YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Shelach**

**The Sin of the Spies and its Lessons**

**Sicha of Harav Yaakov Medan**

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### Rashi – Sending the Spies

According to Rashi, the sin of the spies began long before the spies returned to the Israelite camp and defamed the Land of Israel. In his opinion, the sin lay in the very fact that they were sent:

"Send you" [literally, for yourself] – That is, according to your own judgment; I do not command you, but if you wish to do so, send them. God said this because the Israelites came to Moshe and said: We will send men before us, etc., as it is stated: "And you approached me, all of you, saying: We will send men" (*Devarim* 1:22), and Moshe took counsel with the *Shekhina*, whereupon He said to them: I have told them long ago that it [the land] is good, as it is stated: "I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt… to a land flowing with milk and honey" (*Shemot* 3:17). By their lives! I swear that I will give them now an opportunity to fall into error through the statements of the spies, so that they should not come into possession of it [the land]. (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 13:2)

The fact that the spies defamed the land and the entire congregation of Israel believed them and refused to proceed is merely a consequence of the sin, but not its essence.

### Rabbeinu BEchayei – Reliance on God and HUman action

 In contrast, Rabbeinu Bechayei does not see a problem in the very sending of the spies. He writes at length about the issue; we will cite here only a small part of what he says. He opens with a verse in *Mishlei*: "The horse is prepared against the day of battle; but victory is of the Lord" (*Mishlei* 21:31), and continues with praise for human action and non-reliance on miracles:

In this passage, King Shelomo admonishes a person to do everything that must be done in accordance with the laws of nature, whatever is in his power to do, and then pass the rest into the hands of God, for a miracle takes place only to fill in some insufficiency in nature. The creation of man is based on nature, and so a person must perform actions that will prepare the way to achieve his wants and attain the desires of his heart. Just like one who wishes to go out to war against his enemies must prepare weapons and horses and chariots for the day of battle, for if he fails to make these preparations and relies on a miracle, he will be delivered into the hands of his enemies.

Later in the passage, he clearly emphasizes: "For the Torah **never** relies on miracles."

The Rambam already said this before Rabbeinu Bechayei in a well-known passage in his *Commentary to the Mishna* on Tractate *Pesachim*, regarding the *mishna* that states: "King Chizkiyahu did six things; in three they [the Sages] agreed with him, and in three they did not agree with him" (*Pesachim* 4:9). The Rambam writes that this *mishna* is actually a Tosefta, but nevertheless he wishes to explain it, "because it has certain benefits." Regarding the statement that Chizkiyahu "hid the Book of Remedies, and the Sages agreed with him," the Rambam presents his understanding that the reference here is to a book of idolatrous practices that was composed as a method of study of the nature of the world. Chizkiyahu hid it because people began to use it to heal themselves. Alternatively, the reference is to a book containing precise instructions for the preparation of poisons and their antidotes. Chizkiyahu hid it away when people started to use it for the preparation of poisons, and not only for the preparation of their antidotes.

Afterwards the Rambam explains why he chose to explain the nature of the Book of Remedies:

And I have only elaborated to speak about this matter because I have heard and people have told me that Shelomo composed the Book of Remedies, so that if a person became ill with a certain illness and turned to him and did as he said, then he recovered. But Chizkiyahu saw that people were not trusting God with regard to their maladies, and instead they relied on the Book of Remedies, so he went and hid it.

 The Rambam comes out furiously against this approach:

And besides the nonsense of this matter, which has elements of fabrication to it, they have also associated foolishness with Chizkiyahu and those who agreed with him that one should only associate with the lowliest of the masses. According to their erroneous and weak logic, if a person is starving and then eats bread, he will undoubtedly be cured from that great pain; they would say that he removed his trust in God. One should tell them they are deranged. Just as when I eat, I thank God that He created something to remove my hunger and to keep me alive and well, we should also thank Him for creating a cure that cures my illness when I use it.

It is important, however, to remember that one of those "lowliest of the masses" of whom the Rambam speaks appears to be the Ramban. Hence, we are dealing with one Torah giant versus another, and so we cannot decide unequivocally in favor of the Rambam.

In his commentary to the section of rebuke in *Parashat Bechukotai*, the Ramban explicitly writes:

When Israel are perfect and large in number, their course of events will not be subject to nature at all, neither regarding their bodies, nor their land, neither communally nor for an individual of them. God will bless their bread and their water and remove sickness from amidst them, so that they will not need a physician nor to take any medical precautions at all, as it is stated: "I am the Lord, your healer" (*Shemot* 15:26).

This is how the righteous would act in the era of prophecy. Even if a sin were to cause them to fall ill, they would not seek doctors, but only the prophets, as Chizkiyahu did in his illness (II *Melakhim* 20:2-3). And Scripture states: "Also in his illness, he did not seek out the Lord, but only doctors" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 16:12). (Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:11)

In the continuation of that passage, the Ramban expresses himself as follows: "However, one who seeks God through a prophet would not seek doctors. After all, what place do doctors have in the house of those who do the will of God?"

In any event, Rabbeinu Bechayei, as stated, adopted the approach of the Rambam on this issue, and so we must clarify where the error began in the case of the spies. What was the failure that caused this grave sin?

### Recognition of the difficulty, recognition of capability, and prayer

In order to answer these questions, I would like to suggest a totally theoretical proposal, one that has no practical implications – an alternative reading of the *haftara* for *Parashat Shelach*.

We are used to drawing a distinction between the spies sent by Moshe to scout the land and the successful spies sent by Yehoshua to Jericho. But it seems that Yehoshua suffered a not-inconsiderable failure of his own with the spies that he sent in the story of Ai:

And Yehoshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bet-Aven, on the east side of Bet-El, and spoke to them, saying: “Go up and spy out the land.” And the men went up and spied out Ai. And they returned to Yehoshua, and said to him: “Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; make not all the people to toil there; for they are but few.” (*Yehoshua* 7:2-3)

In the continuation of the story, Yehoshua cries to God using language that is reminiscent of the people's wailing in our *parasha*:

And Yehoshua said: “Alas, O Lord God, why have You at all brought this people over the Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to cause us to perish? Would that we had been content and dwelt beyond the Jordan!” (*Yehoshua* 7:7)

Once again, we encounter a story that begins with the sending of spies, but continues with fear of the inhabitants of the land and a preference to remain on the east bank of the Jordan. Indeed, *Chazal* sharply criticized Yehoshua for his words:

R. Nachman said in the name of Rav: What is meant by: "The poor uses entreaties, but the rich answers insolently" (*Mishlei* 18:23)? "The poor uses entreaties” — this refers to Moshe; "the rich answers insolently" — this refers to Yehoshua. (*Sanhedrin* 44a)

Moshe begs to cross the Jordan, whereas Yehoshua questions the whole enterprise.

What can we learn from this parallel? It seems that in all endeavors that require human action of the type of which Rabbeinu Bechayei speaks, there must be three vital components.

The first stage involves recognition of the difficulty. Indeed, conquering the Land of Israel is difficult and dangerous. Does anyone imagine that we are dealing with child's play? After all, "the cities are fortified, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there" (*Bemidbar* 13:28)!

But the second component that is required is the recognition that it is possible. The argument between Kalev and the other spies initially revolved around this point:

And Kalev stilled the people toward Moshe, and said: “We should go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.” But the men that went up with him said: “We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.” (*Bemidbar* 13:30-31)

It is notable that God's name does not appear even once in the course of this debate. This is a purely "secular" argument – or, as we might put it, a question of assessing the situation.

The debate revolved around what is stated in the verse: "And they went up into the south and came to Chevron; and Achiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the children of Anak, were there" (*Bemidbar* 13:22). *Chazal* expound that only Kalev entered Chevron, whereas all the other spies were alarmed by the *anakim* (giants) who were found there. Kalev said: I was there! I know the situation, and it is not so bad. From the outside things always look a lot more frightening than they actually are.

The third component, after the first two, is faith in God and praying to Him. After recognizing that the mission is difficult but possible, we need God's help to tip the scales and bring success. This component depends, of course, on the two preceding components: If there is no problem, then there is no **need** to pray, as Yehoshua's spies thought, and if there is no chance, there is no **reason** to pray, as Moshe's spies thought. For each of these mistakes a dear price was paid.

The third stage is absolutely essential. The conquest of the Land of Israel presented real problems. One who reads the book of *Yehoshua* sees that the Israelites do not conquer any city "surrounded by a wall from the days of Yehoshua the son of Nun." They are not set up to lay siege around a city; they do not have the equipment or the ability to do such a thing. Matters are always decided in the field. Somehow, God always sends the people of the city to them – either by way of an ambush in the field, by way of "bait" that causes the residents of the city to go outside the wall, by way of an alliance of kings who decide to attack Israel and go out to meet them, or in some other way. By the grace of God, the battles are always fought in the field.

Likewise, Israel is unable to cope with the iron chariots of the Canaanites. In the book of *Shofetim*, this is reported in connection with the people of Yehuda, who attempt to go down from the central highlands to the coastal plain: "And the Lord was with Yehuda; and he drove out the inhabitants of the hill-country; for he could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron" (*Shofetim* 1:19). The same problem had already been reported in connection with the people of Yosef (*Yehoshua* 17:16-18).

However, it is possible to deal even with this. This is the lesson that God taught the Israelites already at the time of the exodus from Egypt:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by the way of the land of the Pelishtim, although that was near; for God said: Lest perhaps the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt. (*Shemot* 13:17)

The direct route from Egypt to Israel passes through the plain, but then the Israelites would go up from Egypt straight into the iron chariots of the Canaanites: "But God led the people about, by way of the wilderness by the Sea of Suf" (*Shemot* 13:18). And at the Sea of Suf, God conducted a war against the chariots of Egypt – against "all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen" (*Shemot* 14:23).

This is a clear statement to the people of Israel: I can help in the war against chariots – whether by splitting a sea located in the vicinity or in some less dramatic fashion. This is indeed what happened in the war waged by Devora and Barak against Sisera, wherein rain fell that interfered with Sisera's chariots, and in the war at Mikhmash, wherein Shaul was forced to contend with "thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the sea-shore in multitude" (I *Shemuel* 13:5).

### The difference Between facts and interpretation

But a problem remains: Spies were sent and they returned with a negative assessment of the odds of success. Why were they sent if not that they be listened to?! So what if Calev stood up against the ten other spies? On the face of it, there is an overwhelming majority that say that the situation is hopeless. Moshe already commanded in the name of God: "You shall follow the majority" (*Shemot* 23:2). Whoever thinks there were no "Torah scholars" who could use such arguments in order to escape assuming the initiative with the claim of saving lives – is invited to look around today… But the answer is clear: This is not really a situation of one against ten. Even in Halakha, no importance is attached to ten people who feed each other's fears for forty days, and in the end, to nobody's surprise, come to an agreement. There is at most one agenda against another.

But why choose Kalev's approach? Here we come to the basic failure of the spies and of the people of Israel in their wake, to a lesson that the State of Israel learned only after the Yom Kippur War: Intelligence personnel are supposed to present the facts alone, not assessments. The practical decisions are left to the commander. Moshe sent out spies and asked them to see "the land, what it is, and the people that dwell therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many" (*Bemidbar* 13:18), and another series of informative questions. Only Moshe was supposed to receive the answer – the dry facts. He and only he was supposed to weigh the data and decide whether he has the tools to deal with the situation and assess the forces available to him and their ability to contend with the circumstances.

This is the approach that should be adopted in all matters. Thus, for example, university studies must be limited by this essential qualification: In every field, the dry facts must be distinguished from the interpretations and conclusions, which in most cases follow from the presuppositions and worldview of the lecturer – which the facts might support, but do not necessitate. This is true in the fields of Bible and Talmud, but also in political science and history. I understand more about the first fields, so I mention them, but in fact, in every field, one must distinguish between the scientific tools and dry analysis, on the one hand, and ethical conclusions, on the other.

The Ravadim method can be used to analyze the course of a Talmudic passage, with its various layers and their precise dating. However, going from this to saying that we are dealing with a band of simple-minded villagers who authored the Talmud requires a "leap" based on assumptions that have no place in the *beit* *midrash*. The same holds true for my own words… Each and every one of us must distinguish between the dry facts and the conclusions drawn from them, and based on this alone evaluate the matter at hand.

### Ramban – Hope for prophetic Governance

So far, I have followed Rabbeinu Bechayei's approach regarding the sin that was committed in our *parasha.* Now I would like to follow in the footsteps of the Ramban in *Parashat Bechukotai,* in order to gain a deeper understanding of his position as well.

The words of the Ramban cited above are truly beautiful and moving, but at the very beginning he limits them with a grave qualification: "When Israel are perfect and large in number, their course of events will not be subject to nature at all." When exactly are Israel perfect and large in number? How can we know when these words of the Ramban are at all relevant? In a certain sense, it seems that this heading in itself is the greatest miracle.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When are Israel perfect? When are the words of the Ramban relevant? I do not know, but I do know that there are situations in the life of the nation in which God reveals Himself to all of Israel, and in those situations we must rely on Him and His kingship. Certainly, the journey to the Land of Israel was supposed to enjoy such a status, as in what actually happened in the book of *Yehoshua*, when God's ark passed before the people and parted the Jordan River. In the desert as well, the ark set out before them on a three-day journey to seek out a resting-place for them.

In my opinion, one who sends out spies before entering the Land of Israel in such a situation may be likened to one who arrives at Mount Sinai with a fire-extinguisher and fireproof garments, just to be on the safe side…. This is inconceivable! God reveals Himself to all of Israel on Mount Sinai; it is inconceivable that anyone should worry about dying in such a situation! In such circumstances, we must rely on a miracle and follow God through fire and water.

### Prophecy and halakha

In the book of *Melakhim*,King Asa bribes the king of Aram to help him in his war against Baasha:

Then Asa took all the silver and the gold that were left in the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house and delivered them into the hand of his servants; and King Asa sent them to Ben-Hadad, the son of Tavrimmon, the son of Chezion, king of Aram, who dwelt in Damascus, saying: “There is an alliance between me and you, between my father and your father. Behold, I have sent to you a present of silver and gold; go, break your alliance with Baasha king of Israel, that he may depart from me. (I *Melakhim* 15:18-19)

Halakhists will surely clarify that although taking the Temple treasures violates the prohibition of *me'ila*, trespass, Asa finds himself here in a situation of *piku'ach nefesh*; lives are in danger, and nowhere do we find that *piku'ach nefesh* does not set aside the prohibition of *me'ila*! Asa did well in teaching us this chapter in the laws of *me'ila.*

But prophecy is clearly criticizing Asa's work: You have before you are two partners to a covenant, two kingdoms that could come to your assistance. You turn away from the kingdom of God to the kingdom of Aram with a request for help in a time of war. This cannot be! And this is where the criticism is directed – at the preference for the kingdom of flesh and blood over the kingdom of God. Even if the Halakha can understand the process, prophecy strongly opposes it.

A famous story is told in tractate *Berakhot* (32b-33a) about a certain pious man who was standing in prayer when an officer came and greeted him, and he did not return the greeting. When the officer commented on the pious man's stupidity and audacity – that he exposed himself to the danger that the officer might kill him – the pious man explained the matter with an *a fortiori* argument: If the officer would not have returned the greeting of an ordinary person while he was talking to a human king, all the more so, should the Chasid who was engaged in a dialogue with the King – the King of kings, "who lives and exists forever and ever" – not answer the officer's greeting.

All the Halakhists read this story and wonder: Surely there is an explicit ruling in that very *gemara* and in the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Orach Chayyim* 104a) that if a gentile king greets a person who is standing in prayer, he should answer him, for reasons of *piku'ach nefesh*! But this Chasid acted in accordance with the teachings of piety, that God is present at all times – even after the destruction of the Temple and even when there is no prophecy – and a person who is engaged in prayer must conduct himself as if he were standing before the King, the King of kings. Thus, he must not interrupt his prayer even for the sake of *piku'ach nefesh*; he must rely on God that He will save him.

The *gemara* in tractate *Megilla* (7a) attempts to adduce proofs that the book of *Esther* was written under the inspiration of the holy spirit. The word "proofs" in this context is problematic, however: "It has been taught: R. Eliezer said: *Esther* was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it is stated: 'And Haman said in his heart' (*Esther* 6:6)." Who told the author of *Esther* what was in Haman's heart if not the holy spirit? Now, if there is a tradition regarding this issue, we accept it; but if this is a matter of logical argumentation, there is certainly an answer…

In my opinion, it is absolutely clear from one verse in the book that the book of *Esther* was written under the inspiration of the holy spirit:

Then Mordechai bade them to return answer to Esther: “Think not with yourself that you shall escape in the king's house more than all the Jews. For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether you are not come to royal estate for such a time as this?” (*Esther* 4:13-14)

How did Mordecai know that relief and deliverance would arise to the Jews from another place? How did he know that this winning argument outweighs the rational considerations put forward by Esther? Mordechai is sure about one thing – when facing the King of kings, there is no concern about earthly kings. Relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews, and who knows whether you are not come to royal estate for such a time as this?

We are familiar with this idea from a Talmudic story that took place in a period of harsh decrees against the Jews:

The wicked state once proclaimed a decree against Israel that whoever donned *tefilin* should have his brains pierced through; yet Elisha put them on and went out into the streets. A quaestor saw him; he fled before him, and the latter gave pursuit. As he overtook him, he [Elisha] removed them from his head and held them in his hand. He [the quaestor] demanded: What is that in your hand? He [Elisha] replied: The wings of a dove. He stretched out his hand and the wings of a dove were found therein. Hence he is called "Elisha-the-man-of-the-wings." (*Shabbat* 130a)

The *gemara* continues:

And why did he tell him the wings of a dove rather than that of other birds? Because the Congregation of Israel is likened to a dove, as it is stated: "As the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her pinions with yellow gold" (*Tehillim* 68:14). Just as a dove is protected by its wings, so with the Israelites, their precepts protect them.

In the face of a commandment issued by the heavenly King, one ought pay no attention to the decrees of an earthly king.

Of course, this is similar to our explanation of the laws of zealotry – "zealous people have the right to strike him [when caught in the act]," and the like. These are phenomena that strict Halakha cannot contain – "we do not rule in this manner" – but prophecy and piety recognize them.

Situations in which the life of the nation is in danger – whether physically or spiritually – require an initiative that deviates from the ordinary rules and the calculations that they generate. And of course, just as implementation of the laws of zealotry must be highly restricted, so too here: It must be remembered that many times people relied on a miracle in the hope that God would save and deliver them, and all that did was bring destruction upon the people of Israel.

As stated earlier, I do not know how to identify such a situation. But I do know that such situations exist, even today, in which God reveals Himself to His people, and under those circumstances we must rely on our Father in heaven, even when petty considerations of one kind or another appear to dictate a different, more "pragmatic" approach.

The same is true with respect to the splitting of the Sea of Suf, when the people of Israel irrationally relied on God. As I see it, the greatest miracle took place later at the Song of the Sea, when all of Israel sang together a song of thanks to God, who redeemed them from their enemy, and they closed their song with the eternal coronation of God: "The Lord will reign forever and ever."

1. A similar point may be made regarding the gathering of the manna: "And when they did mete it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating" (*Shemot* 16:18). We usually think of the miracle here as being that each person gathered up as much as he could, but nevertheless it turned out that everybody gathered up precisely the same amount. I prefer to consider a much greater miracle: Each person did not gather up as much as he could, but rather in measure. "They did mete it with an omer" refers not to what happened after they gathered the manna, but rather to what happened while they were gathering it. One who would ordinarily take more did not take more, and one who would ordinarily take less did not take less. Everyone obeyed Moshe's instructions to take an omer per person. In my opinion, this is a much more impressive miracle. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)