

# THE GAP BETWEEN THE ROOF AND THE LEG OF THE LETTER 'HEY'

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Shlach

### The Gap Between the Roof and the Leg of the Letter 'Hey'

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### The Gap Between the Roof and the Leg of the Letter 'Hey'

There is an incident recorded in this week's parsha known as the story of the "Ma'Apilim". After the sin of the Spies in which the people cried that they did not want to enter Eretz Yisrael, Moshe Rabbeinu related to the people the decree of the Almighty that they would need to stay in the Wilderness for the next 40 years and the generation would die there without ever entering the Land of Israel. The people mourned exceedingly when they heard this decree.

Immediately thereafter the pasukim say: "They awoke early in the morning and ascended toward the mountaintop saying 'We are ready, and we shall go ascend to the place of which Hashem has spoken, for we have sinned!'" Moshe immediately chastised them for this action: "Why is it that you transgress the word of Hashem? It will not succeed. (V'Hi Lo Tizlach) Do not ascend, for Hashem is not in your midst! And do not be smitten before your enemies. For the Amalekite and the Canaanite are there before you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned away from Hashem, and Hashem will not be with you." Predictably, "They were intransigent to ascend to the mountaintop, while the Aron [Ark] of Hashem's covenant and Moshe did not move from the midst of the camp. The Amalekite and the Canaanite who dwelled on that mountain descended; they struck them and pounded them until annihilation. [Bamidbar 14:40-45]

The question is – why did this not constitute doing Teshuva on their part? Superficially, this had all the components required of true repentance. Teshuva requires regret for the past and a determination to mend their ways in the future. That is what happened here. They felt bad for the past that they disobeyed the Almighty. Now they wanted to enter Eretz Yisrael and they resolved to make that happen in the immediate future. Why was Moshe Rabbeinu so adamant that their actions would not be successful? How could he be so sure that they were not manifesting a bona-fide Teshuva that the Almighty would accept?

Rav Wolbe writes in one of his essays that they were lacking a third required component of repentance. Yes, Teshuva requires regret for the past and acceptance of change for the future. However, the main thing a person must do is to try to figure out what he did wrong the first time and how to change his ways to avoid repetition of past mistakes. Merely repeating the same mistakes repeatedly is not really Teshuvah.

Teshuva requires an examination of what I did wrong, of figuring out "Why is the Master of the World not happy with me?" The main component of Teshuva is change – doing it differently than previously. The sin committed here (with the report of the Spies and the people's reaction to it) was the fact that they did not listen to the Ribono shel Olam. The Ramban writes that the sin was that after having seen the miracles in Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea, it was about time for the people to put their faith in G-d. If the Almighty told them to go to Eretz Yisrael, they should have believed Him. They failed to bend their will to the Will of the Creator. This is primarily what a Jew is about: "We will listen and we will do" [Shemos 24:7].

However, in this case, they continued doing exactly the same thing. Once again, they transgressed the Will of the Creator. The Will of the Creator now was "stay where you are". Saying, "We are going into Eretz Yisrael" is exactly a repetition of their previous sin. This Teshuva does not indicate a change.

Rav Wolbe provides a beautiful insight into the Gemara [Menachos 29b], which asks "Why was This World created with the letter Hey? (The Talmud mentions that Olam HaZeh was created with a Hey and Olam Habah – the World to Come – was created with the letter Yud). The Gemara answers: "It is because this world is like a vestibule – anyone who wants to leave can leave." There is no "bottom" to the letter Hey. If one wants to leave, there is a wide-open "door" from which to make one's exit.

The Gemara then asks why there is a space between the leg of the Hey and the roof of the Hey. The Gemara answers "If a person repents and wants to re-enter, there is a little opening for him to climb back in." The Gemara then asks why there is a need for the "little opening" – why can't the repentant person come back through the bottom opening, the same way he left? The Gemara answers, "He will not be successful doing that." I have never fully understood this passage of the Talmud.

Rav Wolbe explains that the words "He will not be successful" are exactly the words of Moshe to the Ma'Apilim: "V'Hi Lo Tizlach". You cannot just repeat exactly what you have been doing until now and

expect to achieve repentance. That will not succeed! Repentance means changing one's approach, not merely retracing one's same steps all over again. Teshuva requires coming in afresh, from a new vantage point and a new perspective.

As Rav Hutner used to say, "Teshuva is not just becoming better; Teshuva is becoming different."

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## **A Chassidishe Ma'aseh With Three Lessons**

There was a Jew in Czarist Russia named Rav Mendel, who was fantastically wealthy. He supported poor Jews in the Land of Israel. One of the people he supported sent him a bottle of wine from Eretz Yisrael. This was a time when for the Jews in Russia, the Land of Israel was a far off dream. Despite his great wealth, the bottle of wine from Eretz Yisrael was Rav Mendel's most precious commodity.

When Rav Mendel was about to die, he told his son: Here is my most precious possession -- this bottle of wine from Eretz Yisrael. When there is a special occasion, I want you to open the wine, but not before.

It so happened that a day arrived several years later when the 8 sons of the Chernobler Maggid visited this little village. The 7 youngest sons of Reb Mordechai of Chernoble were known as the "Seven branches of the Menorah" and it was said about the oldest son, Reb Aharon of Chernoble, "Aharon stood above the other seven" (Shiva Kanei haMenorah v'Aharon omed al gabeiheim).

The eight sons came to the village and held a Chassidic "Tish" for all the Jews in town. The son of Reb Mendel said to himself, "This is a special occasion!" He arrived at the Tish with his bottle of Eretz Yisrael wine and passed up the bottle from the back of the room towards the head table where the 8 Rebbes of Chernoble were sitting. He yelled toward the front of the room "Wine from Eretz Yisrael; Wine from Eretz Yisrael."

Reb Aharon Chernobler, the oldest son, opened the bottle, poured himself a glass, recited the "Borei Pri haGafen" blessing, and tasted the wine. "Ummm! Delicious!" he said. He praised the wine profusely and passed the bottle to his brother Reb Moshe of Koristchev. Reb Moshe poured himself a glass, recited the blessing, tasted the wine, licked his lips, and likewise praised the wine. The bottle was then passed down the table to the next brother, Reb Yakov-Yosef of Cherkass and the process was repeated. The protocol continued with each of the brothers – Reb Menachem Nochum of Makarov, Reb Avraham of Trisk, Reb Dovid of Talne, and Reb Yitzchak of Skvira. Until finally, the bottle reached the youngest brother, Reb Yochanan of Rachmistrivka.

Reb Yochanan received the bottle. He did not pour himself a glass. He did not taste it. He passed the bottle down to the next person. The eldest brother, Reb Aharon, said to his youngest brother, Reb Yochanan "What is the matter with you? – you don't taste the wine from Eretz Yisrael?" Reb

Yochanan responded to his brother: "You know that I am a wine connoisseur and that as soon as I taste wine, I can immediately detect its quality. I was afraid that I would taste the wine and that for a split second, it would not satisfy my refined pallet and I would think evil of Eretz Yisrael. I don't want to be guilty again for the sin of the Spies of not appreciating The Land of Israel!"

We learn several things from this story:

First, we learn how careful we must be about speaking ill against Eretz Yisrael. Reb Yochanan of Rachmistrivka not only did not want to say anything bad about Eretz Yisrael, he did not even want to think it, not even for a split second. This is something we need to learn because we are all familiar with the challenges that exist in Eretz Yisrael. We all have a long list of things going on there that are not to our liking. However, that should not diminish the great love and sense of importance we must grant to the Promised Land in our minds and in our value system. Today, Eretz Yisrael is certainly the center of gravity of Judaism and the Jewish people in the world. America has nothing to be ashamed about regarding the amount of Torah studied here, but nothing comes close to what goes on in Eretz Yisrael in terms of the amount and intensity of learning of Torah and the meticulous observance of mitzvos. Here we are in Galus [exile]. There, you can feel that you are in a Jewish society. You feel a Yom Tov. You feel the holiness (Kedusha) of the Land. Unfortunately, it is the nature of people to expose shortcomings and to ignore or take for granted what is good. We must keep reminding ourselves not to stumble and repeat the sin of the Spies.

The second thing we learn from this incident is how precious Eretz Yisrael was to men of spiritual stature in that era. A bottle of wine from Eretz Yisrael was an heirloom. It was something that was passed down from generation to generation. It was something that was only opened up on the most special of occasions. The reason why they had that That which a person does not have is always more precious.

It is human nature to take what we have for granted. This is one of the great challenges of life. The most overwhelming emotion I have when I leave a funeral is that, for so long, I took the person, who was just buried, for granted. I did not fully appreciate him while I had him. That is why we feel what we do not have the proper sense of appreciation towards Eretz Yisrael. We have it today. There has been Jewish sovereignty once again in the Land of Israel for over 65 years now, after over 1900 years when Jewish sovereignty did not exist. We take it for granted.

We are approaching the 50-year mark since the Six Day War. Many of us were alive in that period, many others were not yet alive or not yet old enough to understand what was going on. The days leading up to that watershed event were days that are seared in the memories of anyone who lived through them. I will never forget the atmosphere in the Yeshiva leading up to the Six Day War. I was a young bochur in the Beis Medrash. There was this real thought that 19 years after we gained that sovereignty, the Jewish people were facing another Holocaust. It was a real danger that the yishuv (Jewish settlement) would be wiped off the map.

I will never forget the morning that the war started – June 5, 1967. I recall a young student running through the dormitories shouting "The war has started! The war has started!" I will never forget that during those days of the war, 24 hours a day, there was always a minyan of boys learning in the Beis Medrash, around the clock! June 5, 1967 is a day that not one bochur in the entire Yeshiva slept through davening. We knew that everything was on the line. We knew that we could lose it all.

Here we are, 48 years after the Six Day War. The State of Israel is no longer 19 years old. It is 67 years old. Unfortunately, we take it for granted because we do not appreciate that which we have. We just do not appreciate it!

For many year after the Six Day War, Rav Weinberg ZTL would bemoan the fact that we did not take full advantage of the atmosphere that existed right after the WAR, in which people were so inspired that they were primed to become baalei teshuva. If there is one regret that we should all feel about Eretz Yisrael and those miraculous days of the Six Day War, is that we did not take enough advantage of the opportunity to turn Eretz Yisrael around in a spiritual sense. In my lifetime, there was never a time like that where people were so ripe to be chozer b'Tshuva [engage in a life-changing repentance]. That is the third lesson from the story.

There is a famous story that went around then which tells the whole story. When the Western Wall was captured by the Israeli army, there was a confluence of emotions of tears and joy. People cried. They were bawling. A secular Israeli soldier was among the first troops to liberate the Kosel. He was crying. Someone asked him. Why are you crying? In other words, it was obvious why the religious soldiers were crying at this emotional moment in history, but this 'Chiloni' soldier was asked "Lamah ATA boche?" He responded "I am crying because I don't know what everybody else is crying about." (Ani boche mipnei she'ani lo yodeah al mah bochim.) Not to have a sense what the Kosel is, to not appreciate what the place of the Bais HaMikdash is -- this secular soldier realized at that moment that this was something to cry about.

That was the atmosphere of the time. I am afraid that unfortunately we did not take full advantage of that moment. We squandered the moment.

On this week of Parshas Shlach and the recently passed 48th anniversary of the Six Day War, let us remember to (1) Never talk ill of Eretz Yisrael; (2) Appreciate what we have when we have it; (3) Never again squander the opportunity to engage in and promote life changing repentance when the historical moment is so ripe for national Teshuva.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter

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