

## **Ups and Downs**

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Parshas Shelach opens with the tragic episode of the meraglim sent to investigate Eretz Yisroel. The mission, which was led by twelve great leaders, ended in disaster, with ten of the twelve reporting to the people that they were facing insurmountable difficulties and that it would be impossible for them to enter Eretz Yisroel. Feeling that they were doomed, the people were disconsolate and became angry at Hashem, Moshe and Aharon (Bamidbar 14:1-3) for leading them into a quagmire that would lead to their death. "Had we remained in Mitzrayim," they cried, "we would have been better off" (ibid. 4).

We study the parsha and wonder how ten great men, chosen by Moshe Rabbeinu to scout out the land Hashem promised to the Jewish people, could have made such a terrible error. We question what caused them to be so wrong and how were they able to convince the nation that their dream of entering the Promised Land was doomed.

How was it that the people who experienced Yetzias Mitzrayim and Krias Yam Suf lost their faith? The same people who recently recovered from the tragedy of the Eigel, and who complained about the manna and were plagued by the sloth in last week's parsha, doubted the ability of Hashem to fulfill His promises.

How are we to understand that?

The first Rashi in the parsha holds a key to the explanation. Quoting from Medrash Tanchuma, Rashi explains that the parsha of the meraglim follows the

parsha of Miriam because Miriam was punished for the way she spoke about her brother, Moshe, and the meraglim did not learn lessons from her experience.

The common explanation of this is that witnessing the consequences of Miriam's lashon hora should have deterred the meraglim from speaking lashon hora on the Land of Israel. I'd like to offer a different explanation of why Parshas Shelach follows Parshas Behaaloscha.

Miriam criticized her brother, Moshe, and said to Aharon, "Halo gam bonu diber Hashem. Why does Moshe think he is superior to us? Hashem spoke to us as well, not only to him." She erred in thinking that she had reached the pinnacle of human achievement, as Hashem had spoken directly to her. She didn't realize that no matter how great a person is, they must always reach higher. We must always seek to grow and reach a greater level of holiness and purity. Moshe knew that and thus raised himself to the higher level. The others did not.

This idea is seen again in the past parsha of Behaaloscha. The people who were tomei and unable to participate in the korban pesach complained to Moshe about their exclusion from the mitzvah. Their distress is understandable, but what did they think that complaining to Moshe could accomplish? The halacha that someone who is tomei cannot participate in the bringing of korbanos is explicit. Perhaps they should have accepted their fate and forgone the ability to bring a korban pesach.

We see from here that a person should never allow his understanding to interfere with his desire to grow and improve in Torah and the performance of mitzvos. Although there was no apparent way for them to be able to bring a korban pesach, they appealed to Moshe anyway. They said, "While it may be

obvious that we have to be excluded due to our impurity, we are making our hishtadlus to do the mitzvah and have faith that Hashem will discern our sincerity and find a way to make it happen.” And indeed, their wish was granted.

We see that people should never complacently accept their situation and be satisfied with the level they have achieved. We must always aim for more and be ambitious in our pursuit of fulfilling Hashem’s command. Even if by rules of logic the way we understand them there is no way for us to perform the obligation, we must seek to do the maximum.

The meraglim were sent to scout out the land that had been promised to the Jewish people centuries earlier. Since the days of the avos, Hashem had been telling them that this blessed land would be inhabited by the Jewish people. Throughout their bitter lives as slaves in Mitzrayim, they dreamed of the fulfillment of Hashem’s promise that He would remove the Jews from the land of their oppressors and bring them to the Holy Land.

When they were redeemed from slavery and miraculously left Mitzrayim, they were told all along that they were on their way to Eretz Yisroel, the land that had been promised to the avos. Many of the laws that are included in the Torah, which was given to them on their way to Eretz Yisroel, are only relevant in that Promised Land.

Here they were, on the cusp of entering the coveted land, and the meraglim decided that it was a no-go. It wouldn’t work. The Jewish people would not be able to live there.

If the meraglim would have been conscious about their prime obligation in life to serve Hakadosh Boruch Hu and to grow in kedusha, they would not have seen the land in a way that led them to conclude that the Jewish people would not be able to enter there.

As they toured the country, had they been thinking about how blessed they were to be able to follow in the footsteps of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, how could they not have been overjoyed just to be there? How could they have found fault with the land that Hashem promised flows with milk and honey? If their motivation in life was to grow in mitzvos, how could they have found fault with the land in which many of the mitzvos of the Torah can only be performed there?

Apparently, the nesi'im, as leaders of their tribes, felt that they had reached the peak of their careers and there was no higher designation they could attain. Had their motivation in life been seeking improvement in the observance of mitzvos, they would have been overjoyed with the prospect of the opportunity to observe the mitzvos of terumah and maaser, for it would lead them to higher levels of avodah and kedusha. They didn't learn the lesson from Miriam's error and didn't seek to attain higher levels than they already reached.

They didn't learn from the impure people who sought to be included in the korban pesach and seek added obligations, even though according to their understanding of the halachos there was no way they could bring the korban. Had the nesi'im learned from them, they would have sought to go beyond their understanding of the situation. They would have changed their perspective and sought guidance from others to better comprehend the situation. With their limited vision and jaundiced appraisal, it appeared to them that the Jewish

people would not be able to defeat their enemies, but they had an obligation to do hishtadlus and have faith that Hashem would keep His word and not leave His people to die in the desert or die in battling the occupiers of the land He had promised to give them.

The nesi'im also made the error of presuming how they were viewed by the inhabitants of the land they were scouting. They reported back to the Bnei Yisroel (ibid. 13:33), "In their eyes, we were like grasshoppers." As bnei Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, recipients of the Torah and Hashem's chosen people, we don't pay attention to how we are perceived by the nations of the world if it will cause us to falter in obeying the word of Hashem. If Hashem has told us that He will lead us to this land, why do we care about how the people currently there view us?

They were standing at a crossroads. On one side, they had the promises of Hashem, made repeatedly over many years, that the Jews would inherit the Land of Israel and prosper there. On the other side, they feared that the nations presently in the country would not let them in. This, coupled with their uncertainty as to what their positions would be in the new country, led them to fear the change and seek to malign it.

When we fear change, when we see things that cause us to panic over what the future has in store for us, we must not lose our Torah perspective and faith in the goodness of Hashem.

We must never lose our faith.

When things occur that we don't understand, we have to know that there is a higher purpose for all that transpires in this world and that nothing happens by itself. Hakadosh Boruch Hu tests us from time to time, and those who remain loyal and faithful are rewarded, while those who lose faith face the consequence of ruination. When faced with a challenge, sometimes what we need to do is examine our prejudices and influences that lead us to think that we are in a hopeless situation.

Torah study, coupled with emunah and bitachon, helps us maintain a positive disposition and a positive outlook on all that befalls us, preventing us from sinking into depression and thinking that we are in a hopeless situation. Positivity not only reduces stress and dispels sadness, it also helps a person escape negative situations. When you maintain your faith, you retain your equilibrium and don't become so overwhelmed by fear, grief and panic that you are unable to think straight and extricate yourself from a difficult circumstance.

Yehoshua and Kaleb pointed the way for Am Yisroel. They didn't pay attention to the nations. They didn't let their emotions guide them. They didn't forget Hashem's promises. Wherever they went, they saw potential for kedusha, for gadlus, and for more mitzvos. They perceived that every step they took as they were fulfilling their shlichus in the eretz ha'avos was a mitzvah. Thus, they retained their greatness and merited to enter the Holy Land along with the next generation of the Bnei Yisroel, who had not become despondent and dejected after hearing the frightful report of the meraglim.

A story is told about a water carrier. A famous tzaddik came to town and met an old man weighed down by pails full of water on each shoulder, with a very sad look on his face. The rov went over to the man and asked about his welfare. The

water carrier told the rov his tale of woe, explaining that he had no money and had to work hard despite his advanced age. The tzaddik blessed the man and went about his business.

The townspeople waited to see if the water carrier's situation would change. Alas, it did not. Every day, he would trudge about, carrying water to people and getting paid pennies for his intense labor.

Several months later, the tzaddik was back in town, and again he met the water carrier. He went over to him and asked him how he was doing. The man's face lit up. "Boruch Hashem, I am able to support myself, even at my age. How blessed I am to have a source of income and the strength to carry the water pails."

Word quickly spread through the town and the tzaddik's reputation remained intact after all. His brocha actually worked. He had blessed the man to have a positive outlook and find happiness in all he does.

Positivity breeds confidence in the present and the future. People who go through catastrophic experiences and maintain their faith and positive outlook are able to rebuild and regenerate what they lost. People who lose their faith become negative and are unable to resuscitate themselves. They become embittered and unproductive, unable to overcome the catastrophe that befell them. Our nation has known great tragedy throughout the ages, enough to destroy any other people, but we have persevered.

When all was dark and the future seemed bleak, we kept our faith and belief in a better day to come. We rebuilt from destruction. We are people of faith. We

have ideals and we have spirit. We have a fabled past and a glorious future. We learn from the past as we look forward to the promised future, as we confront the challenges of the present.

We all go through ups and downs. That's what life is all about. We all have challenges that we must deal with and overcome. We must remember that we can overcome them, we can succeed, and there is never reason to give up. If we maintain our faith in Hashem, if we study sifrei mussar, if we have a positive attitude, then we will succeed.

The parsha of the week provides us with stimulation and perspective. Every week, there are positive messages and lessons to guide, inspire and energize us. Pirkei Avos reinforces those lessons. Let us take advantage of the leisurely summer season about to begin and the longer Shabbosos to study the weekly parsha and perek and better our lives.