AM I TESTING GOD TOO?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

They brought an evil report of the land which they had spied to the Children of Israel, saying, "The land which we spied is a land that consumes its inhabitants and all the people that we saw there were of great stature." (Bamidbar 13:32)

The sin of the spies was not like the rest of the sins the Jewish people committed throughout their 40 years in the desert, even though it is included by the mishnah in the following statement:

> With 10 trials did our ancestors test The Holy One, Blessed is He, in the desert, as it is stated, "They have tested Me 10 times and did not listen to My voice" (Numbers 14:22). (Pirkei Avos 5:6)

For, as the Leshem explains with respect to the first nine, the Jewish people did not actually commit the sin, otherwise the mishnah would have stated that the Jewish people sinned 10 times. Rather, the usage of the word "tested" means that they used the crisis as a way to prove God's loyalty to them, not the other way around.

In actuality, it was primarily the Erev Rav who committed the sins in the desert, though some Jewish stragglers always got pulled into the sin as well. But, each time a major sin occurred, the rest of the nation lived with the fear that God would cut them off and abandon them in the desert, in spite of the fact that God had stayed with them until that time. That was the test to which the Mishnah refers.

However, with respect to the sin of the Spies in this week's parshah, we know otherwise. The Spies had not only been Jewish, but they had been leaders of the people, and when they came back with their evil report, it is was to the Jewish people that they told it, and who cried the entire night choosing, instead, to remain in the desert, as God says:

> "Your children, however, which you said would be prey, I will bring in and they will know the land which you rejected." (Bamidbar 14:13)

Hence, the episode the Spies was no test, it was an outright sin. Unlike the other crises, especially the escapade of the golden calf, it was not the Erev Rav who instigated it, and it was not the Erev Rav who carried it out. Rather, this was a homegrown sin, straight from within Klal Yisroel, so why is it included as a "test," and not the catastrophic sin that it actually was?

Perhaps the answer to that question can help answer another question, namely, how it was possible

for the Jewish people to reject Eretz Yisroel in the first place? They knew that God wanted them to live there, and they knew that God was watching their every move, and they also knew that God punishes swiftly and decisively when they step out of line. Were they simply looking for trouble? Was theirs a suicide mission?

We might ask the same question about children. It is amazing how great a risk children will take, especially teenagers, in their battle against authority. Sometimes, they are even willing to risk it all, and tragically, lose exactly that. There is something about children that makes them feel that it is okay to push the limits and risk the consequences, even use sin to test just how much their authority figures will put up with.

Apparently this is why the mitzvah to not covet what belongs to others corresponds to the mitzvah to honor one's parents in the Ten Commandments. Parents represent human authority, and the need to make and live by responsible boundaries. Coveting that which belongs to others represents just the opposite, that is, a willing to ignore and break boundaries, which, according to Chazal, was the sin that warranted the Great Flood of Noach's time.

The other amazing thing about children (which adults once were as well), is how they can believe with a full heart that they can know more about raising children in their short life to date than their parents can after decades of living experience. They also consider themselves to be objective and clairvoyant, making it possible for them to know with clarity what they will always want from life, whereas their parents can't possibly know, with any accuracy, such information.

I am not saying that children do not have very valuable input regarding their likes and dislikes, or that they are not capable of tremendous insight. They are. But life-altering decisions require more than knowledge of likes and dislikes, or even great insights, such as wisdom and many years of experience for which there are really no shortcuts to achieve.

Tell that to the kids, for whom getting their way is often do-or-die. And, so begins a kind of cat-and-mouse game, during which children often go beyond the level of theory and actually knowingly and consciously go against the will of their parents and perpetrate the sin, wondering to themselves, "Can I get away with this, or at least minimalize the damage that may result?"

Of course, an infuriated parent wants his day in court. But, depending upon the nature of the parent, the judgment might be tempered by statements such as, "Don't overreact!" or, "Pick your battles!" Sometimes, if the war rages on long enough, a kind of attrition may set in, forcing the parent to care less about the situation than perhaps he ought to. That is tantamount to victory for the child, who counts on that.

On some level, it was no different for the Spies. Yes, they knew that they were destined to live in Eretz Yisroel, and yes, they knew that there was great risk in rejecting the land. But how great? How much could moving into the land actually matter to God? Maybe He would give into the demand to remain in the desert, and bring the next generation of Jews into the land instead. Going to war

against the Canaanites would certainly result in death; would going to war against God, Who is All-Merciful, result in death as well?

There was only one way to find out, and they chose it. They spoke badly about the land, cried about going there, and made it known aloud that they wished to stay in the desert. All that remained was to find out just how severe the All-Merciful's reaction would be, and it did not take long to find out, as the Torah says:

> God told Moshe and Aharon, "How long must I put up with this evil congregation, which complains against Me? I have heard the complaining of the Children of Israel against Me. Tell them that, I, God declare that as I live, I will do to them as they have asked: their bodies will fall in this desert, anyone 20 years of age and older and who was counted, those who complained against Me. None of you will enter the land I said you would live in, except for Caleiv, the son of Yefuneh and Yehoshua, the son of Nun. Your children, however, which you said would be prey, I will bring in and they will know the land which you rejected. As for you, your bodies will drop in this desert. Your children will wander in the desert for 40 years, paying the price of your indiscretions, until your corpses have all fallen in the desert. According to the number of days you spied the land you will suffer for your mistake: 40 years corresponding to 40 days, and you will sense My estrangement from you. I, God, have said that I will do this to them; in the desert they will die and be consumed." (Bamidbar 14:26-35)

Woops. Didn't see that coming, because look at how they reacted:

> Moshe told everything to the Children of Israel, and they mourned greatly. They rose up early in the morning and went up to the top of the mountain, saying, "Let's go up to the land which God has promised to us! We erred!" (Bamidbar 14:39-40)

Too late. The damage was done. The dye was cast. The decree was sealed, and they must have kicked themselves over-and-over-again each day, asking one themselves and one another: "We had it so good, and now we have it so bad. What were we thinking? Why did we gamble? Was what we wanted so important to take such a risk?"

Apparently, part of the problem was they underestimated how important going to Eretz Yisroel was to God. Like so many Jews since then, they knew that Torah is the main event, without which the world ceases to have a reason to exist. Therefore, like so many Jews since then, they assumed that Torah can even be a reason not to want to go to live in Eretz Yisroel, as if it is possible to reject the land without rejecting Torah.

Apparently, it is a package deal:

> Three wonderful gifts were given by The Holy One, Blessed is He, to the Jewish people, and all

> of them were given through suffering. They are Torah, Eretz Yisroel, and The World-to-Come. (Brochos 5a)

Apparently, by rejecting one, it is a rejection of the other two. Hence, their Torah did not save them, or even their desire to learn and live it in the future. And, according to the Talmud, they even forfeited their portion in the World-to-Come (Sanhedrin 108a). Sometimes a test can go horribly wrong and end up producing tragic results.

But, before we solemnly shake our heads in agreement, we should look in the mirror, for the sin of the Spies continues in our generation as well. Just as they tested God, so too are we testing God. Rav Dessler (d. 1953) wrote that, even if you hold that the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 was not the beginning of the redemption, you cannot deny that it was a tremendous miracle and act of Divine Providence, and therefore, worthy of our appreciation. It certainly cannot be disregarded, and anyone who does, warned Rav Dessler, will have to answer to God.

It was a different world in 1953. Since that time, so much has changed, at first for the good, but more recently, for the bad. Being a Jew is like living in a glass house, with people pushing in on the walls on all sides. At first the walls hold, but as more people join the mob, the walls bend more, until they fall in with a crashing noise. And when they do, what follows happens so fast that there is usually no time to escape or to run for cover.

And, all because we test God. For, when we do what He wants, as the Torah states explicitly, it just takes a few Jews to make a multitude of anti- Semites run for their lives. But, when we test God, by doing our own thing, even in a Torah way, without following His lead, then anti-Semites seem to come from all places and for all reasons. Even Spanish children find it within themselves to write and ask Jewish officials about how many Palestinians they have killed today.

And, all of a sudden, Christian groups pour money into Jewish groups committed to tearing apart the Jewish State and feeding it to the Arab wolves. Even a popular comedy show finds it funny to create games that take pot shots at a tiny little country living in a Middle-Eastern lion's den and which has been generous with the enemy, even though it is forced to spend most of its budget to ward them off for no other reason except that they exist.

The day of reckoning is coming; it always does. The bad guys will get their due, that is a promise from God Himself. The only question is who they might be, for though some are quite obvious, others are not. As the mob gets bigger and the glass walls bend more, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves, "Am I testing God too?" The last group to assume otherwise is most famous for having done so, and what happened as a result.

Text

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