



Volume III Issue #32

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Parshas Shelach, 28 Sivan, 5783

June 17, 2023

On the Parsha

In this week's Parsha, Moshe Rabbeinu agrees to send spies into Eretz Yisrael (Israel) to scout out the land. These spies were the greatest men among the nation, as Rashi points out. And yet, despite being the righteous people that they were, they still returned from their mission with a very negative report about Eretz Yisrael.

The Midrash Rabbah (16:11) points out that there were two sins that the spies committed when they relayed their negative report to Bnei Yisrael (the Jews). They declared:

"And there we saw the Nephilim, the giant sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes." (BaMidbar 13:33)

The first sin is contained in the words, "we were in our own sight as grasshoppers". The first sin was caused by a lack of Bitachon (faith) in Hashem. They were overly fearful. If they had more Bitachon, they would not have looked at themselves as grasshoppers, but rather as conquerors who could readily capture Eretz Yisrael if that was Hashem's will. Regarding this sin, states the Midrash, Hashem responded, "I will forgive them for this."

The second sin is reflected in the words, "...and so we were [as grasshoppers] in their eyes". This was a lie, for how could they have known how they really appeared in the eyes of the Nephilim. The Midrash says that Hashem responded, "And do you really know how I made you appear in their eyes? How do you know that you did not appear in their eyes as [powerful] angels?!" For this sin, Hashem was not as forgiving. This lie that the spies had told had devastating repercussions. Hashem punished Bnei Yisrael with the destruction of Hashem's Batei Mikdash (both Temples) and the future exiles.

Surely the spies had meant well! As stated above, they were the greatest men among the nation. How did they come to tell such a devastating lie?

The spies saw Eretz Yisrael in an unwarranted, negative light which led them to lie. This negativity was likely born out of two biases that the spies harbored. The first bias was "confirmation bias".

Confirmation bias is when we have our minds fixed on a personal belief or desire. When we encounter pieces of evidence that support and undermine our belief or desire, we discard the evidence that undermines it and retain the evidence that supports or "confirms" it. These spies held leadership positions among Bnei Yisrael which they would lose upon entering Eretz Israel. Wishing to retain their stature, they discarded all the evidence that they encountered when scouting out the land that would lead them to believe that Eretz Yisrael was special and could readily be conquered. Instead, they focused on the evidence that indicated that conquering the land was impossible which supported their interests of staying in power.

The second bias the spies had was "negativity bias." We possess a natural bias to at times, have an unwarranted, negative outlook called "Ayin Ra'ah" (See Pirkei Avos 2:11) that needs to be kept in check. The spies did not recognize this bias and this was the second reason that they viewed Eretz Yisrael negatively.

However, we may be able to use these biases to our advantage.

The Gemorah (Brachos 58a) says, "Ben Zoma would say: A good guest, what does he say? 'How much effort did the host expend on my behalf, how much meat did the host bring before me! How much wine did he bring before me. How many loaves did he bring before me. All the effort that he expended, was only for me.'

A bad guest, what does he say? 'What effort did the host expend? I ate only one piece of bread, I ate only one piece of meat and I drank only one cup of wine. All the effort that the homeowner expended was [not for me but was] only on behalf of his wife and

children! [I just happened to be there at the time they were being fed!]" The bad guest has this view because of his negative, and cynical outlook.

How can Ben Zoma say that a good guest says, "How much effort did the host expend on my behalf...?" Does a good guest always say this? Surely there must be times when a good guest is matched with a bad host and therefore has a bad experience?

The answer is that we can use our confirmation and negativity to our advantage. Ben Zoma is telling us that a good guest will usually have a good experience even if he is matched with a bad host. He recognizes that he has a negativity bias to overcome and therefore works on himself to go "the other way" and see things positively. Once he tries to see things positively, his confirmation bias will look for evidence that confirms his positive outlook and he will have a positive experience – even with a bad host.

We can positively apply these biases to our relationships as well. For example, if we tell ourselves that our wife or husband are inherently good, we will find examples of their goodness everywhere.

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: My friend and I are both Rebbes in a Yeshiva. The whole Yeshiva davens (prays) together including the principal. After davening, the principal teaches a quick Devar Halacha (Halachic law or practice). Sometimes, he will say a Halacha that my friend and I know is incorrect. My friend says that our obligation of Emes (to tell the truth) dictates that we correct him, but to do so in a way that will not embarrass him. I agree, but caution my friend that I do not think that that we can correct the principal without embarrassing him and therefore I advise my friend not to correct him. Did I correctly advise my friend?

ANSWER: The Gemorah (Brachos 27b) relays the incident of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Gamliel. A student asked a question to Rabbi Yehoshua about whether one is obligated to recite Ma'ariv (the evening prayer) or whether it is voluntary. Rabbi

Yehoshua answered that it was obligatory. Outside of the Beis HaMidrash (study hall), Rabbi Gamliel was asked the same question and he answered that it was voluntary. He then entered the Beis HaMidrash where Rabbi Yehoshua was sitting and asked, "Is there anyone here that disagrees?" Rabbi Yehoshua did not voice his disagreement with Rabbi Gamliel because he did not want to embarrass him and compromise his honor. We see from this Gemorah that maintaining someone else's honor trumps the obligation to correct him. Therefore, you were correct when you advised your friend not to correct the principal if he could not do so without embarrassing him. [See Niv Sfasayim p. 186]

Chizuk - Inspiration

Rav Refoel Shmulevitz (1937-2016) ZT"l was

one of the Rosh Yeshivas of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. One of his students was still unmarried at the age of 36. Someone suggested a Shidduch (a marriage partner) to him, but she was some ten years younger than he was. The student believed that the girl may be concerned about the ten-year age gap. He knew that some Poskim (Halachic authorities) allowed one to shave off a year or two from one's age (i.e. the 36 year-old student could say that he was 34). Was he permitted to do so? Rav Shmulevitz said that the question should be posed to Rav Aron Leib Shteinman ZT"l. The question was presented to him, and Rav Aron Leib responded, "He already has one strike against him in that he is 36 years old, why give him another strike and have him also be a liar?"

The student took his advice and was honest about his age. The shidduch went through and they got married. At the engagement, the Kallah (bride) told her Chosson (groom), "You should know that I was hesitant about going out with you initially. I decided that I would discreetly make inquiries about your exact age, and if I found out that you were being completely honest about it, I would go out with you."

Were it not for the Chosson's commitment to Emes, it appears that this marriage would never have happened.