**SALT – PARASHAT SHELACH 5782 / 2022**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The portion read as the *haftara* for Parashat Shelach is the second chapter of Sefer Yehoshua, which tells the story of the two spies sent by Yehoshua just before *Benei Yisrael* crossed the Jordan River into the Land of Israel. Parashat Shelach tells of the spies sent by Moshe before *Benei Yisrael* were to have entered the land, and of how the spies returned and frightened the people, resulting in an additional thirty-eight years of sojourning through the wilderness. When Yehoshua succeeded Moshe, he sent two spies into the land who then returned with a message of encouragement, confident that *Benei Yisrael* would succeed in capturing the land.

The opening verse of this section relates that Yehoshua sent the spies “*cheresh*” – a term that is understood by the commentators in several different ways. *Targum Yonatan* translates this word as “*be-raza*” – “secretly.” Yehoshua ensured that this mission remained inconspicuous and unknown to the public. The Radak adds that Yehoshua was concerned that the people might become frightened if they learned of this mission, and so he made a point of keeping it quiet.

Rashi, after citing *Targum Yonatan*’s translation, offers a different interpretation, suggesting that “*cheresh*” means “deaf.” According to this approach, Yehoshua instructed the two spies to act as though they suffered from a hearing impairment, so that the locals would feel comfortable speaking freely in their presence, and thus their secrets would be revealed.

Others, including the Ralbag and *Metzudat David*, note that the root *ch.r.sh.* can also be used in reference to unspoken thoughts. For example, a verse in Sefer Mishlei (3:29) warns against plotting evil against one’s fellow who trusts him – “*Al tacharosh al rei’akha ra’a*.” In our context, these commentaries explain, the word “*cheresh*” should be understood to mean that the spies were sent to determine the thoughts and mindset of the natives in Canaan, to find out their feelings toward *Benei Yisrael*’s imminent entry into the land. Indeed, the text proceeds to relate how the spies heard of the Canaanites’ fear and dread of *Benei Yisrael*.

Rashi and the Radak cite the Midrash’s reading of the word “*cheresh*” as “*cheres*” – “pottery,” indicating that the spies disguised themselves as peddlers selling earthenware utensils.

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev suggests interpreting “*cheresh*” in an allegorical sense, explaining that the spies were instructed to be “deaf” to the negative influence of the original group of spies. The twelve spies sent years earlier by Moshe left a certain impact upon the land by committing their grievous sin, and these two spies would be exposed to that negative energy as they carried out their mission. Yehoshua thus instructed these spies to remain “deaf” – impervious to the influence of the first spies, who led the nation astray and persuaded them to rebel.

This chassidic teaching reminds us of the long-term effects of our behavior. Everything we do and say has an impact that extends much further, and remains for far longer, than we might think. Just as the influence of the original spies’ sin was felt thirty-eight years later, so do our words and actions have direct or indirect effects for well into the future. But in addition, Rav Yitzchak’s reading of this verse assures us that we are capable of being “deaf” and resisting negative influences. We are endowed with free will, which empowers us to act correctly even in the face of difficult pressures. Even when we come under sinful influences, we have the God-given strength to make ourselves “deaf” to these pressures so we can behave the way we are meant to behave.

Sunday

Rashi, in his famous opening comments to Parashat Shelach, draws a connection between this *parasha* and the final verses of the previous *parasha*, Parashat Behaalotekha. Parashat Shelach tells of the spies who were sent to scout the land, and ended up dissuading *Benei Yisrael* from proceeding, warning of the dangers that, they believed, loomed in the Land of Israel. The concluding section of Parashat Behaalotekha tells the seemingly unrelated story of Miriam, Moshe’s sister, who was punished for speaking derogatorily about Moshe, criticizing him behind his back for matters concerning his marriage. Based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi writes that both Miriam and the spies were punished on account of “*iskei diba*” – for speaking negatively, about Moshe and about the Land of Israel. These two stories are thus linked, to underscore the fact that the spies failed to learn from Miriam’s mistake, as they, too, sinned through inappropriate, disdainful speech.

Many later commentators raised the question of how to explain this connection drawn by the Midrash between Miriam’s sin and the story of the spies. Other than the fact that both involved derisive speech, there appears, at first glance, to be no substantive similarity between them.

Rav Yaakov Goldberg, in his *Devir Kodsho*, suggests that the connection lies in the fact that both Miriam and the spies spoke the truth, but then reached the wrong conclusions. Miriam spoke to Aharon about Moshe’s decision to separate from his wife (see Rashi to 12:1), and proceeded to criticize him, claiming that this was unnecessary, when in truth, this decision was sanctioned by God (Shabbat 87a). Similarly, the spies truthfully reported to the people their findings about the people and quality of the land, but they then presented their assessment that the nation could not defeat the Canaanite peoples, and that they could not survive in the land, which, they decided, “consumes its inhabitants” (13:32). In both these unfortunate episodes, people communicated accurate information but then reached woefully mistaken conclusions based on this information.

The prohibition of *lashon ha-ra* (speaking negatively about other people), for which the story of Miriam serves as a Biblical source, forbids relaying even truthful, accurate information (as opposed *hotza’at sheim ra* – the prohibition against slander). The evil of *lashon ha-ra* lies in the fact that it leads people to reach wrong conclusions about their fellow based on one piece or several pieces of information that they hear. Even if we have verified unflattering information about somebody, this does not entitle us to render judgment about him, or to view him with disdain. Seldom, if ever, do we receive information about somebody that gives us the full picture; there are always angles and relevant factors that allow for assessing the individual favorably. The connection drawn between the story of Miriam and the story of the spies warns us not to hastily rush to conclusions based on bits of information that we hear, and to always give people the benefit of the doubt, realizing that there is so much that we do not know.

Monday

The *haftara* for Parashat Shelach, taken from the second chapter of Sefer Yehoshua, tells the story of the two spies sent by Yehoshua to Yericho, the city in the Jordan River Valley which later became the site of *Benei Yisrael*’s first conquest after crossing into the Land of Israel. The men found lodging in the home of Rachav, a prostitute, who became the heroine of the story by protecting them even when it was discovered that they were Israelite spies. She hid the spies on the rooftop of her home, and falsely told the authorities that they had already left. Rachav then lowered them by rope through her window to the other side of the city wall, near which her home was situated. Before they left, she asked the men to promise to spare her and her family when they attack the city, and they agreed. Sure enough, *Benei Yisrael* spared Rachav and her family during the battle against Yericho (6:23-25). According to tradition (Megilla 14b), Rachav joined *Benei Yisrael*, and married Yehoshua.

Rashi (2:15), based on the Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (116b), comments that the window through which the spies escaped, and the rope down which they were lowered to the ground, had previously been used by Rachav’s clients. Understandably, they wanted to ensure they would not be discovered to have solicited her services, and so she would secretly lower them down the wall through her window. Now, Rachav used this same window and this same rope for a far more meritorious purpose – to save the lives of the two Israelite men who had come to her home. Rashi writes that Rachav turned to God at this time and prayed, “Master of the world! With these I sinned, through these forgive me.” She asked that she be forgiven for her ignoble profession in the merit of her heroism in helping the two Israelite spies escape Yericho unharmed.

Rachav’s window and rope perhaps serve here as symbols of secrecy, the part of our lives that we keep hidden from public view. Sometimes, we use secrecy in order to act improperly. Like Rachav, we employ the “window” and “rope,” our privacy and concealment, to do things we shouldn’t, without exposing ourselves to scorn and embarrassment. On other occasions, however, we might use secrecy for noble purposes, to do the right things we want and should do, but which would cause us embarrassment or subject us to criticism if they were discovered – such as Rachav’s rescuing the spies, which she needed to go about secretly. By contrasting Rachav’s two uses of her escape mechanism, the Gemara urges us to take advantage of our privacy for meaningful, constructive activities which we would be uncomfortable performing in public. When we find ourselves hidden from public view, we might likely be tempted to act inappropriately, as we are not deterred by any possible threat to our reputation. But if we live with genuine, deeply-ingrained *yir’at Shamayim* (fear of God), we will utilize secrecy not for improper conduct, but rather to perform the good deeds which, for whatever reason, we feel we cannot perform in public, cognizant of the fact that even in private, we are under God’s supervision and subservient to His authority.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the story told in the *haftara* for Parashat Shelach, taken from Sefer Yehoshua (2), about the two Israelite spies who entered the city of Yericho and stayed in the home of Rachav, a prostitute. The authorities of Yericho discovered that two Israelite spies had come to Rachav’s home, and she heroically hid them, and then helped them escape by lowering them down a rope from a window over the city’s wall. As we saw, Rashi (2:15) writes – based on the Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (116b) – that this window and rope previously served Rachav’s clients, who left her home secretly to protect their reputation. Rachav now turned to God and asked that in the merit of her rescuing the two men from *Benei Yisrael* through this window and rope, she should be forgiven for the sinful use she had made of the window and rope during her many years as a prostitute.

What might be the particular significance of these two objects – a window and a rope – in Rachav’s regretting her sinful past?

Rav Binyamin Eisenberger (*Mesilot Bi-lvavam – Derashot*, 5771, vol. 2, p. 110) suggested that these two images symbolize two important elements of the repentance process. The window, he writes, represents an escape route, a way out of a seemingly permanent state of confinement. A person locked in a cell feels trapped unless there is a window in the wall through which he can climb out. Similarly, people mired in sin often feel trapped, permanently consigned to a life of sin, unable to break their bad habits and routines. In order to repent, we must believe that there is a window, that God has provided us an escape route, the power to change and improve, no matter how entrenched in sin we might have become.

Secondly, Rav Eisenberger writes, repentance requires that we acknowledge the “rope” that binds us to God. A common obstacle to repentance is the mistaken assumption that it is too late, that one has steered too far away, that his connection to God has been irreparably severed, such that his quest to repent would be instantly rejected. Rachav’s rope thus perhaps symbolizes our unbreakable bond with the Almighty, which remains intact even if we drift away, and even if we drift far away. Just as Rachav, who had worked as a prostitute for many years, repented and was welcomed into *Am Yisrael*, even marrying the nation’s leader (Megilla 14b), so is every sinner encouraged to work towards changing and improving, and guaranteed that his efforts would be lovingly accepted by God.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Shelach of the twelve spies sent by Moshe to scout the Land of Israel, and how ten of them returned with a frightening report and discouraged the people from proceeding into the land. The Torah relates that after the scouts spent forty days surveying the Land of Israel, “*va-yeilkhu va-yavo’u*” – literally, “they went and arrived” back at the camp to report their findings to Moshe and to the people (13:26). The commentators noted the difficulty in this expression, which speaks of the spies both “going” (“*va-yeilkhu*”) and “arriving” (“*va-yavo’u*”), two terms which are normally antonymous. As the spies here returned from their excursion into the land, we would have expected the Torah to write simply “*va-yavo’u*,” that they arrived back at the camp. What does the word “*va-yeilkhu*” add to this verse, and how should it be understood in this context?

Ibn Ezra suggests reading this verse to mean that the spies went directly to speak to the people, without even first going to their tents. We would naturally expect that after a forty-day journey, they would first want to return home to see their families. The word “*va-yeilkhu*” indicates that upon returning to the camp, the spies proceeded immediately to report their findings, showing the sense of urgency with which they warned the people of the dangers they felt loomed in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar*, offers a creative interpretation of this verse, explaining that the spies had divided into several groups. After forty days of surveying the land in small groups, the spies assembled in a previously designated meeting spot. According to Netziv, this is the meaning of the preceding verse: “They returned from scouting the land at the end of forty days” (13:25). This refers not to their return to the Israelite camp, but rather to their return to the spot where they had divided into groups, and which was now their meeting spot. The Torah then tells that “they went” from the meeting point and then arrived at the Israelite camp.

Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sota 35a), writes that the phrase “*va-yeilkhu va-yavo’u*” implies a parity between the scouts’ departure to the land and their return from the land. In Rashi’s words, “Just as their arrival was with an evil plot, so was their departure with an evil plot.” According to Rashi, it seems, the Torah indicates that the spies did not embark upon their mission with innocent intentions, changing their minds upon seeing the large armies and fortresses of the Canaanite tribes. Already at the time of their departure from the camp to the land, they schemed to bring a negative report and frighten the people. This is the meaning of “*va-yeilkhu va-yavo’u*” – that they had left upon their excursion with the same sinful mindset they had when they returned to report their findings to the people.

Many later writers noted that Rashi’s comment seems to contradict his earlier remark (13:3) that at the time Moshe selected the twelve spies and assigned them their mission, they were “*kesheirim*” – upstanding individuals. It was only afterward that their hearts transformed and they schemed to lure *Benei Yisrael* to rebel. How can we reconcile this statement with Rashi’s later comment that already at the time when the scouts embarked on their mission, they left “*be-eitza ra’a*” – with the idea to frighten the people?

One simple answer, perhaps, is that people can be considered “*kesheirim*” even when they havean “*eitza ra’a*,” evil ideas. Being tempted to sin does not necessarily undermine one’s inherent goodness. The commentators advance different theories to explain the spies’ motive to frighten the people and convince them not to enter the Land of Israel. (One common explanation, for example, is that these were the leaders of the tribes, and they feared they would forfeit their positions of leadership once the nation entered the land.) But regardless of what the motive was, the idea itself did not make them evil people. Even the righteous are subject to sinful lures and temptations. Having an “*eitza ra’a*,” an idea to act wrongly, does not render one unworthy of the title “*kasher*.” Our worthiness is determined by how we react to lures and temptations, by whether or not we struggle against our negative tendencies and remain committed to God. Thus, there is no contradiction at all between Rashi’s two comments, because the spies were indeed “*kesheirim*” even at the time that they had plans to commit evil.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the question addressed by numerous writers regarding Rashi’s comment in the beginning of Parashat Shelach (13:3) that at the time Moshe sent the twelve spies on their scouting mission, they were all “*kesheirim*” – upright,righteous, and worthy of this role. It was only afterward, Rashi writes, that ten of the spies rebelled, and decided to frighten *Benei Yisrael* and convince them not to proceed into the land. This comment appears to contradict Rashi’s own remarks later (13:26), where he writes, based on the Gemara (Sota 35a), that the scouts embarked on their mission “*be-eitza ra’a*” – with the evil plot to discourage the people.

One answer that some have suggested is that indeed, at the time Moshe assigned these men their mission, they were righteous and worthy of this sacred responsibility. As soon as they left, however, even before they saw the Canaanites’ frightening armies and fortresses, their decided to betray their mission, and to incite the people to rebel.

Rav Yitzchak Dov Koppelman, in *Shiurei Chumash-Rashi*, develops this point further. He explains that, as many others have noted, Moshe and the people had entirely different ideas about the nature and purpose of this spying mission. Moshe, in his list of questions which he wanted the spies to answer (13:18-20), asked the spies to get a feel for the country, for its inhabitants and its produce. The purpose, from Moshe’s perspective, was simply getting acquainted and familiarized with the land before the people entered. However, as we read in Parashat Devarim (1:22), the people wanted that spies be sent for the practical purpose of planning their entry into the land and devising strategies for conquering it. They were skeptical of God’s promise to bring them into the land, and thus insisted on a scouting mission to collect information for the purpose of deciding whether it was feasible for them to take possession of the land. From Moshe’s perspective, however, it was self-understood that *Benei Yisrael* would easily conquer the land; this mission, in his mind, was undertaken only to get acquainted with the land that the people would soon inhabit.

Rav Koppelman explains that Moshe chose the twelve men whom he deemed worthy of the mission which he envisioned – and they were, indeed, worthy at that time. However, as they embarked on their excursion through the land, they were influenced by the public pressure, by the people’s skepticism, and their demand to know whether and how the process of conquering the land could occur. Essentially, the ten spies decided to change their role; they were chosen by Moshe for the mission he envisioned, but they then chose to undertake the mission which the nation desired.

Rav Koppelman applies this understanding to each and every one of us. God has chosen each individual for the mission of serving Him, because He knows that we are all “*kesheirim*” – inherently good, and fully worthy and capable of fulfilling this role. Unfortunately, however, we often choose to use our sojourn in this world for a different purpose – such as the pursuit of fame, prestige, comforts or luxuries. Rather than faithfully fulfilling the mission that has been assigned to us, we decide to change the terms and pursue a different purpose. We must remember that we have been sent into the world at this time and under these conditions because God determined that we are “*kesheirim*,” fully suited for, and worthy of, a lofty role, and we are thus dutybound to fulfill that role to the best of our ability, without allowing ourselves to be distracted or lured by other pursuits.

Friday

The Torah says about the twelve men sent by Moshe to scout the Land of Israel, “*kulam anashim*” (13:3) – literally, “they were all men.” Rashi explains that the word “*anashim*” signifies a stature of distinction, and the Torah describes the spies with this term to indicate that, in Rashi’s words, “*otah sha’a kesheirim hayu*” – at that moment, the spies were righteous. It was only later that they rebelled, frightening *Benei Yisrael* and convincing them that they would be unable to capture the Land of Israel.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in *Oznayim La-Torah*, notes the significance of the use of the word “*anashim*” – which generally means “people,” or human beings – in reference to the spies’ pious stature at that time. Human beings are capable of drastic and sudden change; we can act righteously one day, and then sinfully the next. Our behavior at any given moment does not dictate our behavior later. The fact that we conduct ourselves properly now does not necessarily mean that we will continue acting this way in even the near future. Rav Sorotzkin notes the ruling of the *Shakh* (Y.D. 1:8) that if a *shocheit* (one who slaughters animals for meat) rejects the Jewish faith and becomes a heretic, such that he is no longer qualified to serve as a *shocheit*, all the animals he had slaughtered until then – even those that he slaughtered earlier that same day – are permissible for consumption. We do not need to assume that a person who resorted to heresy was anything but an upstanding, believing Jew at any point prior, because people are capable of sudden, drastic change.

Quite appropriately, Rav Sorotzkin writes, Rashi understood the word “*anashim*” in reference to the spies as describing their piety at that moment – just before they betrayed God. The Torah emphasizes that the spies were “*anashim*” – human beings, and thus it should not surprise us that they were righteous and God-fearing at that moment, even though they soon resorted to evil.

The Mishna in Masekhet Avot (2:4) famously exhorts, “Do not trust yourself until the day you die.” Conducting ourselves properly today does not mean that we will not need to struggle to act properly in the future; no matter how strong our habits and routines are, they are never guaranteed to continue. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (29a) notes the unfortunate example of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, who devotedly served as the high priest in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* for eighty years, and then, at the end of his life, became a heretic, joining the Sadducee sect that rejected the oral tradition. Even if we have followed a pattern of piety for many years, we are always going to need to work hard and struggle to remain devoted.

However, our human capacity for change works in the opposite direction, as well. Just as we must always stand guard to maintain our good habits, so are we always capable of breaking our bad habits. According to Kabbalistic tradition (based on the teachings of the Arizal), the soul of Yochanan Kohen Gadol was reincarnated in the person of Elazar ben Dordaya – the sinner whose story is famously told in Masekhet Avoda Zara (17a). Having spent his entire life indulging in forbidden pleasures, Elazar repented in the final moments of his life. Elazar is associated with Yochanan Kohen Gadol because they represent the two polar opposite manifestations of the quality of “*anashim*,” of the human being’s ability to drastically change. Just as we must work hard to maintain our good habits, which are not guaranteed to last, so must we trust in our power to break our bad habits, and make the behavioral changes that we ought to be making.