

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU WANT - BUT HOW YOU ASK

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"The most admirable intentions, if not accompanied by respectful behaviour, are doomed to failure."

In parshas Shelach we first encountered the Meraglim, the spies whom the Jews sent out to scrutinize the Land and assess its vulnerability to conquer. Hashem, it appears, was angered by their request (see Rashi, Bamidbar 13:2), and vows to leave the Jews "room to err" through the spies' report. In this week's sidrah, parshas Devarim, the Torah rehashes the Meraglim incident at length, reviewing with a nation now ready to enter the Land, the events that caused their fathers' downfall forty years earlier. Moshe tells the Jews (1:22-33):

"And all of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us and they shall spy out the Land, and bring word back to us: the way with which we should ascend, and the cities to which we should come.' The matter was good in my eyes, so I took from among you twelve men..."

The question is self-evident: Moshe had "made a career" out of acting as Hashem's faithful messenger to the Jews. As our Sages put it, "The Holy Presence spoke from the throat of Moshe." How is it possible then, that while Hashem was apparently angered by their request, Moshe seems to have been pleased, declaring unabashedly, "The matter was good in my eyes." (See Rashi to 1:23 who is indeed disturbed by this question).

It is told that the holy Rebbe R' Bunim of Parshischa zt"l once said to his disciples, "In truth, I could, if I wished, bring Mashiach (the Messiah). But why - you ask - do I refrain from doing so? I'll tell you: The holy Apter Rebbe is a great and revered tzaddik who is many years my elder. Now how would it look if, when Mashiach would come, and the holy Apter Rebbe went out to greet him, people would ask: 'Tell us, after all these years, after all our prayers and supplications, who finally caused you to come and reveal yourself to the world?' And Mashiach would point to this young man - to me - how do you think the Apter Rebbe would feel? So I refrain..."

I do not claim to fully understand this story and its implications. I will not attempt to decide whether it is meant to be taken literally or allegorically. One thing however is certain: R' Bunim was teaching his disciples a powerful lesson in sensitivity and respect for others, especially those in a position of authority: Even an accomplishment as momentous as bringing Mashiach - if achieved by a lack of respect causing pain and emotional distress to others - is not worthwhile.

Abarbanel, commenting on this week's account of the Meraglim incident, muses, "There are times when one may be making a most noble request... yet he spoils everything by the way he chooses to

ask." Rashi comments on the Torah's expression, "And all of you approached me," that the entire people approached Moshe in a disorderly, disrespectful manner. Young and old pushed and shoved with one another, neither showing respect for the nation's leaders who were among them. Sforno further notes that such an important proposal should have been put forward solely by the leaders, not by a chaotic communal demand.

It is noteworthy that Moshe responded by saying, "The matter was good in my eyes." He did not praise their request - for it was put forth with reckless audacity and was deserving of no praise. Indeed, where there is no respect, the approach must be suspect. The matter - the idea - however, was a good one [Abarbanel].

The most admirable intentions, if not accompanied by respectful behaviour, are doomed to failure. Pinchas, before killing Zimri and Kozbi for their licentious act (see Bamidbar chapter 25; see also Olos Shabbos 12-39), approached Moshe Rabbeinu. "Brother of my father's father, did you not teach us, upon your descent from Mount Sinai, that one who cohabits with an idolatress, zealots may kill him?" (Sanhedrin 82a) Pinchas was the zealot. He was in a state of extreme agitation and zeal, and was preparing to take drastic measures to avenge the honour of Hashem at all costs, yet he did not forget his manners. When he addressed Moshe, who had for the moment forgotten this halachah, he did so out of deep respect and sensitivity.

Indeed, Shulchan Aruch rules (Yoreh De'ah 240, 242) that even if one sees one's Rebbe or parent making an halachic error, he should not criticize them openly, but should rather attempt to correct them by posing a question, much as Pinchas did: "Rebbe/Father, didn't you teach me the following..." (Needless to say, it is critical that we teach our children these halachos of derech eretz (proper behaviour) and respect. They will not assimilate them without our direction.)

Many times, in a rash moment of controversy - especially when we perceive we are acting out of righteousness and pure intentions - we forget ourselves, and present our arguments and positions in a manner not befitting the nobility of the ideal we are attempting to convey. Temperatures rise, the flame of righteous indignation is ignited, and things are said which may later be regretted. How crucial it is to remember the insightful words of our Sages: that even the most worthy ideals, when imparted with impudence and lack of respect, are doomed to failure.

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