

The Path To Follow

Shelach Lecha

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TZADDIKIM AT THE OUTSET

The Sages ask, “What reason did Scripture have for saying, after the incident of Miriam, ‘Send forth men’? The fact is that the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that the spies would speak Lashon Harah about the land. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘They shall not say, “We did not know the penalty for Lashon Harah.”’ The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore placed this section next to the other” (Bamidbar Rabba 16:6).

This explanation does not seem entirely satisfactory, for the Lashon Harah that Miriam spoke about Moshe was not similar to that which the spies spoke about Eretz Israel. Miriam spoke about her brother, whereas the spies were not speaking about a man. They spoke derisively about the land of Israel, so how could they have known that this also constituted Lashon Harah?

Our Sages have also said, “Come and see how great the power of Lashon Harah is! From where do we learn this? From the spies, for if such things happened to those who spoke evil of wood and stones, how much more will it happen to one who speaks evil of his neighbor!” (Arachin 15a). Yet how could the spies have known the punishment of one who speaks evil of wood and stones? We cannot say that they learned it from Miriam, for she did not speak about inanimate objects. Furthermore, if we want to say that a person who speaks derisively about inanimate objects is speaking Lashon Harah, then why did Hashem send them a punishment that was different than Miriam’s? In fact Miriam became leprous, whereas the spies died in a plague, and a plague is not the punishment of one who speaks Lashon Harah. For the latter, the punishment is leprosy, as the Sages have said: “Whoever speaks Lashon Harah is struck by leprosy” (Tanchuma, Metzora 1).

Moreover, Scripture also testifies that the spies were also great tzaddikim, as it is written: “Send forth anashim [men]” (Bamidbar 13:2). In the Midrash our Sages say, “In every instance where the expression anashim is used, it implies tzaddikim.... They had been chosen out of all Israel by the command of G-d and by that of Moshe, as it is written: ‘The idea was good in my eyes, and so I took from you twelve anashim [men]’ [Devarim 1:23]. From here you may infer that they were tzaddikim both in the eyes of Israel and Moshe. Yet even Moshe did not want to send them on his own initiative, so he consulted G-d about each individual, mentioning the name and tribe of each, and G-d said to him: ‘They are worthy’” (Bamidbar Rabba 16:5). That said, why did Moshe choose to implore Hashem to have mercy on Joshua, since they were all tzaddikim at that point?

We are forced to say that the spies were tzaddikim at the outset, but that afterwards they went astray. This is quite surprising, for how could these tzaddikim have committed such a serious sin, to the point of turning the Jewish people away from Hashem and speaking evil of Eretz Israel? Because of them, Hashem became angry with His people,

condemning them to exile and death. In fact they were the source of tears for all the generations. The Gemara teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not bring evil through the intermediary of the tzaddikim (Yebamot 99b). Therefore how could the spies have been an exception?

We may explain all this according to what the Sages say in the Midrash: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: ‘Although it is to the Patriarchs that I made a promise to give them the land, and they are dead, I will not retract’” (Bamidbar Rabba 16:3). Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Eretz Israel as a gift to Avraham – to him and his descendants after him – because he dedicated himself to Hashem’s mitzvot in this land, made His Name reign, and brought people under the wings of the Shechinah. As our Sages say in the Midrash, “Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women” (Bereshith Rabba 39:14). By the merit of the holy Patriarchs, Hashem granted tremendous sanctity to the land, making Eretz Israel different from all other lands. For all other lands, He appointed guardian angels to govern them, whereas Eretz Israel is not under the direction of any angel. It is solely under G-d’s control, as the Zohar states (II:151b). We also read, “A land that Hashem your G-d seeks out. The eyes of Hashem your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end” (Devarim 11:11).

Therefore why did the Children of Israel want to explore the land and see if it was indeed good? It is true that their intentions were entirely pure, meaning that they wanted to discover where all the Canaanites who lived in the land had hidden their treasures, so that all of Hashem’s promises would be fulfilled. Nevertheless, how can a person explore a country if Hashem has already promised that it will contain houses filled with wealth? Although their intentions were pure, they all became wicked because they went to explore the land without regard for the honor of their Creator.

How profound are the words of our Sages, who said: “One transgression brings about another” (Pirkei Avoth 4:2)! Rabbeinu Yona explains this as follows: Once a person has committed a sin and distances himself from the ways of Hashem, he will commit another sin. Although his desire to sin is not as strong as at first, he will sin all the same, for he is pushed by this desire. If one is not powerfully pushed, but sins all the same, he will commit all kinds of sins, for he has conditioned himself to doing everything that Hashem abhors.

Thus although these spies had been tzaddikim, because of the fact that they doubted G-d’s word and wanted to explore the land, they ended up committing an even graver sin, that of uttering unseemly words to G-d. They sinned with their mouths, saying: “For it is too strong mimenu [for us]” (Bamidbar 13:31), which our Sages have explained to mean: “Do not read mimenu [for us], but mimeno [for Him]” (Sotah 35a).

A Fatal Assumption

It is written, “A land that devours its inhabitants” (Bamidbar 13:32).

Here Rashi says, “Wherever we passed, we found them burying the dead.” The author of Siftei Cohen attributes this to a custom of the Canaanites, who did not bury their dead immediately, but kept them in a coffin until the death of a prominent man. Only then did they bury all the dead who had accumulated up to that point. According to their beliefs, they did this in order for the merit of the prominent dead man to protect them and bring everyone into Gan Eden at the same time as himself.

Hence this was the mistake of the spies: “A land that devours its inhabitants” – for on the day that they entered the land, Job died. Thus when the Canaanites buried Job – who was a prominent man – they also buried all their other dead who had awaited burial till then.

The spies, when they saw so many dead people being buried on the same day, were certain that they had died on the day before. Hence they assumed that people were dying in large numbers, which was because this land “devours its inhabitants.”

Atonement

It is written, “[Moshe said] ‘You shall strengthen yourselves and take from the fruit of the land.’ The days were the season of the first ripe grapes” (Bamidbar 13:20).

The writings of the Arizal recount that the bringing of bikkurim (first fruit) to the Temple was meant to atone for the sin of the spies. Since they had disparaged a marvelous land, the mitzvah of bringing the first fruit was meant to endear us to the land of Israel when we bring the seven kinds of fruit for which the land is famous.

In the book Amira Yaffa, Rabbi Menachem Zemba notes that this is why the Mishnah specifically mentions the three fruits which the spies brought back. The Mishnah states, “How were the bikkurim set aside? A man goes down into his field and sees a ripened fig, a cluster of ripened grapes, or a ripened pomegranate” (Bikkurim 3:1). This corresponds to what is written about the spies: “From there they cut a vine with one cluster of grapes, and bore it on a double pole, and pomegranates and figs” (Bamidbar 13:23).

Springs & Water Sources

It is written, “How is the land in which it dwells – is it good or is it bad?” (Bamidbar 13:19).

Rashi explains this to mean: “Possessing springs and other good and healthy water sources.” The commentators are surprised by this, for why does Rashi feel the need to explain the verse in such a way? It can be explained quite simply to mean: Is the country – the land – good for planting and growing food?

The author of Torah Temimah, Rabbi Baruch Epstein Zatzal, explains this by referring to the following verse: “How is the land – is it fertile or is it lean?” (Bamidbar 13:20). This is the essential characteristic of land, its fertility.

Therefore why did Moshe feel the need to restate his question by asking if the land was fertile or not? After all, he had already asked: “How is the land in which it dwells – is it good or is it bad?”

Rashi concludes that Moshe’s first question (“is it good or is it bad?”) alludes to springs and other healthy water sources.

Leveling Mountains

It is written, “They defiantly ascended to the top of the mountain” (Bamidbar 14:44).

The author of Sha’ar bat Rabim asks the following question: How could this mountain exist, since the Clouds of Glory leveled mountains as the Ark walked before them, as Rashi says on the verse in this week’s parsha: “The cloud of Hashem was over them by day” (Bamidbar 10:34)?

The Rav replies that this is why the Torah says further on, “The Ark of Hashem’s covenant and Moshe did not move from the midst of the camp” (ibid. 14:44). This teaches that those who were defiant went outside the camp without the Ark of the Covenant or Moshe. Now without them, the Clouds of Glory did not go before the camp to level the way. Hence the verse says, “They defiantly ascended to the top of the mountain.”

So They May Rise

It is written, “From the first of your kneading shall you give a portion to Hashem for your generations” (Bamidbar 15:21).

The author of Maor VaShemesh gives a wonderful explanation for this verse in the name of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk:

As soon as the dough begins to rise, when you wake up in the morning, immediately pray for the Children of Israel to be in good health and have everything they need. This was the common practice of the man of G-d, our teacher Meshulam Zusha Zatzukal, who every morning, immediately upon arising, would say: “Good morning all Israel.” He would also recite blessings and prayers for them.

This is what constitutes, “Give a portion to Hashem for your generations” – for all the generations of Israel, so they may rise to a great level. Amen!

In the Light of the Parsha

When a Man Dies, His Tzitzit Become His Mitzvot

There is a halachah in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 351:2) which states that we only bury the dead in a tallit which has tzitzit, although some say that there is no need for tzitzit. The usual practice is to bury the dead with tzitzit, although we first render them invalid.

This is surprising: If we render them invalid, then why do we bury the dead in a tallit?

On the verse, “That you may look upon it and remember...and do” (Bamidbar 15:39), the Sages in the Gemara say: “Looking leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing” (Menachot 43b).

Therefore the mitzvah of tzitzit was given only to the living, not the dead, so that the living would distance themselves from sin. This is why we render the deceased’s tallit invalid, for they no longer have to distance themselves from sin.

We may ask, “In that case, why the need for a tallit?” The answer is that the tallit testifies that the deceased fulfilled mitzvot during his lifetime, praying and learning with them. However we take away his tzitzit because he is dead to this world, meaning that his tzitzit can no longer remind him of anything. What do the deceased’s tzitzit signify? That the mitzvot and good deeds which the deceased did in life have become his tzitzit.

Just as the tzitzit (with its threads and knots) had a numerical value of 613 during his lifetime, when he died these are the 613 mitzvot that take its place.

The Spies and the Lesson to Draw from Them

The gaon Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz Zatzal of Prague suffered greatly as a result of protracted controversies that occurred in various Jewish communities around Europe. In fact such controversies caused some troublemakers to hatch a plot against him, for they claimed that he sympathized with the cult of the Sabateans (followers of Shabtai Tzvi).

One day, the Rav's relatives warned him that his opponents were preparing to attack him on that night with clubs and rocks.

Rabbi Yehonatan completely disregarded their warning, saying: "This doesn't scare me in the least. From the episode of the spies, I learn that when Joshua prepared to leave for the land of Canaan along with the other spies, Moshe asked Hashem to protect him from the opinion of the spies. Thus when they returned from their mission and a dispute erupted between the spies on one hand and Joshua and Caleb on the other, the people wanted to stone these two righteous men.

"This is surprising, for during such a dangerous episode in the life of his disciple Joshua, Moshe did nothing for him. However Moshe hastened to act before Joshua departed for Canaan along with the other spies.

"From here," concluded Rabbi Yehonatan with a smile, "we learn that there is more to fear from the mouths of the Children of Israel than from the threat of clubs and stones in the hands of thugs."

When Did Joshua Intervene?

The gaon Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor Zatzal was among the greatest rabbis in eastern Europe during the second half of the 19th century, serving as the Rav of Kovno, the capital of Lithuania, for more than 30 years. Other than his greatness in Torah, he was a leader who accomplished many great things, and his verbal and written instructions were accepted by rabbis from communities throughout Europe without hesitation.

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan sympathized with the Chovevei Tzion movement from its very beginning. Yet contrary to his friend Rabbi Shemuel Mohilever Zatzal, the Rav of Bialystok, he was not among the most active in the movement. In fact on several occasions, he even adopted a lukewarm attitude during disputes that arose in this regard within several Jewish communities of eastern Europe. In a certain way, he was influenced by his personal secretary, Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz, who was fiercely opposed to the movement and was even the source of harsh measures against the movement in the Kovno community.

On one occasion, some writings that disparaged the Chovevei Tzion movement made their way to Bialystok. They had been written in Kovno through the initiative of Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz, Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan's secretary. Rabbi Shemuel Mohilever, who was among the most active leaders of the movement, was furious when he read these writings from Kovno. He immediately sat down to write a vehemently-worded letter to his friend Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan to admonish him for not taking a public stance against such inflammatory writings that were spreading in his city. His stance seemed to imply that he was adopting a neutral position in the public debate

that had been initiated by his secretary against the Chovevei Tzion movement.

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan, who respected Rabbi Shemuel and was his friend, replied in a peaceful tone that he saw no need to get publicly involved up in the writings of his secretary, for his sympathy towards the Chovevei Tzion movement was not a secret to anyone, and everyone knew that he supported it.

Not satisfied with this explanation, Rabbi Mohilever sent another letter in which he said the following: "Among the twelve spies whom Moshe sent to explore the land, two opposed the majority who spoke ill of the land: Caleb the son of Jephuneh and Joshua the son of Nun. When it was decreed that the generation which had left Egypt would die in the desert because of the sin of the spies, the Torah explicitly mentions that this punishment did not apply to Caleb, as it is written: 'My servant Caleb, because a different spirit was with him and he followed Me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land' [Bamidbar 14:24].

"There is reason for surprise here: Joshua the son of Nun shared the same opinion as Caleb the son of Jephuneh, so why doesn't the verse mention that he was to enter the land and live in it, as it is said in regards to Caleb?

"The answer is that when the spies began to incite the Children of Israel against the land that was destined for them, it was Caleb who opposed them with an exceptional degree of courage. He openly confronted them, alone against the masses, as it is written: 'Caleb silenced the people before Moshe and said, "We will surely ascend and conquer it, for we can surely do it!"' [Bamidbar 13:30]. At that point we hear nothing from Joshua, for it seems that he stood to the side and kept quiet, leaving the initiative to his friend Caleb the son of Jephuneh. It was only afterwards, when things reached such a point that the masses cried out in despair: 'Let us return to Egypt' [Bamidbar 14:4], and Moshe and Aaron prostrated before all the tribes, that Joshua joined his voice to Caleb's, as it is written: 'Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephuneh, among the spies of the land, tore their garments' [v.6].

"From here," ended Rabbi Shemuel Mohilever, "we learn that the actions of a community leader are not measured simply by the general attitude that he adopts, but also by how he demonstrates his opinion in public."

Guard Your Tongue!

Lest He Speak Lashon Harah

If we want to talk about someone to another individual, but we think that they do not get along, and doing so will cause the listener to speak Lashon Harah, then it is forbidden to speak about him to that individual.

It is also forbidden to praise someone excessively, even if our listeners do not dislike the individual in question, because it is common to end off such statements with remarks such as "except for that character flaw of his." Furthermore, our listeners will respond by saying, "Why are you praising him so much, since he has such-and-such a character flaw?"

– Chafetz Chaim

An avrech once came to see the Rebbe of Kotzk, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, to complain about his poor memory, meaning the fact that he could not remember anything he studied.

The Rebbe opened Parsha Shelach Lecha in Sefer Bamidbar and showed him, in the passage on tzitzit, the following verses: “You shall look upon them and remember all the commandments of Hashem and fulfill them, and you shall not follow after your heart and after your eyes, by which you go astray, so that you may remember and fulfill all My commandments” (Bamidbar 15:39-40).

Guarding one’s eyes is one of many segulot for a good memory. Whoever desires to be gifted must watch his eyes and his heart, the two agents that may lead him to seeing questionable things, the opposite of holiness and purity.

This is a true and reliable segula. However we must also internalize the fact that foremost among all segulot, there is the simplest one, and it is tried and true: Revise and review your studies, going over them again and again, countless times. It is said concerning the great men of Israel that they reviewed their learning tens and even hundreds of times. The Maharsham, for example, reviewed the four parts of the Shulchan Aruch 400 times, and it is said that the Vilna Gaon reviewed the entire Talmud every month. The book Veshinantam, in the name of the author’s father (Rabbi Shalom Shemueli Shlita), cites the kabbalist Rabbi Mordechai Sharabi Zatzal as saying that before giving a class, he prepared it 60 times, and after the class he reviewed it 60 times!

What follows is a description of what may occur to a student who learns but does not review his studies:

“We can study Torah for twenty years and forget it in two. How? If we go six months without reviewing, we end up saying that the pure is impure and the impure is pure. If we go twelve months without reviewing, we mix up the Sages. Eighteen months without reviewing, we forget the main themes of the tractates. Twenty-four months without reviewing, we forget the essentials, and since we have said that the pure is impure, have mixed up the Sages, and forgotten the main themes of the tractates, we end up with nothing to say. In this regard Solomon said, ‘I passed by the field of a lazy man, and by the vineyard of a man lacking understanding. Behold, it was all overgrown with thorns, nettles had covered it over, and its stone wall was broken down’ [Mishlei 24:30-31]” (Avoth D’Rabbi Nathan 24).

The book Segulot Israel cites the Arizal’s Shulchan Aruch in describing one particular segula: Constantly revising one’s learning so as to have it easily on the lips, for the angel responsible for memory is Michael, a name whose numerical value is 101. This is what the Sages have said, “One who reviews his chapter 100 times cannot be compared to one who reviews it 101 times” (Chagigah 9b), for the angel charged with forgetfulness is called mem samech, which has a numerical value of 100, while the angel who taught Moshe is called Nignazazel, which has a numerical value of 101. In this way, we can remember the Torah secrets that we have learned.

He Forgot Nothing!

During the time that the Chida Zatzal studied in the Beit Yaakov yeshiva with the gaon Rabbi Yona Navon Zatzal, the mother of Rabbi Yom Tom Algazi prepared an herb known as baladhur for him to eat. Now this herb has a rare characteristic: The memory of anyone who eats it improves dramatically, for he forgets nothing! (See the book Pri Chadash, Yoreh Deah 68, which cites the Midrash to this effect.) At the same time, however, anyone who eats this herb is struck by a physical ailment. When he was young, the Chida tasted this herb and suffered a few paralyzed fingers in his left hand. This affliction was considered insignificant compared to the extraordinary and surprising memory that he possessed from then on.

(Concerning the extent of the Chida’s rare and extraordinary memory, it is said that in his youth, he heard a sermon from the gaon Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Zatzal. Numerous years later, he was able to cite sections of it verbatim in his book Shem HaGedolim.)

At this point, let us recall what the Sages of Israel have said in the context of this segula: Chazor, chazor v’al titztarech l’baladhur (“Review, review, and you will not need [the herb] l’baladhur”).

Let us not forget that during the time of Rabbi Yehudah Di Modina, many people sought this herb. Its use had become popular among those who wanted to have a phenomenal memory. In his famous letter he warns, “Don’t do this – don’t put yourselves in danger. We have seen many people, whom I personally know today, that have consumed a great deal of baladhur. Afterwards they became mad, fell ill, or died before their time, and their offspring were forgotten.”

He fought fiercely against another habit, one mentioned in the book of segulot entitled Aspaklaria HaMeira: To succeed in Torah and not forget anything, one must implore the seven archangels each morning for several days, saying: “I implore you [say the angels’ names], in the name of [angel], that I forget nothing of what I have learned from the words of wisdom in the world, and that I be like a cemented cistern that does not lose a single drop. May I have a marvelous and amazing memory in Torah, and of all the words of wisdom that I see with my eyes, may nothing leave my mouth or my heart. May I reflect with my mind and pay attention to even the least of them, and may I not forget anything now and forevermore, by the holy name that I have evoked upon you, the seven archangels that I have mentioned.”

The Rav opposed this custom and firmly declared, “Those who do this will not succeed in anything. Whoever does so will suffer harm and become mad. Experience has proved it. Do not say that it is a mitzvah and that the intention behind it is pure – the intention being to study Hashem’s Torah and to engrave it upon the heart. Such a mitzvah comes about by a grave sin. Who made you worthy of giving orders to the supernal angels to conjure them up? And what if you do not possess such merit? You are not used to giving orders, nor to command the celestial hosts to change your nature. Will Raphael and Gabriel serve you?”