

THE SPIES AND CANDLES: STAYING KOSHER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Children of Israel." (Bamidbar 13:2)

Though Parashas Shlach is clearly its own parshah, it also seems to be a continuation of the previous one, BeHa'alosecha. To begin with, as Rashi points out at the beginning of this week's parshah, had the Spies learned from the end of last week's parshah the damage of speaking loshon hara they might not have been so quick to speak it about Eretz Yisroel.

That, however, was not the main problem, just a symptom of it. As we know, the sending of the Spies was the people's idea with Moshe Rabbeinu's approval. The idea had not come from God and, as the Midrash says, He had not been so supportive of it. Obviously God had not forbidden them to go, but His reluctance to sign on to the plan should have the first clue that the Spies had been vulnerable to sin.

After all, there are people who can be in situations with great potential to sin and not be affected by them in the least. Other people, however, can find themselves in situations with little potential to sin and still fall prey to temptation. Sin depends upon a person's vulnerability to capitulate to temptation.

This is what the Talmud means when it says:

A person only sins when a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sotah 3a)

It means that nobody in his or her right mind would sin if they fully understood the consequences of doing so, emotionally as well as intellectually. Emotional appreciation is a function of maturity, something that is not only connected to age. In fact, you can find children who are better prepared to deal with temptation than some adults, and though this can sometimes have to do with personal nature, it doesn't always.

The natural development of a person has a lot to do with how he or she has been taught. This puts a great responsibility on teachers whose role it is to help with a student's emotional development as well as his intellectual one, at least with respect to the ideas being given over by the teacher. When the student learns and understands an idea, he is smarter. It is only when he emotionally appreciates the idea that he becomes independent with it, one with it, the ultimate goal of any educational process.

At that point an idea becomes part of the person's "natural" way of life, a principle by which he will live his life. From that magical moment onward, a violation of the idea will be felt as a violation of self, something that principled people will often sacrifice a lot to avoid. We may be able to live with others who violate our principles but we have a difficult time living with ourselves when we do. This is even to the point that some will take their lives either because they have violated such personal principles, or to avoid doing so. This entire idea was embodied in the mitzvah of Menorah, a symbol of Torah. At the beginning of last week's parshah, it said:

Speak to Aharon and say to him: "When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall cast their light toward the face of the menorah." (Bamidbar 8:2)

When you light: literally, when you cause to ascend. Since the flame rises, the Torah describes kindling in terms of ascending. He is required to kindle the lamp until the flame rises by itself (Shabbos 21a). (Rashi)

It wasn't enough just to kindle the flames of the menorah. The kohen who lit the menorah was not supposed to move on to the next candle until he was sure that the one he was presently lighting was an independent flame. The same halachah applies also to lighting Shabbos and Yom Tov candles.

Practically this was to make sure that the candle did not become extinguished after removing the igniting flame from it, as can often happen. Metaphorically, it was a message about the teaching of Torah, that the teacher should not move on to the next idea until he knows that the student has grasped, intellectually and emotionally, the current one being taught.

To show how important an idea this is, the Talmud relates the following story:

Rav Preida once had a student that had to be taught something 400 times before he could understand it. One day, the rebi was asked to do a mitzvah, and the student failed to learn the lesson. "Why is it different today than all other days?" he asked his student. "Because," he answered, "from the moment the master was asked to do the mitzvah I was distracted, thinking to myself, 'Soon the master will have to get up . . . Soon the master will have to get up . . .'" Rav Preida said, "If that is so, let me teach the lesson to you again." He then repeated the teaching another 400 times, and because of this a heavenly voice called out to Rav Preida, "Which reward do you want? Either you can live a long life, or you and your generation can merit The World-to-Come?" He answered, "I request that I and my generation merit The World-to-Come." To this God responded, "Give him both rewards!" (Eiruvim 54b)

Was it that Rav Preida's student was so thickheaded that he could not intellectually understand an idea until he learned it 400 times? Or, more likely, was it that he could not develop an emotional appreciation of an idea, and therefore independence with it, until learning it 400 times?

The answer to this question has a lot to do with this week's parshah, from what seems to be a

contradiction in the commentary of Rashi. First Rashi says on the following verse regarding the choosing of the Spies:

So Moshe sent them from the desert of Paran by the word of the Lord. All of them were men of distinction; they were the heads of the Children of Israel. (Bamidbar 13:3)

All of them were men of distinction: Whenever [the word] "men" [is used] in the Torah it denotes importance. At that time they were "kosher." (Rashi)

However, later on, after the Spies returned Rashi says something different altogether on the following verse:

They went, and they came to Moshe and Aharon and all the congregation of the Children of Israel in the desert of Paran, to Kadesh. They brought them back a report, as well as to the entire congregation, and they showed them the fruit of the land. (Bamidbar 13:26)

They went and they came: What is meant by "they went" [since it already says that they returned. It is] to compare their going with their coming: just as their return was with evil intent so was their departure [on the journey to spy the land] with evil intent (Sotah 35a). (Rashi)

Does Rashi not seem to contradict himself? First he said that all of the people chosen to spy the land had been distinguished and "kosher" people, that is men of honorable intention. Then Rashi said that just as the Spies came back with bad advice so did they leave with bad intention, which sounds as if even at the beginning they had not been quite so honorable or kosher.

The answer is that at the time they were being chosen for their mission they were kosher individuals. In front of Moshe Rabbeinu, their leader and teacher, they were who they were supposed to be. Had they been independent with their knowledge of their mission and its historical significance then that is what they would have remained, like Yehoshua and Caleiv who stayed "kosher" there and back.

This is what God knew and why He hadn't sent the Spies Himself. It was a trap, He knew, one that the Jewish people ended up setting for themselves. They sent men into a spiritual test that they had not been on a sufficient emotional level to confront and pass, and so they failed and caused much of the nation to fail as well. The "flames" they represented had been kindled but left to burn on their own before their "wicks" had been sufficiently ignited. When the "igniter," that is Moshe Rabbeinu, had been removed, their "candles" went out.

Ultimately, this is the meaning of the words "lech-lecha," which God used when sending Avraham on his journey to Eretz Yisroel. They were a command to Avraham Avinu to become his own man with respect to Torah and mitzvos, meaning that he should be self-inspiring to perform and protect them. Whereas Noach only tried to change the world after God told him to, Avraham Avinu learned to do it as function of his own personal commitment to a perfected world.

This is one lesson that goes beyond the Spies and their mission to spy the Land of Israel. In a sense

we're all "spies," sent from the comfort and personal world of the womb to investigate and make use of the world beyond it. As the Talmud states, prior to leaving the womb an angel teaches us all of Torah (Niddah 30b), giving us the potential for intellectual clarity. It is life and its many "educators," including personal experience, that is supposed to help us develop emotional clarity as well.

To have one and not the other is to live an incomplete and often spiritually inconsistent life. To have both, though, is to reach the ultimate level of "tzaddik," the level of the righteous person, and to gain entry into what is rightly called "The Land of the Living," the eternal world of the World-to-Come.

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org