

Geulas Yisrael 104

Shelach- Don't Complain About Israel

Moshe Taragin

The disastrous fiasco of the meraglim was a complete moral and theological breakdown. As the intelligence reports about Israel began to stream in, it was obvious that the land of Hashem would not be easily conquered. The cities were fortified to the teeth and the fearsome inhabitants were unconquerable. Not only that, but our old nemesis, Amalek, was stationed to the south of the country, waiting in the reeds, ready to pounce on us as soon as we entered the land. Terrified by these chilling accounts, we lost faith in Hashem and in His ability to vanquish these giants. At the first hint of adversity we unraveled, descended into full scale panic, and failed history. Everything fell apart so quickly and so easily. Our cowardly tears and our babyish sniveling condemned this day of Tisha Be'av to infamy.

The Second Mutiny

Having fueled anxieties about the mighty inhabitants of Israel, the meraglim transitioned into the second stage of their mutiny, vilifying the actual land itself. ויוציאו דבת הארץ . They cast Israel as a land which consumed its inhabitants. As they scouted the land, they had repeatedly witnessed funeral processions. The midrash comments that Hashem raised the local death rate diverting attention away from the secret mission of the meraglim. Noticing these high mortality rates, and the recurrent funerals, the spies assumed the worst- there was something toxic and lethal about the land itself. It appeared to gobble up its citizens.

There was also something bizarre about the people they met. They had mutated into freakish giants. Evidently, this land, supposedly famous for flowing with milk and honey, instead, oozed with toxins and venom. Not satisfied with fomenting public opinion against Hashem, the meraglim whipped up fears about a poisonous and contaminated land.

Miriam's Lesson

They should have known better and should have learned their lesson from Miriam's hideous punishment for her slanderous libel against

Moshe. The final chapter of Beha'alotecha, which immediately precedes the meraglim story in Shelach, records the slurring of Moshe by his own siblings. For her part in the besmirching of Moshe, Miriam was afflicted with repulsive tzara'at. Chazal remark that the meraglim should have realized the corrosive effects of slander and should have spoken more complimentary about the land of Israel.

Obviously, the land of Israel isn't animate and wasn't personally insulted by the derogatory comments of the meraglim. The meraglim's libel of Israel disgraced Hashem's gift to our people. Hashem's decisions and actions are often mysterious, but the land of Israel is not. It is an unmistakable divine gift, and failure to appreciate that gift is a glaring deficiency of faith. Defaming the land didn't insult the land, but it certainly did scorn Hashem who delivered us this sacred ground.

The gemara in Ketuvot showcases Amoraim who either caressed the rocks of Israel or rolled in her dust, as a display of affection. To demonstrate his own devotion to the land, Rabbi Chanina would remove boulders or any other natural barriers which obstructed the roadways, so that future travelers would not trip and would not vent their frustration upon the land. For their part, Rav Ami and Rav Asi assiduously practiced "climate control" in Israel, so that their experience would be more pleasurable. They were scrupulous about receiving sufficient sunlight in the winter and not overheating in the summer so that their pleasant living conditions would elicit favorable associations with the land. Awarding us His land, Hashem expects us to settle it, but also, to compliment it, and certainly not to slander it.

Behind the Curtain

There is an additional parallel between Miriam's mistake and the blunder of the meraglim. The Torah doesn't describe the content of Miriam's slur against Moshe, but Chazal fill in the blanks: she questioned Moshe's decision to abstain from normal marital relations with his wife. Miriam didn't fully appreciate the special circumstances surrounding Moshe's irregular decision. Moshe adopted his unorthodox lifestyle to preserve a constant state of readiness to speak with the shechinah. His atypical behavior was tied to something deeper- the presence of Hashem in his life and in his tent. Miriam was unable to trace Moshe's behavior to this augmented presence of Hashem.

Similarly, the meraglim weren't able to associate their own findings about the land with the presence of Hashem in this supernatural territory. Witnessing the mammoth sized fruits and enormous inhabitants, they should have traced these irregularities to the presence of Hashem. The land devoured its inhabitants precisely because it was Hashem's domain and life before G-d can be harsh. Miriam was unable to trace Moshe's conduct to the intensified presence of the Shechinah, and, similarly, the meraglim were unable to look "behind the curtain" and identify their strange findings as reflective of a deeper divine essence lying beneath the surface.

Hardships in Israel

Life in Israel always carries added complications and severe challenges. These adversities can either elicit scorn and complaints or they can be regarded as signs of Hashem's intense presence in this land. Until redemption concludes life in this land will not be easy.

2500 years ago, Ezra and Nechemiah led us back to Israel from our first exile. Sadly, only 42,000 Jews returned, while the rest remained comfortably nestled in exile. In his comments to Kiddushin, Rashi itemizes the two deterrents to mass aliyah: economic conditions were challenging, and additionally, the Jews faced local violence. The more things change the more they remain the same.

Our precarious security situation in Israel was, and always will be, a function of this land's historical resonance. Subconsciously, the entire world recognizes that this is where history began, and this is where it will end. It is only natural that our presence in this land be hotly contested.

Likewise, financial success, living under the eye of Hashem will never be as straightforward and trouble-free as it may be elsewhere. Hardships in Israel can either evoke disdain and disparagement or they can be contextualized as part of the privilege of living before Hashem. Complaining about life in Israel aggravates the sin of the spies. Celebrating life in Israel, despite its hardships, partially rectifies their historical sin.

Social Tensions

Even the internal social tensions which sometimes rile us in Israel are, ultimately, related to its being the *land* of Hashem which was selected for the *people* of Hashem. We were chosen by Hashem precisely because we are obstinate, and we were capable of withstanding the formidable challenges of exile. Just because we have returned home, doesn't mean we have become any less stubborn or have softened our personalities. We are still determined and headstrong and we are often quite loud about it. We tenaciously and vociferously defend our beliefs and our values. Stiff necked people of God arguing about their collective future in the land of God is a recipe for shrill arguments and for noisy quarrels. Everything in the land of Hashem is magnified- even arguments.

Moving to Israel takes courage and vision and not everyone has seized the historical opportunity. At this stage of history many have chosen the *right* to live outside our homeland. However, no one has the *right* to scorn our land by excessively grumbling about the challenges of living in Israel. Conditions in Israel, especially when they are difficult, are symptomatic of it being the land of Hashem. Griping about these conditions mocks Hashem's gift to His people and ignores His presence in His land. No one has a right to scorn our Motherland. We learned this lesson the hard way, thousands of years ago in a contentious desert, at a very high historical cost.