**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHELACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Shelach tells the tragic story of the spies who were sent to scout *Eretz Yisrael*, and upon their return successfully persuaded the people that they should not proceed into the land. In response, God decreed that the nation would wander in the desert for a total forty years, during which time the entire current generation would pass on, such that only their offspring, the next generation, would enter *Eretz Yisrael*. In issuing this decree, God told Moshe that the forty-year sentence corresponded to the forty days which the spies spent on their scouting mission. Since they sojourned for forty days in the Land of Israel, *Benei Yisrael* would have to sojourn for forty years in the wilderness before finally entering and settling the land (14:34).

The implication of this correspondence, seemingly, is that the forty days spent by the scouts in *Eretz Yisrael* were themselves sinful. If God saw fit to punish the people for each day spent by the spies on their excursion, we must assume that their sin was committed already then, during those forty days. Whereas we would have considered their betrayal to have occurred only once they returned, when they spoke with the people and the people sinfully accepted their recommendation, in truth, it appears, the sin of the spies transpired already during the forty days of scouting.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explained that the forty days of scouting were themselves sinful because the spies looked at the land from a negative perspective already then. Rather than focus their attention on the great benefits offered by the Land of Israel, they focused instead on its negative qualities. This is reflected by the famous comment of the Gemara (Sota 35a), cited by Rashi (13:32), that God brought a deadly plague upon the Canaanites during the period of the scouts’ excursion, to ensure that they would not be noticed. The scouts, however, saw funerals taking place and concluded that *Eretz Yisrael* is a land that “consumes its inhabitants.” The point being made is that from the outset, the spies approached their mission with a negative outlook, looking to find fault in the land, rather than appreciate its many blessings. And thus the punishment corresponded to the number of days the spies spent scouting the land, because they sinned by surveying and assessing the land with a jaundiced eye, with the intention of finding fault and criticizing.

With this in mind, we can perhaps understand more clearly the connection drawn by the *Midrash Tanchuma* (cited by Rashi, 13:1) between the story of the spies and the story of Miriam’s inappropriate criticism of Moshe. The Midrash explains that these two accounts are juxtaposed in the Torah because the spies failed to learn the lesson of Miriam’s punishment for speaking negatively about her brother, and they likewise spoke negatively of *Eretz Yisrael*. Many have addressed the question as to the precise point of connection between these two episodes – Miriam’s disrespectful censure of Moshe, and the spies’ discouraging report about the Land of Israel. The answer might lie in the negativity expressed by both Miriam and the spies. Just as Miriam looked to criticize Moshe, failing to speak of him with the respect and reverence he deserved, likewise, the spies went into their mission looking to find fault. The two stories teach us of the importance of living with a positive outlook on the people in our lives and the circumstances we confront, to try as much as possible to find all that is good about the people and things around us, rather than focusing on all that is wrong. Rather than looking to complain and find fault, we should instead be looking to appreciate and feel grateful for all the many blessings we have been granted.

Sunday

Parashat Shelach tells of *cheit ha-meragelim*, the story of the spies who scouted the Land of Israel and then persuaded *Benei Yisrael* that the land was unconquerable. *Benei Yisrael* accepted the scouts’ report, whereupon God decreed that the generation would perish in the wilderness, and only their children would enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

Several sources in Chassidic thought view the scouts’ sin as mistakenly preferring the supernatural existence of the wilderness over the natural lifestyle that *Benei Yisrael* would need to lead once they entered the land. The *Chuddushei Ha-Rim*, for example, taught that the scouts did not want to lose the miraculous conditions of the wilderness which afforded the people the opportunity to devote themselves entirely to Torah. They did not need to work to sustain themselves, as they were cared for miraculously, and so they spent their time learning from Moshe. This was going to change once *Benei Yisrael* enter the land and begin building homes and developing an agrarian economy. They would be busy tending to their farms and herds, and would not have the luxury to devote themselves exclusively to spirituality as they did in the wilderness. For this reason, the scouts chose to dissuade the people from proceeding into the land. But they were mistaken, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* explained, because God made it clear that this is what He wanted – that *Benei Yisrael* should enter the land and live a normal, natural existence. The *Chiddushim Ha-Rim* writes that we are to submit to God’s laws and demands unconditionally, without deciding how we should serve Him. If He determined that the miraculous existence in the wilderness should be only temporary, and that the people should immediately enter the land and begin their natural mode of existence, then they should accept it, without claiming to know better than God does how they should serve Him and what kind of lives they should live.

In a sense, this Chassidic reading of the events bears a certain resemblance to the plain meaning, whereby *cheit ha-meragelim* involved a lack of faith in God’s ability to lead the nation to victory over the Canaanite nations. *Benei Yisrael* wanted to realize their destiny as God’s treasured nation on their own terms – in a smooth, straightforward and simple manner. They did not want to have challenges and struggles to overcome, to face the large, well-equipped militaries of Canaan and place their trust in God who assured them of victory. And thus once they realized what was entailed in the process of the conquest and settlement of *Eretz Yisrael*, they rejected this process and the destiny for which they were freed from Egypt.

This mistake is essentially the same mistake described by the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim*. He speaks of people who want to serve God in one particular way, who have an idea in their minds of what religious life is meant to look like, and they are unwilling to accept, or have difficulty accepting, realities that require making adjustments. We might dream of the kind of idyllic spiritual life that *Benei Yisrael* experienced in the desert, as explained by the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim*, but sometimes circumstances require us to serve the Almighty under trying and challenging conditions. We need to accept these realities and remain committed to serving God by doing what He wants us to do under any set of circumstances that come our way, even if we had expected or hoped for something very different, for something simpler and for something less challenging. Serving God means standing prepared for whatever He demands of us, even if it is not a task that we would have ideally wanted to undertake.

Monday

Rashi opens his comments to Parashat Shelach by citing a seemingly peculiar question from the *Midrash Tanchuma* – why the story of the spies, which is told in the beginning of this *parasha*, is presented immediately following the story of Miriam’s punishment for inappropriately criticizing Moshe. The Midrash’s famous answer to this question is that this juxtaposition teaches that the scouts repeated Miriam’s mistake by speaking negatively about the Land of Israel, just as Miriam spoke negatively about Moshe Rabbenu.

Many later writers wondered by such a question needed to be asked. Why should we not assume that the Torah’s presentation follows the chronological sequence of the events, and the sin of spies was the first significant event to transpire after the story of Miriam? What compelled the Midrash to probe into a possible connection between these two episodes that accounts for their juxtaposition to one another?

One simple but surprising answer, as noted by Rav David Mandelbaum (*Pardeis Yosef Ha-chadash*, Parashat Shelach), is that Rashi himself elsewhere clearly indicates that the Torah’s presentation does not, in fact, follow chronological sequence. In his commentary to the opening verse of Sefer Devarim, Rashi writes that when the Torah tells of Moshe speaking to the people at Chatzeirot, it means that he reprimanded them for rebelling against him during the time of Korach’s uprising. Rashi appears to have felt that Korach’s revolt occurred in Chatzeirot – the place where Miriam spoke out against Moshe (see Bamidbar 11:35). If so, then we must conclude that Korach’s revolt – which is told in Parashat Korach, after the story of the spies, which we read in Parashat Shelach – occurred before the sin of the spies. After all, the Torah writes explicitly in the final verse of Parashat Behaalotekha that *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Chatzeirot to the Paran Desert after Miriam’s sin, and it was from the Paran Desert that Moshe sent the spies (12:3). Necessarily, then, Korach’s revolt transpired in between Miriam’s punishment and the story of the spies. Thus, the Midrash poses the legitimate question of why the Torah chose to present the story of the spies immediately following the story of Miriam, rather than following chronological sequence and telling of Korach’s revolt first before telling the story of the spies.

Rav Mandelbaum further notes Rashi’s comments in Parashat Masei (33:18), regarding the Torah’s account of *Benei Yisrael* journeying from Chatzeirot and then arriving and encamping in a place called Ritma. Rashi writes that Ritma was the place in the Paran Desert from where the spies were sent, and it was so named because the verse in Tehillim (120:2) compares false, deceptive speech to “*gachalei retamim*” (coals made from broom-wood). The spies spoke falsely and deceptively about *Eretz Yisrael*, and thus the place where this occurred was named “Ritma.”This clearly proves that the sin of the spies took place after *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Chatzeirot, and thus if, as Rashi indicates in the beginning of Sefer Devarim, Korach’s revolt occurred in Chatzeirot, then we must conclude that Korach’s revolt took place before the sin of the spies.

This is also the indication of the *Midrash Tanchuma* in Parashat Korach (2), which tells that among the Korach’s supporters in his campaign were the twelve tribal leaders. The Midrash specifies the name of Elitzur ben Shedeiur, the leader of Reuven who oversaw that tribe’s census (Bamidbar 1:5), and who is named as leader also in reference to his tribe’s encampment (2:10) and the celebration of the *Mishkan*’s consecration (7:30). Now here in Parashat Shelach, the Torah tells that the men chosen to spy land were the *nesi’im* – the leaders of the tribes (“*kol nasi bahem*” – 12:2), and that the spies were killed by a miraculous plague after convincing the people that they could not conquer Canaan (14:36-37). Accordingly, if the *Midrash Tanchuma* names Elitzur ben Shedeiur as one of Korach’s supporters, then necessarily, Korach’s revolt occurred before the sin of the spies.

However, in a different context, Rashi explicitly states that Korach’s revolt occurred after the sin of the spies. The Torah in Parashat Korach (16:4) tells that Moshe “fell on his face” after being confronted by Korach and his followers, and Rashi explains that he felt hopeless because this was the nation’s fourth grave misdeed. The first three, as Rashi lists, were the golden calf, the *mit’onenim* (*Benei Yisrael*’s complaints during travel), and the sin of the spies. Rashi thus seems inconsistent in his understanding of the chronology of the events, as in Parashat Korach he works off the assumption that Korach launched his revolt after the sin of the spies, whereas in other contexts, as we have seen, he implies just the opposite. This issue requires further study and discussion.

Tuesday

The final verses of Parashat Shelach discuss the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*, which requires affixing strings to the corners of a four-cornered garment. The Torah tells us that the purpose of this obligation is to remind us of our religious duties: “…you shall see them and remember all the commands of the Lord and perform them, and you shall not stray after your heart and your eyes after which you would [otherwise] be led astray” (15:39). Without a regular reminder of our obligations to God, we would naturally follow our sinful instincts, the desires of our heart and the lustful sights beheld by the eyes. The *tzitzit* serve as reminders of our subservience to God, which ensure that we do not follow our natural impulses.

Rashi explains (based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*)that the word *tzitzit* in *gematria* (the system of numerical values assigned to letters) equals 600, and when we add the eight strings and five knots on each corner, we arrive at a total of 613. Thus, looking at the *tzitzit* string reminds one of the *mitzvot*. The Gemara (Menachot 43b) explains differently, suggesting that *tzitzit* reminds us of the *mitzvot* through the requirement to dye one of the strings in *tekheilet* – a dye whose color resembles the color of the sea, which reflects the color of the heavens, which brings to mind God’s Heavenly Throne. In this way, seeing the *tzitzit* reminds a person of his responsibilities to God.

Many later writers legitimately questioned whether this reminder is truly effective. Is it really possible to expect a person who sees his *tzitzit* strings to reflect upon the number 613, or the Heavenly Throne?

It has been suggested that the message of *tzitzit* is precisely that we must avoid superficial perspectives, and look beneath the surface to see things the way they really are, and not the way they appear to be. The word *tekheilet* might be understood as a derivative of the word *takhlit* – “purpose,” or “end goal.” The message of the *tekheilet* string is that our attention must be directed toward the “*takhlit*,” the ultimate goal and purpose for which we live. The point is not that the color actually brings to mind the Heavenly Throne, but that we must look beyond the superficial appearance of things. In life, we are so often lured and tempted by that which is either harmful or wasteful. Sin and vanity both have a way of seeming attractive and appealing, as something valuable for us to pursue. The message of the *tzitzit* string is that we need to view the world around us with a “*takhlit*” perspective, seeing the true essence of all things, and not be misled by false appearances.

This might possibly mark a point of connection between the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* and the story of the spies, which is told in this *parasha*. The spies – and then the people, whom they influenced – looked at the Land of Israel from a superficial viewpoint. They saw impressive volumes and quality of fruit, but they also saw large, powerful armies, and instinctively concluded that the campaign to capture the land could not possibly work. If they would have assessed their situation more thoroughly, they would have looked beneath the surface and seen before their eyes God’s explicit promise to lead them to victory over the nations of Canaan. They would not have been misled by the intimidating appearance of the challenge which lay ahead, and would have instead seen the reality of their situation, which differed from its outward impression. The response to this tragic mistake is *tzitzit* – the *mitzva* which teaches us to avoid superficiality and simplemindedness, to avoid the pitfalls of external trappings and to perceive things the way they truly are, and not the way they outwardly appear.

(Based on [*Torah Ve-hora’a*, Parashat Shelach, 5777](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/52_37_77.pdf))

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Shelach of the spies who returned from their excursion in Canaan and concluded, “We are unable to rise up against the people [of Canaan], because they are stronger than us” (13:31). The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (35a) offers a startling interpretation of this declaration, noting that the word “*mimenu*” (“than us”) can also be read to mean “than him.” Accordingly, the Gemara explains that the spies here denied God’s ability to vanquish the Canaanites, and told the people, “Even the Owner is unable to remove His belongings from there.” Meaning, although God was the “owner” over the land, He lacked – in the view of the spies – the power to remove the Canaanite peoples from the land so *Benei Yisrael* can take possession of it and settle there.

The Chafetz Chaim (*Shemirat Ha-lashon* 2:19) suggests a novel reading of the Gemara’s remark, which he presents as part of his general approach to the story of the spies, viewing the spies’ mistake as rooted in their lack of spiritual self-confidence. According to the Chafetz Chaim, the spies did not doubt God’s power to drive the Canaanites from the land. After all the miraculous events *Benei Yisrael* had witnessed, they knew with absolutely certainty that God was capable of performing the most unlikely miracles. However, the spies determined that *Benei Yisrael* were unworthy of a miracle of this nature. They assumed – perhaps rightfully so – that God, the land’s “owner,” would remove His “belongings” from the land only to bring in higher quality “belongings.” Just as a person replaces his old furniture and clothing with higher quality furniture and clothing, similarly, God would replace the inhabitants of Canaan only with people who were more righteous. The spies asserted that *Benei Yisrael* had no reason to believe they were worthier of residing in the land than its current inhabitants, and thus they successfully persuaded the people that the Almighty would not remove the current inhabitants for their benefit.

On this basis, the Chafetz Chaim explains Yehoshua and Kaleiv’s retort to the other ten spies: “Only do not rebel against the Lord!” (14:9). On the surface, it appears that Yehoshua and Kaleiv here warn the people not to betray God by refusing to proceed to the Land of Israel (which is, tragically, what actually happened). The Chafetz Chaim, however, understands these words differently – as expressing reassurance. Yehoshua and Kaleiv were telling the people that although they had indeed failed on numerous occasions, and although they were certainly far from perfect and had angered the Almighty several times since leaving Egypt, nevertheless, they were worthy of His assistance as long as they do not outright rebel against Him. *Benei Yisrael* thought it pious to declare themselves undeserving of God’s assistance and thus refuse to proceed into *Eretz Yisrael* as He wanted them to do, but Yehoshua and Kaleiv insisted that this perspective is actually sinful. Even if we are far from perfect, and even though we have made grave mistakes, we still deserve the privilege of serving Him, and we are still required to do so. Guilt and shame, genuine as these feelings may be, must not be used to absolve oneself of his or her religious obligations. Recognizing our failures and shortcomings should motivate us to continue trying to serve God to the best of our ability, rather than allow us to excuse ourselves from trying.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Shelach of Moshe’s impassioned plea on behalf of *Benei Yisrael* after God informed Moshe of His decision to annihilate the nation in response to the sin of the spies. Moshe begged the Almighty to forgive the people’s betrayal “as You have borne [the iniquity of] this people from Egypt until now” (14:19). God accepted Moshe’s petition, and proclaimed, “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*” – “I have forgiven as you spoke” (14:20). He then quickly added, “However…all the people who saw My glory and My wonders which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness…shall not see the land which I promised to their forefathers…” (14:21-23). Although God agreed not to annihilate the nation, He decreed that the current adult generation would perish in the wilderness, and only their children will enter the Land of Israel.

God’s pronouncement of forgiveness – “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*” – is cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Yitro (Shemot 18:13) in reference to – surprisingly enough – the sin of the golden calf. In discussing the chronological sequence of the events told in Parashat Yitro, Rashi comments that on Yom Kippur, nearly three months after the sin of the golden calf, God announced to Moshe that He has forgiven *Benei Yisrael*, proclaiming, “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*.” (*Tosafot* in Masekhet Bava Kama 82a cite this comment in the name of *Seder Olam Rabba*.)As many later commentators noted, Rashi here seems to extract this proclamation from its context – the sin of the spies. It is clear in Parashat Shelach that the announcement “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*” was made in response to Moshe’s plea after the sin of the spies, not after the sin of the golden calf. Why, then, does Rashi tells of God making this proclamation after the sin of the golden calf?

Several different answers have been offered to explain Rashi’s comments. Rav Chaim Paltiel suggests that Rashi understood God’s response to Moshe to mean that in previous instances He “has forgiven as you spoke,” fully accepting Moshe’s plea, but in this instance, as God proceeds to declare, He will not be actually forgiving the people. Although He agreed not to annihilate *Benei Yisrael*, He will decree death upon that entire generation. According to this interpretation, the pronouncement of “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*” indeed refers to God’s forgiveness for the sins committed prior to the sin of the spies, including the golden calf. A similar explanation is offered by Chizkuni.

*Da’at Zekeinim* explains that since God announced His forgiveness “*ki-dvarekha*,” just as He had forgiven *Benei Yisrael* on past occasions when Moshe interceded on their behalf, the phrase “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*” in a sense refers even to those prior occasions.

*Rabboteinu Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot* offer a different answer, suggesting that perhaps the verse, “The Lord said: I have forgiven as you spoke” is actually the conclusion of Moshe’s plea. Moshe recalled the prior occasions – specifically, after the sin of the calf – when God told him, “*Salachti ki-dvarekha*,” pronouncing His forgiveness of the people’s misdeed. Thus, this proclamation was made not after the sin of the spies, but rather after the sin of the golden calf, as Moshe recalled after the sin of the spies. Quite obviously, however, this is a very strained reading of the text, and, as noted by the Rash Mi-Shantz (in *Shita Mekubetzet*, Bava Kama 82a), it fails to account for the next verse, in which God is clearly the one speaking (“However, as I live…”). According to this reading, that the verse, “The Lord said: I forgive” was spoken by Moshe, the Torah should have then told us that God responded, “However, as I live…” rather than just presenting the response without the introduction, “God said.”

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Shelach (15:32-36) tells the story of the “*mekosheish eitzim*,” the man who violated Shabbat and was subsequently punished. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (96b) cites three different views as to the precise violation committed by this individual. One view maintains that he picked pieces of wood from the ground, in violation of the prohibition against detaching vegetation from the ground on Shabbat. According to a different view, the sticks were already detached, but this man gathered them, in violation of “*me’amer*,” which forbids gathering scattered items into a heap on Shabbat. A third view maintains that the *mekosheish* simply carried sticks through the desert, in violation of the law which forbids carrying items through a public domain on Shabbat.

The *Minchat Chinukh* (*Mosakh Ha-Shabbat – me’amer*) suggests that one of the issues underlying this debate might be the scope of the *me’amer* prohibition. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (73b) cites two views as to whether this prohibition applies to all scattered items, or only to *gidulei karka* – things that grew from the ground. *Halakha* accepts Abayei’s position, that the Torah prohibition of *me’amer* is relevant only to *gidulei karka* (*Shulchan Arukh*, O.C. 340:9). The *Minchat Chinukh* infers from a textual nuance in the Rambam’s discussion of *me’amer* that according to the Rambam, the Torah prohibition of *me’amer* is limited not only to things that grow from the ground, but also to foodstuff. That is to say, inedible vegetation, such as wood, would not fall under the Torah prohibition. And for this reason, the *Minchat Chinukh* suggests, two of the three *Amora’im* cited did not accept the possibility that the *mekosheish* was guilty of *me’amer*. The Torah says explicitly that his violation involved wood (“*mekosheish* ***eitzim***”), and in their view, wood is not included in the *me’amer* prohibition. Therefore, they needed to identify other prohibitions of which the *mekosheish* was guilty.

On this basis, the *Minchat Chinukh* suggests an explanation for Rashi’s otherwise perplexing comments on this passage in the Gemara. Commenting on the view claiming that the *mekosheish* was guilty of *me’amer*, Rashi makes reference – seemingly unnecessarily – to the opinion mentioned earlier (73b) that the *me’amer* prohibition applies even to salt. As we saw, one view among the *Amora’oim* maintains that *me’amer* is applicable to all items, not just those that grow from the ground. Rashi makes reference to that opinion in the context of the discussion surrounding the *mekosheish* to establish that the *me’amer* prohibition applies even to non-foodstuff. Elsewhere (Bava Batra 20a), Rashi writes that salt is not halakhically classified as “food,” and thus, for example, it is not susceptible to *tum’a*. Therefore, the fact that one view applies the *me’amer* prohibition to salt, and the other disagrees only because salt does not grow from the ground, demonstrates that this prohibition is relevant even to inedible items. That discussion, then, provides the background to the Gemara’s discussion about the *mekosheish*, as it explains why one view maintained that the *mekosheish* was guilty of *me’amer*. The Rambam, however, maintained that *me’amer* is not applicable to inedible items, and he understood that this is precisely the point of debate (or one of the points of debate) among the *Amora’im* in identifying the prohibition transgressed by the *mekosheish*.

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