

SHELACH (NUMBERS 13:1-15:41)**Around the Land in Eighty... um, FORTY, Days**

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

It should have been a longer trip. G-d sped it up.

Twelve spies set off from the desert on a reconnaissance mission to check out the Land of Israel. Apparently, the Israelites weren't fully comfortable with G-d's promise to give them the Land; they wanted to find out for themselves if it was worth making the move. Unfortunately, as a result of the negative report by a majority of the spies, the Nation decided that they'd rather not go. And, as the saying goes, be careful of what you wish for; you may get it. G-d decided to postpone the move for a while.

Rashi points out that to walk the length and breadth of the Holy Land should take eighty days. Miraculously, it took only forty. And it's a good thing. The forty day "discount" saved us an additional forty years in the desert:

"...Your children will roam in the desert for forty years and bear your guilt, until the last of your carcasses in the desert. Like the number of days that you spied out the Land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year, will bear your sins -- forty years -- and you will understand straying from Me."

(Numbers, 14:33-34)

As we can see, G-d's up-front miracle in allowing the spies to complete their mission in half the time was due to G-d's compassion. He knew that the expedition would result in a massive sin by the nation; He knew that He was going to punish them. Therefore, in His great mercy, he "helped" them sin quickly so the punishment would be smaller. Had He not done so, we would have had to spend eighty years in the desert, rather than "just" forty.

On the one hand, we see G-d's love for His People by reducing the sin in order to reduce the punishment. But this is really not so clear. After all, it wasn't a forty-day sin, and without the miracle, it wouldn't have been an eighty-day sin. They were on a fact-finding mission. They examined the fruits of the Land and brought back samples. They observed the inhabitants and reported on the facts. The spies simply described what they saw. The problem was when the Nation decided, based upon that description, that they didn't want to enter the Land. (We report, you decide.") The sin was the rejection of the Land, based upon the report that was brought back. It was a one-day sin, not forty.

The answer to this question is obvious.

... *They went, and they came to Moses...* (Ibid, 13:26)

The Talmud (Sotah, 35a) observes, based on the terminology of this verse, “*they went, and they came*’”, that the departure from the desert and the return to the desert were similar. They returned as sinners because they departed as sinners.

The spies never planned on bringing back a positive report. They left, on the very first day of their mission, looking for things to criticize. G-d caused many of the inhabitants to die during the journey so that they would be too pre-occupied with their funerals to pay attention to the spies in their midst. This act of Divine protection was described as “... *a land that devours its inhabitants.*” (Verse 32) The tremendously large fruit that grew there was interpreted as proof that it was a land where only giants can survive.

The whole purpose of the mission was to disparage the Land of Israel. The majority of the spies had no interest in giving an honest report. When you look for things to complain about, you will always succeed in finding them.

That is, perhaps, one of the reasons that in the Passover Seder, we deal so harshly with the wicked son. The Hagaddah gives a list of questions posed by different types of people. The wicked son asks, “What is this Service TO YOU?”

The Haggadah interprets his words, “TO YOU,” as excluding himself from his People, and concludes that people with an attitude like his never would have been taken out of Egypt.

But what about his question? Isn’t he entitled to an answer? No. He’s not interested in an answer. He’s already decided.

This is not to imply that legitimate questions don’t deserve legitimate answers. Rather, the point is that a question that is asked with a negative agenda is almost impossible to answer. (“Don’t confuse me with the facts; I’ve already made up my mind.”) Many people reject Torah Judaism simply because they reject Torah Judaism. They will offer challenges to the “outmoded, antiquated” beliefs of our faith because it is easier not to believe than it is to believe. Once you believe, you have to justify not practicing. If you reject belief, you can do what you want.

The other day I was speaking to someone about a question he had asked about a particular Mitzvah. Someone standing nearby interrupted with, “Well the orthodox have to do it that way, because...”

I interrupted her interruption. “No, that’s not correct. We ALL have to do it that way. The Torah was given to ISRAEL, not to the orthodox!”

All questions are legitimate. Asking about the Holocaust is fair game. Asking about apparent contradictions in Torah is fair game. (I do that in this column all the time!) Asking about women’s issues is fair game.

The problem is when the question comes from a negative agenda. Ten of the twelve spies left the desert on a mission to find “dirt” on the Land of Israel. They found it. Joshua and Caleb left the desert looking for good in the Land of Israel. They found it.

But doesn’t that make Joshua and Caleb just as bad as the others? Didn’t they too have an agenda? Wasn’t their report equally biased?

In one respect, it was. The difference is that G-d, the source of all good, is, by definition, good. Therefore, whatever He does is, by definition, good. If we don’t see that clearly, it is our obligation to look harder. Is that biased? I guess it is. But it’s the CORRECT bias!

Have a great Shabbos.

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