

THE FOREST AND THE TREES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Like the sin of Adam and Chava at the beginning of history, the sin of the Spies in the middle of history is sorely oversimplified. We talk about both as if they are black-and-white, often overlooking very perplexing questions that show that they are anything but that.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

However, the men that went up with him said, "We are not able to fight the people; they are stronger than us!" They brought an evil report of the land which they had spied to the Children of Israel . . .
(Bamidbar 13:31-32)

One day, while explaining to one of my youngest children that I could not afford to pay for something because I was short of funds, he said to me, "Abba, why don't you just go to the bank and get some money?" It was cute, but it took some explaining as to why just going to the bank and asking for money doesn't necessarily work unless you already have the money there in the first place.

Thinking I had set things straight for him, he then suggested, "So just write a check!" I smiled again, and once again explained how writing a check necessitated the necessary funds already in the bank to back up the check, otherwise the check is sent back and you get into trouble with the authorities.

"Ooph!" he retorted. "So what are you going to do?" he then asked me, saddened and sharing my frustration.

I smiled sympathetically; we were finally on the same page.

It's all about being on the same page, if we're going to learn the deeper lessons that the Torah wishes to teach us, for OUR own good.

For years, I was bothered by a question that anyone who has ever thought deeply about the sin of eating from the Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah has to ask: If Adam HaRishon was so spiritually elevated to such an extent that, if we were to be in the same room as him we wouldn't see him, how could he break what, to us seems like a straight forward commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit? After all, unlike mankind since the sin, he did not yet possess an internal yetzer hara, so he was incapable of a selfish act.

Countless divrei Torah have been devised over the millennia, but few ever really addressed the issue in totality, seemingly ignoring how high a level Adam HaRishon had really been on at the time

of the sin. It wasn't until I saw the Leshem's explanation many years later that I finally saw an answer that put matters into perspective, and as a result, gave a deeper insight into what it is that mankind is supposed to rectify.

Elsewhere, I have presented that material as a translation of the Leshem's actual words on my website.

That twelve men went out and spied the land of Canaan, and ten came back with a negative impression is not hard to fathom. That all twelve of them were great men makes it more difficult to relate to, but still not impossible. That these men were part of a generation led by Moshe Rabbeinu who spoke directly and regularly to G-d, were protected constantly by the Clouds of Glory, ate manna everyday, and never had to worry about their clothing wearing out, is unfathomable.

I mean, can we imagine them saying no to Torah at Mt. Sinai when G-d Himself offered it? Then how can we imagine them saying no to Eretz Yisroel when that same G-d offered it to them?

They saw what happened to the perpetrators of the golden calf back at Mt. Sinai, and they saw what happened to those who complained about the manna in the previous parshah. So, unless they had suicidal tendencies, they must have thought themselves better than those who participated in the sin of the golden calf, and those who died in last week's parshah because of their desire for meat.

Really? So what did they think, and how did they come to that conclusion? If we can't answer that question, then we can't know if we are making the same mistake in our generation.

SHABBOS DAY:

It is a tree of life for all those who grasp it. (Mishlei 3:18)

These are the words of the extremely wise, Shlomo HaMelech. The only problem is that the Talmud seems to contradict them, by referring to Torah as either a sum hachaim (elixir for life) OR a sum hamavet (elixir for death) (Yoma 72b). Is this one of those cases of, "Too much of a good thing can be bad for you as well," or is there something deeper going on here?

And, another curious thing; the Torah writes:

G-d said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." (Bereishis 1:26)

"Let US make man?" To whom does the "us" refer to, if G-d works alone? So, Rashi explains:

Although [the angels] did not assist [G-d] in forming him, and although the plural may give heretics an opening to reject [the notion of a single G-d, still] the Torah did not refrain from [writing "us"]. This is in order to teach derech erez and the trait of humility, that the greater should consult and request permission from those less important. (Rashi)

Thus, derech erez comes before Torah itself. But, again, we can ask, "Should they not come at the same time? After all, what is Torah but a lesson in how to be G-d-like, so if G-d showed derech erez

back at the time He created man, even though He didn't have to, shouldn't the Torah bring that *derech eretz* out in us automatically?

Yes, and no. Yes, if what you are "grasping" is indeed the *Aitz HaChaim*, then it is an elixir for life and it will automatically promote *derech eretz*. However, if what you are learning is, in fact, the *Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah*, then:

G-d said, "The man has become one of Us knowing good and evil. Now, in case he stretches out his hand to take also from the Tree of Life and live forever [I will send him out]." So G-d sent him from the garden . . . and banished the man and set up angels and a flaming sword to the east of the garden to guard the way to the Tree of Life. (Bereishis 3:22-24)

The way . . . this is *derech eretz*. (Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Rabbah)

Derech Eretz . . . That is to say, the acquisition of positive traits . . . The essential existence of man in this world is to break his bad traits and his bad nature. (Tuvi Chaim)

In other words, there are two levels of Torah, the first of which Moshe Rabbeinu "broke" when he threw the first set of tablets to the ground after seeing the golden calf. Those tablets were carved out and inscribed by G-d, and concerning those tablets it says:

"The tablets were made by G-d, and the writing was G-d's writing, engraved (*charut*) on the tablets" (Shemos 32:16). Do not read *charut* (engraved) but rather *chairut* (freedom), for no one else is free but he who occupies himself in Torah learning. (Pirkei Avos 6:2)

That level of Torah the Kabbalists call "*Torat Atzilut*," or "*Torat Moshiach*," and it is the level of Torah that will return to us in *Yemot HaMoshiach*. It is the Torah that is truly called "*Aitz HaChaim*," the Tree of Life," which can ONLY be an elixir for life. Though we quote the posuk from *Mishlei* all the time in reference to our Torah, in truth it refers to the ultimate level of Torah, that of the First Tablets.

However, the level of Torah that we possess is the product of the second set of tablets that Moshe descended with eighty days later, after the Jewish people were finally forgiven for their involvement with the golden calf. Those tablets had not been carved out by G-d, but only written on by G-d, and therefore they lacked much of the holiness that the first set of tablets contained, and are said to be on the level of the *Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah*. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 454)

It is to this level of Torah that the Talmud refers when it speaks of its ability to be either an elixir for life, or an elixir for death. Apparently, for the Generation of the Spies it had been the latter. And, if that's what it was for them, then it certainly can also be for us, and the question is how? And why?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Behold, I place before you this day life and good, death and evil . . . (Devarim 30:15)

The essential difference between the two levels of Torah is this:

However, after the children of Israel did not merit the First Tablets that were broken, they were given the Second Tablets which is the Torah of Beriyah from the sod of the Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah; the Gevuros in them are the Negative Mitzvos, all of which are for the sake of protecting them and to distance them from impurity and zuhama, which is death, and that is the Torah we have now. Thus, it speaks of the forbidden and permissible, impure and pure, guilty and innocent, profane and holy, sin and mitzvah, unfit and kosher. It is a combination of right and left, and life and death, as it says, "Behold, I place before you this day life and good, death and evil . . ." (Devarim 30:15). It says "this day," because in the future we will return to Torah from the sod of the Aitz HaChaim . . . (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 454)

In other words, the level of Torah called Aitz HaChaim is completely pure and Chesed-based. It is a level of Torah, explains the Leshem that automatically improved the character of the person who learned it, and of all those whom he affected, as one would expect Torah to do. This level of Torah that was "touched" turned completely holy.

However, the level of Torah that the Jewish people departed Mt. Sinai with was not that of the Aitz HaChaim, but that of the Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah, with which Gevuros are associated. Hence, with this level of Torah there is no guarantee that one will automatically be elevated; rather *derech eretz* must precede it to make sure that the person knows how to extract the "good" and use it to improve himself and his clarity of G-d.

Indeed, a person lacking the proper "*derech eretz*" can easily use Torah as a source of rationalization to ultimately avoid that which the Torah requires. This is what happened to the Spies and their generation, and this is what's been happening for thousands of years since. Perhaps the most dangerous attitude a Jew can develop is one that assumes that just learning Torah will keep him on the straight-and-narrow, when time-and-time-again we have seen that this is not necessarily so. In fact, a person can come to use Torah to avoid seeing the very thing that the Torah was given in order to help us see.

Hence, and this is the crucial point: the Spies rejected Eretz Yisroel based upon Torah, at least as they saw it. Yehoshua and Caleiv accepted Torah based upon Torah, as they learned it. Incredibly, here were two very diverse opinions based upon a single Torah, and in this case, only one could be right. But, judging by the amount of people who died as a result of the sin of the Spies, it was not at all easy to see which one was right.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Do not accept a false report. Do not join forces with an evil person to be a corrupt witness. Do not follow the majority to do evil. Do not speak in a trial to pervert justice. A case must be decided according to the majority opinion. (Shemos 23:1-2)

Did the Spies deliver a false report? No, they went out of their way to prove that they saw what they spoke about it, and therefore, they did not consider themselves to be corrupt witnesses. And, being

the minority, they were merely speaking their opinion about the situation; there had been no majority as of yet to follow to do any evil, and therefore they quickly set about to form a majority, after whose opinion the Jewish people, and G-d too for that matter, would have to follow. This is what the Torah says.

There was another important time in history when a similar situation arose. According to Tanach, Sancheriv encircled the entire city of Jerusalem with 185,000 professional troops, ready to pounce on and devour the greatly outnumbered Jewish army inside the walled city. As a result, a vote was taken and the majority of the Jews at that time voted to surrender rather than suffer a disastrous and bloody defeat. Only King Chizkiah and a minority had decided to hold out and trust that G-d would save the day.

But the Torah says that the majority vote carries the day, so Chizkiah himself felt obliged to consider surrender according to Torah. And, that's what would have happened had the prophet Yeshayahu not showed up to explain that the law of majority rule only applies in situations where the people voting act for the sake of Torah, and not just to save their own skins.

As a result, Chizkiah held down the fort, and the enemy was ravaged by plague and panic that night. By the next morning when Chizkiah awoke, Jerusalem was safe and the enemy was destroyed, and those who had surrendered had been scattered and met with a similar fate. But you can be sure that when they discussed the matters amongst themselves, they gave all kinds of Torah rationale to justify doing exactly the opposite of what the Torah ultimately wants, just as the Spies did in their time, and just as we do in our time.

For, how many people really know what the Torah Ultimately wants from us? We throw terms around like, "fear G-d," and "perfect character traits," but many times at the end of the day, these terms and others like them come out so different through the subjective ideas of the individual.

It wasn't that way with the First Tablets. They were clear and precise because they dealt with the ultimate level of Torah and what G-d wants from Creation. They were the very description of the ultimate state of mankind, which is why history can only be addressed after Moshiach has come. Atzilut is the level of existence on which there is unity with the light of G-d, so any Torah of that level must be, by definition an ideal vision of reality.

Therefore, each and every one of us have to ask ourselves, when confronting a situation that, by Torah standards is controversial, "Am I using Torah as an excuse to avoid the issue that Torah really wants me to confront? Am I relying upon a majority to that which I ought not to, or not relying on one that I ought to, one that is not the kind of majority Heaven relies upon?"

I must admit, I am a broken record. So here it is again: The Spies used Torah to justify avoiding living in Eretz Yisroel, or even wanting to live there. According to the Arizal, our souls are their souls that came back to fix up what we did wrong. Have we lost the forest for the trees once again, specifically the Aitz HaDa'at Tov v'Rah?

"Yeah," G-d told them, "it's a land that eats up its inhabitants. But, it's where I want you to go anyhow . . . because it is on the level of Aitz HaChaim, on the level of Torat Atzilut, without which you can't really get to Me."

Have a great Shabbos,

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