

SHELACH (NUMBERS 13:1-15:41)

I'm Gonna Do What You Want ... Whether You Like It or Not!

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Some people just don't get it. The Nation of Israel didn't get it.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt after G-d bombarded the Egyptians with miraculous plagues. When the Egyptians (who also didn't get it) decided to stage "Pharaoh's Last Stand" at the Red Sea, G-d split the sea and drowned the Egyptians.

All of life for the Israelites in the desert was supernatural. Food came from Heaven, and water came from a "traveling well" that followed them wherever they went. Their clothes never wore out and grew with the wearer.

G-d had assured them that He would take care of them and He was doing just that. And when G-d makes a promise, you know for a fact that it will come true. Or, at least, you SHOULD know.

G-d had promised Abraham that after a stay in Egypt as slaves, the Children of Israel would be led into Israel, then known as Canaan. It was a good land. G-d said so. I believe Him, don't you?

The Israelites apparently didn't. They pressured Moses to appoint an expedition to check out the Land of Canaan to evaluate the feasibility of moving in. The scouts came back with mixed reviews. Two spies said the land was great and theirs for the taking. Ten spies said that the Canaanites were too powerful; it would be impossible to conquer the land.

Now let me ask you a question. If the vote is 10-to-2, but the two have G-d on their side, how would YOU vote? G-d had certainly demonstrated His "credentials" as the Protector of Israel. Shouldn't He be trusted to successfully lead His Chosen People into the Promised Land?

The people voted "No." (See "What Was Moses' Last Name?" and "Fringe Benefits")

That night the people wept. ... "We wish we had died in Egypt! We should have died in this desert! Why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by the sword? Our wives and children will be captives! It would be best to go back to Egypt!" (Numbers, 14:1-3)

As a result of this rejection of the Land of Israel, G-d decreed that the adults would not be permitted to enter the Land. They would wander for forty years in the desert until all of the adults over twenty had died. Only the children under twenty would be allowed to enter the Land. (The only exceptions were Caleb and Joshua, who were the two “good” spies, and all of the women, because they had not rejected the Land.)

Here’s where the story gets REALLY strange. The Nation now realizes what a terrible mistake they just made. G-d had said that they could have the Land. They said, “No, thank You.” G-d said, “O.K., never mind.” Suddenly, they’re saying, “Now, wait a minute...”

Moses related G-d’s words to all the Israelites, and they were overcome with grief. When they got up early in the morning ... they said, “We are now ready. We shall go forth to the place that G-d described. We have sinned!” (Ibid, verses 39-40)

How do you like that! They finally got their act together! Better late than never, right? Well, perhaps not! ...

“Why are you going against G-d’s word?” said Moses. “It won’t work! Do not proceed! G-d is not with you. Don’t be killed by your enemies! Up ahead of you are the Amalekites and the Canaanites, and you will fall by the sword. You have gone away from G-d, and now G-d will not be with you.” (Ibid, verses 41-43)

They still didn’t get it. Originally, they didn’t believe that G-d could lead them into Canaan. After they were punished for not trusting G-d, they now decided to trust Him. Except now that they had sinned, it was too late! G-d was no longer promising His protection. And now they didn’t believe THAT either!!

They went ahead with their plans, setting off for the Land of Israel, without Moses, and without G-d’s promise of protection. Many years later, Moses described how on that day, *“the Amorites ... went out against you, and pursued you as the bees do.”* (Deuteronomy, 1:44)

They were crushed and humiliated. One who disturbs a bee’s nest without adequate protection goes away with a “stinging” reminder of the experience.

What was with these people?! How could they have been so foolish? They had already admitted sinning in rejecting G-d’s gift of the Holy Land. Didn’t they realize that it was now a sin to try to take it??

Apparently, their statement of *“We have sinned”* wasn’t totally sincere. Their sin, as far as they were concerned, was rejecting the Land. Now they regretted that “sin,” and accepted the Land.

The problem is that they acknowledged the wrong sin. Their sin was not in rejecting the Land; it was in rejecting G-d! And by ignoring G-d's command NOT to enter the Land, they were sinning again!

Shortly after telling us about this rebellion, the Torah gives us the Mitzvah of "*Challah*."

When you will come to the Land to which I am bringing you ... you must separate a gift ... the first portion of your kneading as a dough offering. (Ibid. 15: 18-20)

When baking bread, there is a Mitzvah to separate a small piece from the dough. That dough is called "*Challah*," which literally means, "loaf." The actual Commandment, as written in the Torah, is to give that portion of dough to a Kohain.

Technically, the Mitzvah, as it is written, does not currently apply. What the Torah emphasizes is "*when you will come to the Land to which I am bringing you.*" This Mitzvah only applies when the majority of the Jewish population is actually living in Israel. (We still perform this Mitzvah due to a rabbinical requirement, burning a small piece of dough in memory of the original Mitzvah.)

Why does the Torah tell us the Mitzvah of *Challah* after telling us about the defeat of the Israelites when they tried to enter the Land of Canaan?

Perhaps G-d wanted to bring out the fact the purpose of Israel is to serve as a place where we can fulfill G-d's will. It is a place where we have the obligation to separate *Challah* from our bread, and tithes from our produce. It is a place where G-d's Temple used to stand, and will, one day soon, stand again.

The people said they were now prepared to fight their way into the Land. WHY? FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

G-d did not give us the Land of Israel simply as an act of Jewish nationalism. If He had, He would not have stood in the way of the band of renegades who tried to take it on their own. Rather, He was telling them, "If you're not yet ready to listen to Me, you're not yet ready to enter the Land." (G-d is not a "secular Zionist;" He's a religious one.)

Israel was given to us to enable us to better serve G-d. Today, all over Israel, there are Yeshivas for students of every imaginable background. All of my children studied there at one point.. The Holy Land "*flows with "milk and honey,"*" the spiritual nourishment and sweetness of Mitzvah observance.

Unfortunately, there is a school of thought in Israel today that sees Israel as just another country. There is nothing unique about Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. There are those in the Israeli government who would like nothing better than to dismantle all vestiges of Torah Judaism from the Jewish State. And they are doing everything in their power to make that happen.

The Israelites survived forty years in the desert. They had Torah, but no Land. Our Nation survived two thousand years of exile. We had Torah, but no Land.

The band of rebels who ignored Moses' plea wanted Israel without Torah. When you try to take (milk and) honey that you're not entitled to, watch out for the bees!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2004 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.