

WHAT WENT WRONG?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

It is difficult to comprehend how much could go wrong in such a short period of time with superior people being the main destroyers. After all, Moshe sent the best representatives he could find to become the spies and he certainly was blindsided by their unexpected and unjustified report. So, what really went wrong? The question has been examined for thousands of years by all of the great commentators to Torah. What emerges from all of this scholarly opinion is that there were two basic underlying, subconscious, inherently unrecognizable motivations that created this debacle. In a certain sense, these two motives were not unique to the spies, the leaders of Israel, but were deeply embedded in the hearts of the Jews of that generation. That is why the Jews were so willing to accept the words of the ten spies and ignore the truth that Yehoshua and Calev related to them. The first motivation was a personal one. The leaders in the desert realized that new leaders would take their places once the Jewish people settled in the Promised Land, so they subconsciously chose to scuttle the idea of going to the Land of Israel in favor of remaining in office in the desert. When the rabbis said "One should not trust one's self" they meant that one's judgment is always clouded by self-interest. One has to examine one's own prejudices, experiences, ego and desires before passing judgment on important issues. The prophet stated: "The heart is perverse, who can truly know it?"

The other motivation, the one that the general public of Israel in the desert also feared was the necessity of assuming responsibilities that having a Jewish state in the Land of Israel entailed. That generation came from being slaves in Egypt. Being a slave is no joy but a slave after all has no independence, no decisions to make, no responsibilities to shoulder. After Egypt, they came to a desert where all of their material needs were miraculously met. Manna from heaven, water from the rock and from Miriam's traveling well, dry cleaners from clouds and perfect weather were taken for granted. Then, when they would become independent state builders upon coming into the Land of Israel all of those support systems would disappear. They would have to become masters of their own destiny and they shirked from this task. The slave mentality had not been eradicated from their subconscious. They preferred to return to Egypt rather than to advance to the Land of Israel and have to deal with all of the problems of independent nationhood. Our generation is still witness to the difficulties of uprooting the psyche of dependency from Jews and getting them to face the responsibilities of nationhood and homeland. Shirking national responsibilities leads to disastrous consequences for such a generation. Decisions of policy and state founded upon weakness of will and distorted vision always come back to haunt us. Yehoshua and Calev may have been the minority opinion but history has proven them to be the authors of the correct opinion.

Shabat shalom.

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