YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Shelach**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

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May HKBH help us meet the challenges He sends us

(כי-יָכוֹל נוּכַל" (שמות יג:ל"

Shanen and Akiva Werber and family

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**The Sin of the Spies and “*Lo Taturu*”**

Summarized by Aviad Lipstadt

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

The first few *parashot* of *Sefer Bamidbar* lead us along with the people of Israel through the wilderness as they ready themselves for their entry into the Land of Israel and even begin operational preparations to further that end. As part of the preparations, spies are sent to scout out the country and determine the best way to conquer it.

But from that point on, there is a rapid deterioration: The people of Israel sin by listening to the spies’ negative report, and it is decreed that the older generation will die in the wilderness. It is not only the older generation that is affected by this, however. There is a change in the entire plan of the journey to the land: God decides that the people of Israel will not enter the land immediately, but will first wander in the wilderness for forty years.

We will try to understand what was unique about the sin of the spies, and from that, to understand the meaning of the punishment imposed because of it.

**The Attitude Towards the Sin of the Golden Calf**

In fact, two major sins were committed in the wilderness years: the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies. *Chazal* in many places noted similarities between these two sins.

One of the striking points of comparison between the sins relates to their effects on future generations. Concerning the people's weeping over the spies’ report, *Chazal* say:

"And all the congregation lifted up their voice and wept" (*Bamidbar* 14:1). Rabba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: That day was the ninth of Av, and the Holy One, blessed be He, said: They are now weeping for nothing, but I will fix [this day] for them as an occasion of weeping for generations. (*Sota* 35a)

The sin of the spies continues to resonate throughout history. Following the sin of the spies and the "weeping for nothing," the people of Israel "merited" the destruction of the Temple. Similar things were said about the sin of the golden calf:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: No retribution whatsoever comes upon the world which does not contain a slight fraction of the first calf [i.e., the molten calf in the wilderness], as it is written: "Nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them" (*Yechezkel* 32:24).(*Sanhedrin* 102a)

Rabbi Yitzchak explains that we continue to bear the consequences of the sin of the golden calf to this day: Any trouble that comes upon Israel is related in one way or another to the sin of the golden calf. For behaving like "a brazen bride, promiscuous under her very bridal canopy" (*Gittin* 36b), we continue to suffer to our own day.

However, it seems that the consequences of each of the sins should be measured on a different scale. Although the sin of the golden calf was indeed terrible, its consequences were limited. It is true that God was furious with the people of Israel, and Moshe had to turn to Him with the thirteen attributed of mercy – but Moshe's prayer was answered. It is also true that those who sinned with the golden calf were killed – but the people of Israel continued on their way to the Land of Israel. Moreover, some understand the entire goal of *Parashot Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* to be the sending of a message that business is back to normal. In the new command concerning the *Mishkan*, God informs us that He expects to continue His relationship with Israel.

Concerning the sin of the spies, on the other hand, even when God answers Moshe's prayer, His words contain a certain reservation:

And the Lord said: I have pardoned according to your word. **However,** as I live – and all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord – surely all those men that have seen My glory, and My signs, which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have tested Me these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore to their fathers, neither shall any of them that despised Me see it. (*Bamidbar* 14:20-23)

The consequences of the sin of the spies are far more serious than those of the golden calf: God proposes to strike all of Israel with a plague, and to continue the people of Israel from the seed of Moshe. Ultimately, He is appeased and doesn't destroy the people of Israel; nevertheless, it is decreed that the first generation of the redemption, the generation of those who left Egypt, would not merit to enter the land but would die in the wilderness.

Furthermore, we see that in the eighth chapter of *Bava Batra* (117a), Rabbi Yonatan maintains that the land of Israel was not divided among those who left Egypt, but rather among those who arrived in the Land of Israel. Based on the above, the reason is simple: It is possible to understand that those who left Egypt and those who arrived in the Land of Israel were considered like different nations. Thus, in a certain sense, God indeed exchanged the people of Israel for a different nation: the generation of the sons.

**The Severity of the Sin of the Spies**

How can we explain the difference between the two sins? Or in other words, how can we bridge the gap between the two different punishments?

The initial answer to this question is relatively simple. It may be suggested that the difference between the two sins is chronological. The sin of the golden calf occurred several days after the giving of the Torah and the birth of the people of Israel. The people did not yet know the proper way to worship God, and therefore they erred and worshiped the calf. It is true that such a sin continues to echo to our day, but it is similar in a sense to the sin of Adam – the sin of a person who is unaware of the consequences of his actions. The sin of the spies, on the other hand, came after a long succession of miracles, and by that time they should already have recognized the power of God.

From another perspective, the sin of the spies, as we know, was not the first sin of the people of Israel, nor the second or third, and the Gemara teaches:

Rav Huna said: Once a man has committed a sin once and twice, it is permitted to him. Permitted? How could that occur to you? Rather, it becomes for him as if it were permitted. (*Yoma* 86b)

If a person sinned once and failed to turn away from his sin, he will continue on the same path until the sin loses all its severity in his eyes. With the sin of the spies, the people were no longer able to internalize the severity of their actions, and as Rav Huna would have formulated it: "it became for them as if it were permitted."

**The Root of the Sin**

Having considered the special severity of the sin of the spies even in relation to the sin of the golden calf, we will now turn to the following question: What is the root of the sin? What is the fundamental point that led to the sin?

Some have explained the sin of the spies by saying that the spies provided their own interpretation for the sights that they saw. According to this explanation, Moshe expected the spies to give him an objective report, whereas they added their own opinion, saying: "However, the people that dwell in the land are fierce" (*Bamidbar* 13:28).

In my opinion, there are a number of difficulties with this interpretation. First of all, is a spy not expected to express his opinion? Are there any spies better than the two people sent by Yehoshua, who upon their return said: "Truly the Lord has delivered into our hands all the land; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land do melt away before us" (*Yehoshua* 2:24). They did not content themselves with a dry description of the reality, but stated assertively that conquest of the land is possible. And they did this without even having gone around the city of Yericho, and only having had a brief encounter with Rachav.

Second, it is not clear to me how it could have been expected that the spies would give a completely objective report, as almost every event we experience is interpreted in light of our preconceptions. For example, during the Corona pandemic, we saw that every expert expressed a different opinion, each one purporting to be absolutely professional. It is clear that each of these opinions was based on previous assumptions and preconceptions that shaped each of the experts' perception of reality. How then could the spies have been required to fully differentiate precise factual details from their personal interpretations?

Therefore, it seems that the sin of the spies did not lie in their added interpretation itself, but in the prejudices behind their interpretation. The words of the spies revealed their lack of trust in God, and their unwillingness to accept His words as a servant who defers to the authority of his master.

**The Repair: The Mitzva of *Tzitzit***

The mitzvaof *tzitzit* is directed against such a perception:

And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you will not go about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you go astray. (*Bamidbar* 15:39)

Upon which Rashi comments:

The heart and the eyes are the “spies” of the body – they act as its agents for sinning. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 15:39)

A number of parallels can be found between the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* and the sin of the spies. The most prominent of these is that the mitzvaof *tzitzit* comes to prevent a person from going about (*ve-lo taturu*) after his own heart, precisely as the spies did. Rashi emphasizes that a person's heart and eyes are "the spies of the body," and thus sharpens our comparison even further.

*Chazal*[[1]](#footnote-1) say that the *tzitzit* remind us of the *tzitz* (golden head plate) worn by the High Priest. On the *tzitz* is written: "Holy to the Lord" (*Shemot* 28:36), in order to highlight the High Priest's subordination to God. The priest submits himself totally to the Creator, and accepts upon himself to do His will.

The purpose of the mitzvaof *tzitzit* is to instill within us a similar understanding, according to which we are God's servants and we must keep His commandments. One must not doubt God's instructions or criticize them, but do them in full. This is, of course, in contrast to the spies, who sinned precisely on this point; they were not willing to accept God's word and rely on His promise. The spies had hoped to offer an objective analysis of reality, but failed and added ideas stemming from their own hearts.

The mitzvaof *tzitzit* comes to reshape a person's perceptions and educate him to be a servant of God. How, then, is it possible that the mitzvaof *tzitzit* is not an absolute obligation, but is instead contingent on certain other factors? Why is it that, according to the strict law, a person who is not wearing a four-cornered garment is not at all obligated to have *tzitzit*?

The answer to this question lies in the Gemara in *Menachot*  (41a), which states that while there is no prohibition not to wear *tzitzit*, yet "in a time of wrath," one who does not wear *tzitzit* will be punished. It seems that *tzitzit* is a special opportunity given to us by God to internalize the consciousness of being a servant of God. The natural consequence is that a person who does not take advantage of such an opportunity, and fails to wear *tzitzit*, will not be able to stand before God "in a time of wrath."

May we all merit to accept upon ourselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, and continue to serve God and stand before Him.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Shelach* 5780.]

1. See *Keli Yakar*, *Shemot* 28:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)