

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Devarim

Looking Back at the Sin of the Spies

INTRODUCTION

The first section of Chumash Devarim is devoted to Moshe's words to retrospection and rebuke to the Jewish people concerning the various mistakes they made during the forty years in the wilderness. The first such episode to be discussed at length is that of the spies, which is initially recounted in Parshas Shelach.¹ As we will see, Moshe's words are not merely a historical review of that episode, but rather a reflection on its background and character, with a view to learning the lessons that will ensure it is not perpetuated or repeated in some other form.

FIRST POINT: FROM WHOM THE IDEA?

The first thing we note about Moshe's account of this episode is that it contains significant information that does not appear in the original recounting. Parshas Shelach begins with Hashem telling Moshe to send spies. It is not until we get to our parsha that we discover that the idea of sending spies originated, not with Hashem's command to Moshe, but with the Jewish people themselves. Verse 22 of Chapter 1 reads:

וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כְּלִכְּם וְהִיאמְרוּ נִשְׁלַחְהָ אַנְשִׁים לְפָנֵינוּ וַיַּחְפְּרוּ לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשִׁבוּ אֵתְנוּ דְבַר אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר נִעְלָה בָּהּ וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר נָבֵא אֵלַיָּהוּן

All of you approached me and said, "Let us send men ahead of us and they will spy out the Land and bring word back to us: the path on which we should proceed and the cities which we should [first] approach."

This is a most puzzling situation. Why would the Torah omit this important piece of background information from its original account? On the other hand, if we say that this background is not actually of such great significance, then why does Moshe see fit to mention it here?

Before we try and answer this question, it is most interesting to note Rashi's comment on the word "כולכם".

1 Interestingly, the earlier episode of the Golden Calf is not discussed until later on in Chapter 9.

In a disorderly manner, the young were pushing the old and the old were pushing the leaders.

It is quite striking to consider how even as Moshe is about to describe one of the lowest points in the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert, he does not neglect to also chastise them for approaching him in a disorderly way. Moshe seems to be saying, "You showed lack of trust in Hashem by refusing to enter into the land which He swore to your fathers; and also, you shouldn't have pushed!" Apparently, the lesson is that when it comes to rebuke, small issues do not get eclipsed by larger ones. Ultimately, everything has to be accounted for.

However, it is possible that Moshe mentions this lack of order for a very different reason.

SENDING SPIES: GOOD FOR THE JEWS?

Probably the most basic question to be asked regarding the episode of the spies was whether it was correct to send them in the first place. In other words, while we know that the episode ended in disaster, was the idea itself categorically flawed?

On the face of it, sending spies seems like a legitimate act of *hishtadlus* (effort) on the part of the people, assuming they were not expected to rely completely on a miraculous entry into the Land. Indeed, forty years later, Yehoshua who was one of the original twelve spies, himself sends two spies to look at the land. However, the issue here is the question of striking the balance between *bitachon* and *hishtadlus*. The crucial point is that they are not exclusive of each other, but rather, complementary to each other. *Hishtadlus* is not a replacement for *bitachon*, but an accompaniment to it. The winning formula is that a person engages diligently and responsibly in *hishtadlus*, trusting that Hashem will send blessing to his efforts. As such, the critical question is not necessarily, "What *hishtadlus* should a person engage in?" but rather, "With what in mind should a person engage in *hishtadlus*?" The answer to this second question will be decisive.

With this in mind, let us consider the mood of the Jewish people regarding the idea of sending spies. We may say that the entire matter is summed up in Moshe's words: "וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כְּלָכֶם – All of you approached me." Let us ask:

- ▷ Why did the people feel the need to suggest the idea of sending spies to Moshe? If, indeed, it was such a good idea, did they not trust that Moshe – or Hashem Himself – would also think of it and implement it at the appropriate time?
- ▷ Even if the people felt that they "needed" to suggest it, how many people did they think were required to do so? One or two representatives, or perhaps even one per tribe, would certainly have sufficed. It did not take all of them.

The fact that *everyone* felt they had to approach Moshe with this idea indicated that it was coming from a place which is antithetical to trust in Hashem, namely: anxiety, if not outright panic and desperation. Indeed, with this in mind, let us return to Rashi's comment that the people approached Moshe in a disorganized and unruly way, pushing and shoving each other. R' Yaakov Kamenetzky² explains that this is not a side-point in the episode of the spies. Rather, Moshe mentions this here because it was a clear indicator that the idea itself was not an expression of *bitachon*, but of its absence.

To send spies without *bitachon* could only lead to a negative outcome, for by asking in this way, the people revealed that they had lost sight of the fact that Hashem would be with them in their

2 Commentary *Emes le'Yaakov, Parshas Devarim*.

conquest of the land. Indeed, much of Hashem's command to Moshe in the beginning of *Parshas Shelach* to send spies was to "rescue" it from its original negative mode and elevate it to an act of kosher *hishtadlus*. For this reason, the people's request is omitted from that parsha. Rather, Hashem says, "Send men and they will spy out the Land that I am giving to the Children of Israel,"³ emphasizing that they should observe the land from a position of awareness that Hashem will be giving it to them.

The spies, unfortunately, did not bring this awareness with them. Ultimately, this led to their negative report. Since they were looking at the conquest of the land as something they would be doing "by themselves," i.e. losing sight of Divine assistance, it was only natural to conclude that this would be impossible. Hence, as Moshe comes to rebuke the Jewish people for this episode, he begins by mentioning their request, as well as the disorderly way in which it was presented, for this was the beginning of the path which led to that episode ending in tragedy.

SECOND POINT: THE EPISODE OF THE SPIES – WITHOUT THE SPIES!

If our first observation addressed the matter of additional information in our parsha concerning the meraglim, the second observation relates to information that seems to be *missing*.

Moshe records the spies' report concerning the land as saying that "the land is good,"⁴ turning then with rebuke to the Jewish people: "Yet you did not wish to enter!"⁵ As we know from *Parshas Shelach*, while the spies' initial words were that the land was good, they proceeded to slander it repeatedly, stating that it was "a land that consumes its inhabitants" and that the people currently living there were giants who could not be conquered! It is therefore absolutely astonishing that Moshe omits these negative words, giving them entry only in the people's own words of complaint later on.⁶ How are we to understand this?

It would appear that Moshe was seeking to impart a profound lesson here. To refer to this tragic episode as "the sin of the spies" is accurate only inasmuch as it began with their slanderous reports. And indeed, the spies received their due punishment for their reports; however, at the end of the day, it is not the story of twelve people; it is the story of the entire Jewish people. Moshe all but ignores the role of the spies in this chapter because he is seeking to disavow the people from the notion that they had no choice but to believe the spies. Ultimately, having been promised the land by Hashem Himself, they should have known that the land was good, and if that meant refusing to believe the negative reports of the spies, that was what was expected of them. This is the lesson here. We cannot always choose what it is that people say to us, or what happens to us. However, we are always accountable for how we react to those things, and can never absolve ourselves of our own responsibilities by pointing to what "he" did, "they" said or what "they" made me do. Hence, the episode under review is not of the spies spreading bad reports but of the people believing them.

Moreover, perhaps this may explain something else in our parsha. In Verse 37, Moshe says:

גַּם בִּי הִתְאַזְּנָה ה' בְּגִלְלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר גַּם אֶתֶּנָּה לֹא תָבֹא שָׁמָּה

Also with me Hashem got angry on your account, saying, you too, shall not come there.

Many commentators are puzzled by these words, as they seem to imply that Moshe was denied

3 Bamidbar 13:2.

4 Verse 25.

5 Verse 26.

6 Verse 28.

entry to the land of Israel as a result of the sin of the spies. However, as we know, the matter which prevented him from entering the land was the episode of *Mei Meriva*, where he hit the rock, as recorded in Parshas Chukkas!⁷ How is that episode relevant to the present discussion of the spies?⁸

Perhaps we may suggest that these are not words of rebuke, but of empathy. Moshe's message to the people is that you can never escape the consequences of your actions with the excuse that "they made me do it." At this juncture, Moshe interjects that this is not only something he is saying to them, it is something he experienced himself. Whatever one's understanding of Moshe's sin at *Mei Meriva*, it is very clear that whatever he did was a result of the contentious way in which the people approached and provoked him. Thus Moshe us saying: "The message I am telling you, that it is never sufficient to say 'it was because of them', is one I can corroborate from my own experience. I too, acted incorrectly at a later occasion, and that time it was *because of you*, but that did prevent me from having to bear the consequences of my actions."

THIRD POINT: FALLOUT – THE LANDS OF ESAV, AMON AND MOAV

The phenomenon of discovering additional information which was not mentioned in the parshiyos at the time continues in Chapter 2.

1. Verses 4-5 state that the people are not to wage war against the descendants of Esav, as that land has been given as an inheritance to Esav.
2. Verse 9 states that they cannot wage war against Moav, as their land has been given as an inheritance to their ancestor, Lot.
3. Verse 19 states that Amon, too, is off limits, having been given to Lot as an inheritance.

What is the relevance of these directives to Parsha Devarim? In Parshas Chukkas, which describes those events when they were actually happening, we were told only that the Jewish people asked Edom (Esav) for permission to pass through his land peacefully.⁹ We were not given any additional information concerning this request, such as the reason why war with Edom was not an option. Likewise, there is no mention there of any injunction against waging war with Amon or Moav? Why are we being told all of this now?

The answer, says R' Leib Heyman,¹⁰ is that this too is part of the rebuke for the sin of the spies! To understand how, let us go back to a verse in the beginning of our parsha.

SEVEN NATIONS – OR TEN?

In the beginning of Chapter 1,¹¹ the people, who have been encamped around Har Sinai for almost a year, are instructed to move on toward the Promised Land:

סְעוּ לָכֶם וּבֵאוּ הַר הָאֱמֹרִי וְאֵל כָּל שְׂכֵנָיו

Journey and come to the mountain of the Emori and all its neighbors.

We know that the Emori are one of the inhabiting nations of Canaan that the people were to conquer. To whom, however, is the verse referring with the phrase "and its neighbors"? Rashi,

7 Bamidbar 20:1-

8 See e.g. commentaries of Ramban and Ohr Hachaim to verse 37.

9 Ibid. 20:14-21.

10 *Chikrei Lev*, Parshas Devarim.

11 Verse 7.

citing the Sifrei, explains that the reference is to the three nations of Amon, Moav and Seir (Esav).

With what in mind are the people meant to come to those three nations?

We are familiar with the idea that the Land of Canaan was occupied by seven nations whom we needed to conquer. However, when we consult back to the event when Avraham was promised the land, known as the *Bris Bein Habesarim* (Covenant between the Pieces), we see that the lands of ten nations are mentioned, the final three being the Keini, Kenizi and Kadmoni.¹² Who are those three nations? Rashi, citing the Midrash,¹³ explains that they are none other than Amon, Moav and Edom!

It emerges that the full inheritance of the land includes those three nations. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon explains¹⁴ that this is the meaning of Hashem's instruction to the people at Har Sinai to "come to the Emori and his neighbors," namely, it was for purposes of conquering their land! However, as we have noted, when the time came, we were warned not to approach them. What happened?

The answer is: The Sin of the Spies happened.

As a result of that sin, we were no longer on a level where we could merit the full inheritance of the land. This is why the marking of those three nations as off limits, which was not mentioned in Parshas Chukkas, is mentioned in our parsha – for it is *part of the rebuke* for the sin of the meraglim! Had we not sinned, any merit those nations had that might entitle them to those lands would have been nullified by the merit of the Jewish people entitling them to the full fulfillment of the *Bris Bein Habesarim*. Now, however, with a drop in our level of merit, the merits of those three nations surfaced and were taken into account.

It turns out that the sin of the meraglim not only deferred our entry into the land or forty years, it also limited the extent of the land that we were able to inherit at that time. The lands of the final three nations originally promised to Avraham were placed beyond our reach until future times with the coming of the Mashiach.

May we merit always to see the good in the Land of Israel, and achieve a full rectification of the sin of the spies, allowing us to witness the complete fulfillment of Hashem's covenant with Avraham speedily in our days.

12 Bereishis 15:19.

13 Bereishis Rabbah 44:23.

14 Aderes Eliyahu, Parshas Devarim.