

TO LIVE IN A WILDERNESS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"We were intended to live among the nations and be their teachers, not hide from our own responsibilities behind the sheltering over of our fears."

Let me tell you a story of heroes and villains, courage and cowardice, tragedy and hope, sorrow and rejoicing. It is a story of lost trust and passionate belief, potential greatness and ignoble failure. It is a tale whose ending is yet to be written, but whose consequences have echoed over the millennium. It is the story of giants and grasshoppers.

Once upon a time, a nation was miraculously freed from the bondage of an evil oppressor. Following their leader into the wilderness, they witnessed events that shaped the destiny of all humankind. In the desolate wilderness, G-d cared for the nation "as a mother cares for her nursing child"; and while in the barren wilderness, they enthusiastically accepted the responsibilities of being the chosen ones. Their leader was an excellent teacher, and among them were men and woman of exceptional character, who modeled for them the meaning of being "chosen".

Starting with their earliest ancestors, they had been promised nationality and freedom in "the land that flows with milk and honey". It was this promise which had kept them alive during the terrible years of bondage and oppression, and it was toward this goal that they followed their leader through the wilderness. Before entering the promised land, they experienced the all encompassing hand of G-d directing the destiny of the universe and sustaining all living things. In an awesome display of control, the Creator fed them, protected them, and punished them. Their teachers lived among them, and their G-d dwelled in their midst.

As time passed and the nation felt the constant presence and demands of G-d, they grew restless. "Let us be as all the other nations", rather than, "we are the chosen ones" became their dream. "Free us from the bondage of Mitzvos" replaced their cries of "free us from beneath the oppression of Egypt". This frustrated their leader, whose only desire was to see his people realize their dependency upon G-d, and strengthen their commitment to follow His rules and regulations. His dream was to lead them into the land flowing with milk and honey where they would experience the constant goodness of G-d's presence in nature and fulfill their responsibilities as the chosen people.

The conflicting goals of the nation and their leader came to a head as they drew closer to the promised land. The closer they came, the more they complained. The closer they came, the more basic their demands. The closer they came the more apparent their fear of the responsibilities that

would set them apart from all other nations. Their problem was very fundamental. They didn't like being told what to do. They were good people who wished to accept G-d on their own terms, rather than being forced to do so on His terms. In fact, the experiences in the wilderness backfired. The more overt G-d's presence and control was, the more demanding His rules appeared to be, and the more resentful the people became. This was the background for this week's Parsha, the story of the Miraglim - Spies.

The story of the Spies, is fundamental to understanding the relationship between Klal Yisroel and Hashem. As a result of the Spies: The Bnai Yisroel would stay in the desert another 38 years; the generation of the Exodus would die in the desert; Moshe, Miriam, and Aharon would not enter the land; and the 9th of Av would be reconfirmed throughout our history as the most tragic of all days. The following questions will help to clarify the significance of the Spies.

1. What was the spiritual and psychological condition of the Jews that motivated their demand to send the Spies?
2. Why did Moshe consent, even though it was clear that G-d was opposed to the idea?
3. The Spies were men of stature, strength, courage, and conviction. What happened that these "very best" should intentionally sin so grievously?
4. What set Yehoshua and Kalev apart from the other Spies that they were not influenced by their conspiracy?
5. What is the importance of Moshe changing Yehoshua's name, and Kalev davening at the graves of the fore-Fathers?
6. Why did the Bnai Yisroel readily accept the negative report regarding the Promised Land?
7. Why were Moshe and Aharon silent in the face of the nation's defection?
8. What happened to Elazar, Issamar, Pinchas, Nachshon, the 70 Elders, the tribe of Layvie, and the rest of the other great Tzadikim?
9. How was the punishment to wander and die out in the desert "a measure for a measure?"
10. What can we learn from the fact that Moshe immediately argued to save the nation but accepted G-d's decree for the nation to wander for forty years and die out?

The spiritual and psychological condition of the Jews was as described in the opening story. They were uncertain and frightened of the imposed restrictions and demands of being the Chosen People. In fact, they were hoping to enter into Eretz Yisroel and find relief from the pressures of G-d's constant presence and scrutiny. They were tired of being punished for what they did wrong and being told that simply being alive was their greatest reward. It was time for a break. It was time to begin living "as all the other nations". (in many ways it was a reversal of "Naseh V'nishma - we will do

and then we will understand")

Moshe consented to send the spies because the Bnai Yisroel were reluctant. Knowing that their real work would first begin once the people occupied the land, Moshe had to be certain that they were ready to assume their responsibilities. It would have been far more disastrous if the Bnai Yisroel had entered the land and then rebelled, than if they rebelled in the desert and underwent the necessary changes before entering the land. He hoped that the Spies would confirm the promise of a wonderful land flowing with milk and honey, and catapult the nation beyond their fears and reservations. Therefore he took the chance of testing the Bnai Yisroel and sent the most popular and best from among the nation on this mission.

The Spies were men of great stature, intellect, and conviction. However, upon entering the land they realized that the conditions for serving Hashem were far more ideal living in the desert than being among the other nations. In fact, knowing Moshe's concerns for the nation's reluctance, they understood how easily the nation would defect and assimilate if they "lived as all other nations". Therefore, they decided to take things into their own hands and keep the Bnai Yisroel within the confines of "G-d's sheltering Tabernacle." Additionally, they turned selfish. Why undertake to be teachers for the rest of the world when we can stay in the desert and bask in the constancy of G-d's protection. As in Gan Eden, the nation would be free of all other responsibilities except learning Torah and growing in their understanding of Hashem.

Of course, the spies were fundamentally wrong. The purpose of the Torah was for the Jews to be governed by the dictates of Torah and Mitzvos, and yet live "as all the other nations." The relevance of Torah is far more applicable in the normal workings of society and life than the sterility of the wilderness. We were intended to live among the nations and be their teachers, not hide from our own responsibilities behind the sheltering cover of our fears.

Yehoshua and Kalev were different. Yehoshua was the student of Moshe. His every thought and feeling was directed by his devotion to his Rebbe. There was no possibility of his second guessing Moshe, as the Spies had done. Therefore, Moshe added a letter from Hashem's own name to Yehoshua's name so that he would always remember the purpose of being the Chosen People living in the Promised Land.

Kalev was similar to Yehoshua. His devotion was to Moshe and the original promise made to the Avos and Imahos. He davened at their graves for the courage to maintain his trust in Hashem's promises, and remain unquestioning of Moshe's teachings.

The People accepted the Spies negative report because it confirmed their greatest fear. There was no escape! The Promised Land would be a continuation of G-d's constant presence and demands. It's a land that consumes it's inhabitants! It's impossible to live there "as all the other nations!" It's a land where we will remain as vulnerable and dependent as a grasshopper in relation to a giant! (to quote an ancient Chinese proverb) Returning to Egypt would be easier than the constant demands

of being the Chosen People!

Moshe, Aharon, and all the other great Tzadikim understood that this was the inevitable confrontation that had to take place if the Bnai Yisroel would ever be able to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The air had to be cleared, the doubters had to be left behind, and it could only be done by Hashem Himself. Either the Bnai Yisroel would accept their responsibilities by themselves, or they would loose out on being the Chosen People. The coercion of a Shayvet Layvie wouldn't help except to delay the inevitable.

For the same reason, Moshe did not attempt to reverse Hashem's decree. The Bnai Yisroel needed to stay in the desert. They needed the time to better integrate the realities of Hashem and become accustomed to living with His constant presence. The generation that experienced the Exodus had to die out so that a new generation, that had grown up and matured in G-d's presence, would unreservedly embrace the opportunity of being the Chosen People.

Finally, we can understand why the two Temples were destroyed on the 9th of Av. Just as the Bnai Yisroel "cried" on the 9th of Av when they heard that their destiny was to live in Eretz Yisroel as the Chosen People, and as a result, they lost their opportunity to do so; so too, when the Jews do not use Eretz Yisroel as the Chosen People, but treat it as "all the other nations", Hashem takes the land away from us, destroys our Bais Hamikdash, and exiles us from our land - on the 9th of Av.

May we all merit to witness the rebuilding of our Bais Hamikdash and our return to Eretz Yisroel as G-d's Chosen People.

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