

A CONTROVERSIAL VOICE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

But the men who went up with him said, "We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." (Bamidbar 13:31)

This is the parshah for me. When it finally comes around, I get a chill. If any parshah explains why we're still in exile, it is this parshah. If any parshah holds the key to redemption, it is this parshah. Writing about Parashas Shlach for me feels like handling something extremely valuable, yet very fragile.

It's not only that I love Eretz Yisroel, which I REALLY do. I love this land to a degree I can't physically explain. I did not grow up with Zionist teachings. As a child and young adult, I NEVER considered this to be my homeland. Not even my home away from home. Now I feel like soul mates.

The importance of this parshah is that it holds the key to more than just being able to make aliyah. It holds the key to national redemption. You can do mitzvos in exile. You can't really "do" Eretz Yisroel, at least not in the full sense of the term, in the Diaspora, and Eretz Yisroel is an indispensable part of redemption.

What does this have to do with the parshah? Granted that the spies erred gravely and prevented the Final Redemption from occurring in their time. Unquestionably, there are lessons still to be learned from what they did wrong. What, however, does their sin have to do with us anymore?

After all, we have our own issues to fix up today, and they are the ones holding back the redemption in our time. Certainly how a Jew feels about Eretz Yisroel today is important, but is it really central? For the Jewish people in the generation of the spies, the next mitzvah was aliyah, and they failed it. For us, it is just staying Torah observant, and we're not doing so well at that either.

The rest of this essay will be devoted, be"H, to showing how this is not exactly accurate. In fact, it is this inaccuracy that is actually holding back the redemption. It's at the door. It wants to come in. We just won't let it.

To begin with, the spies did not only reject Eretz Yisroel, though that was bad enough. What they really rejected was redemption, as in the final one. They were already comfortable with the one they had, so "why fix what aint broken"? Why upset a status quo you can live with it?

I'm always amazed, each week that I go to the Kosel, how much we accept the Arab mosques on our most cherished place in the universe. We're more concerned about the physical dangers the

Arabs "above us" pose than the spiritual dangers created by having foreign places of worship on our holy Temple site. We're okay, to a large degree, with the status quo.

The reason is obvious. I get to doven in a great minyan at the Kosel. Israeli guards check everyone who comes and goes. They're on top watching the Temple Mount to make sure nothing dangerous is happening. A taxi brings me and a taxi takes me home. It's all quite "comfortable."

For the moment, there is peace, thank God. We know that this can change in a moment, and how much the rest of the world is breathing down our back. We also know that many of our own people are working tirelessly to undermine the status quo that has given us peace of mind until now. For the moment, though, we're good.

This, of course, is true across the Jewish world. We're still within a very unique period in Jewish history that has allowed us to enjoy freedoms that our ancestors have not known for millennia, literally thousands of years. Exile, post-Holocaust, has been good to us, and still is, in spite of the troubles we have and the ones brewing on the horizon.

In this respect, are we any different than the Jews of the generation of the spies? Clouds protected them from their deadly environment. Bread fell daily to feed them, water followed them around the desert, and personal hygiene was never an issue. If God didn't talk to them directly then He did through Moshe Rabbeinu. Why change the status quo?

It might have been different had all of this Divine blessing continued into the Land. Had Eretz Yisroel been only a change of scenery and not a change of lifestyle, it would have been easy to make aliyah. If it had not meant the cessation of the mann, the miraculous well, and the protective clouds, then moving into the land of our ancestors would have been easy and even natural.

Who wants to have to work for a living, though? That hardly seems like redemption, not then and not today. How is forcing another people off their land so you can move into it, even if they are morally corrupt, supposed to inspire people to leave behind the "good life" even if destined to occur through miracles?

This is one of the reasons why the book, "Kol HaTor," has been such a source of controversy. Said to be the teachings of the Vilna Gaon to his students on a mission to resettle the Land of Israel, it has been quite controversial in the Torah world. Partly to do with how it came to publication, mostly to do with what it says, many in the Torah world refuse to believe that it is authentic GR"A (the letters of HaGaon, Rebi Eliyahu).

Many years later the authenticity of the work has been verified by different sources. The history of how it came to be published is thoroughly chronicled in a new translation of the work, called "The Voice of the Turtledove," by the "Mishmeres Sholom." Undoubtedly, such crucial information will not change the opinion of the many who "need" it to not be the work of Gaon.

The reason is human nature, and the story of the spies all over again. Kol HaTor focuses primarily on

the concept of Moshiach Ben Yosef, a little known and even less understood component of the Final Redemption. Only the GR"A, in this ground uprooting work, seems to have understood the idea, translating it into a call for national proactivity in bringing about redemption.

All of a sudden statements like, "I'll make aliyah when Moshiach comes" do not work. Suddenly, our "to each his own" type of lifestyle is pushed aside for one that puts every Jew either at war against the forces blocking redemption, or on their side. In short, if a person is not a redemption-lover, someone who daily fulfills the directive of anticipating redemption, Kol HaTor is a proverbial brutal slap across the national face.

That is bound to make enemies. Like Yehoshua and Caleiv in this week's parshah, Kol HaTor talks to a complacent nation that, for the time being, loves the status quo. It was not a question of whether the two righteous spies were correct or delusional. It was a question of what their opinion meant in terms of a change of lifestyle, which became an issue of kill or be killed.

Before Kol HaTor came to public light, one could have argued that there was a big difference between the generation of the spies and subsequent generations. After all, they had been taken out of Egypt specifically to go to Eretz Yisroel. God Himself was leading the nation, and Moshe Rabbeinu was His emissary on earth. Rejecting Eretz Yisroel at THAT time was clearly a big no-no.

Since then, we have wandered from exile to exile. We are no longer led by pillars of fire but threatened by them. We have leaders but none even close to the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. What can we do but sit back and let history run its course, doing the best we can do to preserve Torah tradition in a world that is become increasingly hostile to God-believers. Given the circumstances and what we know about redemption, can God really blame us?

Enter Kol HaTor. Kol HaTor says yes, God can and will blame us, at least since the Jewish year 5500 (1740 CE). According to the Gaon, as of that date national passivity was out and proactivity was in. There are things that we should and must do in anticipation of the Final Redemption, especially if we are going to speed it up and help it come mercifully.

Ouch. Ouch, especially today. In the 1800s, most Jews were just trying to escape persecution and find any opportunity they could to eke out a meager living. Equal opportunity for Jews was still nascent, and this is why even secular Jews as well as religious Jews called for mass emigration from Europe to the Land of Israel.

Today, however, many Jews in the Diaspora live in homes just like the gentile population around them. They may pray three times a day, but in suits that allow them to fit into the non-Jewish business world of which they are a part. They get to and from work in cars that the rest of society drives as well. They might still be visibly Orthodox, but in a way that allows them to still blend in with modern society.

Redemption? That's a term that is only comfortable to repeat when referring to stocks or bonds.

National Redemption? That's a phrase that is better left to those who have little or nothing to lose by repeating it, or in the private world of prayer. Proactively pursue redemption? That's tantamount to committing social suicide for many.

Perhaps. Ignoring it though, says Kol HaTor, is tantamount to redemption-, and even national suicide. The exile will end, of that we can be certain. How it will end is a question that can only be answered by the nation itself. As mentioned in the past, the spies had a great reason for rejecting Eretz Yisroel, one that they thought God would whole-heartedly accept and agree to. They were shocked just how wrong they were.

What was their big and deadly mistake? They thought that they had only been rejecting a land, albeit one precious to God and His dear ones. They found out that, instead, they had rejected the whole idea of redemption, in effect retroactively nullifying the reason for their miraculous salvation from Egyptian bondage.

Are we making the same dangerous, nation-threatening mistake today? According to Kol HaTor, unquestionably, which is why so many continue to believe that it cannot be the authentic work of the Gaon from Vilna. Consequently, after they answer to God for overlooking the means to an expedient and safer Final Redemption, they'll have to answer to the GR"A as well.