

Breaking Free from Slave Mentality

In this week's parsha, Moshe Rabbeinu begins his farewell address to the Jewish people. He opens with words of rebuke, alluding to the various places along their journey where they angered Hashem (Rashi 1, 1), and goes on to recount the major events of their forty-year sojourn in the desert. Moshe begins by recounting the episode of the spies, devoting 28 *pesukim* (1, 20 - 2, 1) to this pivotal moment. From standing on the brink of entering Eretz Yisrael, the people were suddenly condemned to wander in the desert for forty years, waiting for that generation to perish so that the next generation could finally enter the land.

It is striking that Moshe chooses to begin his rebuke with the episode of the spies rather than the sin of the golden calf, which was more severe and also occurred first. This cannot be attributed to Moshe avoiding the topic as he addresses it in great detail later in Parshas Eikev (chapter 9), emphasizing that the sin was grave enough to justify barring the Jewish people from the land (see Rashbam 9, 4). Why, then, does Moshe begin with the story of the spies rather than the golden calf? In fact, all the sins that occurred before the episode of the spies are not mentioned until Parsha Eikev (9, 22). Clearly the story of the spies weighed most heavily on Moshe's mind and he regarded it as the most critical message to convey to the people who would finally be settling Eretz Yisrael (Abarbenel 1, 1 question #8).

A Shift in Emphasis

Commentaries highlight and explain various differences in the details of the story of the spies as it is told in Parshas Shelach vs. how Moshe Rabbeinu retells it here. Beyond the specific details, there is a clear shift in emphasis. In Parshas Shelach, the false report that the spies brought back features front and center in the story (see commentaries to Shelach 13, 32) whereas in our parsha this element is nonexistent.

Moshe simply says: וַיֹּאמְרוּ טוֹבָה הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ נֹתֵן לָנוּ ... וְלֹא אָבִיתֶם לָעֵלָת, "they reported that the land which Hashem is giving us is good, yet you refused to go" (1, 25-26). There is no mention of a negative report by the spies. The

emphasis is instead on the people's unwarranted fear, their doubt in Hashem's power, and their lack of confidence in their own ability to wage war¹. This is what Moshe chose to highlight as he began his address.

From Slavery to Bravery

The Rambam writes:

... it is unnatural for someone who has known nothing but backbreaking labor, such as making bricks and mortar, to suddenly cast it all aside and in an instant march off to battle against the 'sons of giants'. Hashem therefore prepared the people gradually for their new life. He led them through the wilderness to build their courage and inner strength, for the hardships of the desert lifestyle naturally toughen a person and instill bravery. Over time a new generation arose in the desert, one that had never tasted humiliation or servitude and was ready to face the future with strength (Moreh Nevuchim 3, 32²).

The Ibn Ezra echoes the same sentiment:

One may ask: How is it that a large camp comprising six hundred thousand armed men were afraid of those who pursued them? Why did they not stand and fight for their own

¹ Even their insistence at the time that the spies report to the entire nation, rather than just to the leaders, deviates from standard practice and reflects their underlying anxiety (Abarbenel).

² See also Moreh Nevuchim 3, 24 and Igeres Techiyas Hameisim. The Rambam quotes the *pasuk* in Parshas Beshalach (13, 17), which explains that Hashem led the Jewish people around the land of the Pelishtim because, if faced with war, they would want to return to Egypt. He explains that the time in the desert was designed to develop a generation who would be brave and capable of going to battle. Although that *pasuk* refers to the immediate aftermath of the Exodus and does not explicitly pertain to the forty years in the desert, a close reading of the Rambam suggests that he views the entire forty-year sojourn as serving this very purpose of readying the Jewish people to enter Eretz Yisrael and face the challenges awaiting them there. Indeed, throughout their time in the desert, the Jews repeatedly expressed regret at having left Egypt and a desire to return, which would have meant abandoning the entire mission of receiving the Torah and settling the land of Israel.

and their children's lives? The answer is: The Egyptians were masters over Israel. The generation that left Egypt were trained from their youth to bear the yoke of the Egyptians. They were of humble spirit. How then could they now wage war against their masters? The Israelites were lazy and not learned in war. Hashem orchestrated³ the events such that all Israelite [adult] males who left Egypt died out, for they had no spirit to fight the Canaanites; and a new generation with a noble spirit, who had never tasted exile, arose after the generation of the wilderness (Beshalach 14, 13)⁴.

Chasiddic works⁵ explain, the root cause of the spies' failure lies in their own words וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים, 'and we saw ourselves as grasshoppers'. Their deep-seated sense of inferiority was not just a passing thought; it was the very mindset that doomed their mission. Because they viewed themselves as small and incapable, they became exactly that.

Yirmiyahu authored the *pesukim* of the first four chapters of *Eicha* following an alphabetical acrostic, beginning with the 22 letters of the Aleph-Bais in order. However, in chapters two through four, the order of the letters ע and פ is reversed. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 104b) explains that this alludes to the sin of the spies (the precursor to the eventual destruction - see below) who placed their פ (mouth; spelled פה in full form) before their ע (eye; spelled עין⁶), meaning they spoke before they saw. In other words,

³ כיו"ב הביא האברבנאל, "כבר חשבו אנשים כי כאשר באו ישראל קדשה והיו קרובים לגבול האמורי חשב משה שאלו היו הדור הד' שיבואו לארץ וכי כבר שלם עון האמורי. ולכך אמר להם ראה נתן ה' אלהיך בידך את הארץ עלה רש וגו' אל תירא ואל תחת וגו'. האמנם יודע הנסתר הוא ידע שלא הגיע עדיין העת לירשה כי היה הדור ההוא דור פושע עובדי העגל וכופרים בהשגחתו כמה פעמים ולא היו ראויים לבא לרשת את הארץ אלא בניהם אשר יקומו אחריהם. ושמפני זה צוה השם למשה שלח לך אנשים כדי לעכב ביאתם לארץ ולעשות להם בחינה אם היו ראויים לירשה אם לא. כמו שעשה לגדעון בעם שהיה הולך עמו למלחמה" (ר"פ שלח). ואולי יתכן שכוונתו לדברי האב"ע, וראה בהמשך דבריו שם מש"כ בדחיית שיטה זו.

⁴ ראה עד"ז גם באב"ע שמות ב, ג: אולי סבב השם זה שיגדל משה בבית המלכות להיות נפשו העליונה בדרך מלכות והרגילות, ולא תהיה נפשו שפלה רגילה להיות בבית עבדים. הלא תראה, כי הרג המצרי בעבור שהוא עושה חמס. והושיע בנות מדין מהרועים, בעבור שהיו עושים חמס להשקות צאנם המים שדלו.

⁵ See for example, Sfas Emes Shelach 5640.

⁶ The letters ע and פ are named as such because, in the ancient Hebrew script, their shapes resembled an eye and a mouth, respectively.

Yirmiyahu is telling us that their negative report was a forgone conclusion before they had observed anything. It was their underlying way of thinking that precluded the success of their mission.

As Moshe Rabbeinu turns his attention to the next generation, the ones who will finally enter the Land his message is clear. Though they were only children during the time of slavery in Egypt and played no major role in the sin of the spies, they were nevertheless shaped by those events and influenced by that atmosphere (Maharsha, Ta'anis 29a). If they are to succeed where their parents failed, they must shed the lingering fear and defeatism of the past. They must leave behind the slave mentality once and for all, and step into their mission with confidence and courage.

Misplaced Humility Can Cause Destruction

This parsha is always read on the Shabbos before Tisha B'av⁷. The Gemara (Ta'anis 29a. Sota 35a) teaches that the spies returned with their fearful report on Tisha B'av, marking the day as one destined for destruction and mourning. But the connection between the two events runs deeper than just a shared date.

In connection with the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, the Gemara (Gittin 56a) tells the story of Bar Kamtza's attempt to frame the Jewish people making it appear as if they had insulted the Roman emperor. The sages explored various options of thwarting the threat but, for various reasons each proposal was ultimately rejected by Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas. Tragically, his decisions paved the way for calamity, leading to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people.

The Gemara goes on to criticize Rabbi Zekharya ben Avkolas, stating that עֲנוּתָנוּתוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי זְכַרְיָה בֶּן אֲבָקוּלָס הִחְרִיבָה אֶת בֵּיתֵנוּ וְשָׂרְפָה אֶת הַיְכָלֵנוּ וְהִגְלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרְצֵנוּ, his [misplaced] humility destroyed our Temple, burned our Sanctuary, and led us to be exiled from our land.

The Ba'al Shem Tov applies this criticism to each of us personally. If we truly believed in the impact of our *tefillah* and Torah study, we would

⁷ See last week's column.

treasure every word, reciting each one with joy and focus. Often, it is our misplaced sense of unworthiness that becomes the most destructive force in our individual *bais hamikdash*. This sense of unworthiness can lead to laziness and discouragement, convincing us that our efforts do not truly make a difference in the world (Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Eikev; Keser Shem Tov, 145).

Both the story of the spies and that of the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash convey the same message. To succeed in fulfilling our mission in this world, we must avoid falling into the trap of believing we are unworthy of having a meaningful impact.

In the first haftarah of the ‘Three Weeks’, we read the opening verses of Sefer Yirmiyahu, where Hashem appoints him as a ‘prophet to the nations’. Yirmiyahu responds, *הִנֵּנִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי דְבַר כִּי נַעַר אָנֹכִי*, ‘I do not know how to speak, for I am but a child’. He expresses to Hashem his sense of inadequacy for the task. But Hashem reassures him, saying, *אֶל תֹּאמַר נַעַר אָנֹכִי, כִּי עַל כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ תֵּלֵךְ וְנֹאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶךָ תִּדְבֹּר, אֵל תִּירָא מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי אִתִּי אֲנִי*, ‘Say not I am but a child for wherever I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not fear them, for I am with you.’ Hashem further warns, *אֵל תִּחַת מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּן אֲחַתְּךָ לִפְנֵיהֶם*, Do not break⁸ down before them, lest I break you before them.”

As we observe the annual period of mourning for the *galus* in which we find ourselves, we may feel inadequate to fulfill the mission Hashem has given us. But we must remind ourselves that Hashem is with us, telling us not to fear and providing us with the wherewithal that we need to succeed (Likutei Sichos vol. 18 pg. 348).

⁸ Perhaps ‘do not fear them’ would be a better translation. In the original Hebrew there is a play on the words *תחת* and *אחתך*, a nuance that is difficult to fully capture in translation.