

DANGEROUS HONOR

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Shlach. "Shlach l'cha anashim vayasuru es Eretz Canaan [Send forth men who will spy out the Land of Israel].[13:2]" Before our scheduled entrance into Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel], meraglim [spies] were sent. They would learn about the roads and entrances to the cities and then later lead the troops in battle via those roads against those cities.

Their report back was an accurate description of the strength of the nation that was there. Their slanderous sin was in their words: "Efess ki az ha'am ha'yoshev ba'aretz [However, the nation that dwells in the land is strong].[13:28]" The Ramban explains that the word "efess [however]" implies an impossibility. The land is great and it flows with milk and honey, however, it is impossible for us to conquer it because the nation that is there is too strong. In other words, they are too strong even for Hashem...

Who were these men whose grievous sin almost brought Bnei Yisroel to the brink of extinction (Hashem proposed rebuilding the entire nation from Moshe) and caused us to remain in the wilderness for an additional forty years where every adult died?

Rashi writes that the term "anashim [men]" connotes chashivus [importance]. They were, as the passuk [verse] states, leaders of Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel]. The Ramban writes that these men were listed in the order of their greatness. Yehoshua, Moshe's successor in leading Bnei Yisroel, being listed as number five gives us an excellent idea of the stature of the men we are dealing with.

If that is the case, then we must try to understand what went so horrifyingly wrong in a matter of forty days?! What brought them to slander the land, causing Bnei Yisroel to rebel against Moshe and ultimately against Hashem Himself? What was the root sin which caused the meraglim to go so wrong?

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz zt"l explains in the following way. The Mesilas Yesharim, when speaking about the lowliness of seeking honor, writes that this lust for honor is what caused the spies to slander the land. They were afraid that they would lose their positions upon Bnei Yisroel's entering Eretz Yisroel.

This fear of losing their positions caused them to first speak badly about Eretz Yisroel and then to ultimately say that Hashem wouldn't be able to handle the nation that was there. Even people on the level of a Yehoshua could crash down to such a lowly level once their views were poisoned by the lust for honor. As a single grain of sand shuts down the effectiveness of the whole eye, their lust for

honor totally distorted their view of the situation. As the Mishna in Avos {Ethics of the Fathers} [4:28] states: "Honor removes a person from the world."

The Baal HaTurim adds a fascinating point. The passuk stated that they were: "roshay Bnei Yisroel haimah [leaders of Bnei Yisroel they were].[13:3]" The word 'haimah' is spelled 'hay', 'mem', 'hay'--a numerical value of fifty. They were leaders of fifty.

The six hundred thousand members of Bnei Yisroel had their leaders. There were those who were in charge of thousands, those in charge of hundreds and those in charge of fifties. This means that twelve thousand people held the same position as the meraglim. Additionally, thousands held positions far greater than theirs.

In our terms, they weren't governors, mayors or even city councilmen. They were in charge of their block in the neighborhood. And yet, the thought of losing that 'lofty' position was enough to cause them to lead Bnei Yisroel into denying Hashem's abilities and strength. Amazing!

If the dangers of honor are so great and a person must try to distance himself from it as much as possible, then we must try to understand why did Hashem create us in a way that we have such a strong drive for it. What can be gained from this lust for honor?

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz zt"l explains that the feelings that no honor is ever great enough must be used in giving others honor!

Every person feels his dignity to be of such paramount importance. I believe I once related the story of my wife and I packing late-night to return with our children home to Israel after a visit to the States. Seeing that we wouldn't be able to fit all of our things into our suitcases, we drove to a nearby PathMark to get some large boxes. As we were cruising the aisles, I saw some very large boxes containing paper towels that were near empty. As I began to remove the remaining few packages and place them neatly on the nearby shelf, an older worker ran over to me and started to shout. "Why are you making a mess out of my shelves?! Don't you see I work hard to keep things neat here?!" My apologies were falling on deaf ears until I used a very key word. The moment I called him 'sir', not just his attitude but even his posture changed! I was no longer threatening his honor, his dignity. On the contrary, I was respecting him. To make a long story short, we left the store with many boxes thanks to my new-found, overly-helpful friend.

One of the many things that I try to learn from my father is to give everyone respect. When I was a young boy, I would often accompany my father to the university where he taught and to the homes of patients that he would visit. At the university, he would greet everyone by name, including the people washing the floors. At the simple homes of these lower income people, my father would always point out to me how they work very hard for their living and how clean they keep their houses. They were so filled with gratitude to my father they would spend the entire time that we were there trying to, without my father seeing, press a quarter into my hand for an ice-cream. They felt the honor that my father gave them and they wanted desperately to repay it by giving his son

money (that they could ill afford) for an ice cream.

The Mishna in Ethics of the Fathers [4:1] teaches: "Who is honored? He who honors others. As it states: 'Those who honor me I will honor'." The Ruach Chaim writes that one must honor every person without thinking that he is above them. How does one do this? By realizing that everyone was created in the 'form' of Hashem. Every person represents Hashem and by honoring others, one honors Hashem. That is why the Mishna brought the passuk of honoring Hashem as the source for honoring others. He honors Hashem by honoring others as His creations.

Good Shabbos,
Yisroel Ciner

This is dedicated to the memory and z'chus of my sister a"h, Devorah Pessel bas Asher Chaim, whose yahrtzeit is this Monday, 30 Sivan. TNZB"H.

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