

Parshat Shlach begins with the story of the spies traveling to the land of Israel. Gd did not command Moses to send the spies. The Midrash says that there was no reason to send the spies as Gd told them the land was good. The Parsha concludes with the Mitzva of Tzitzit. What is the connection between the beginning and end of the Parsha?

The spies were given a mission to scout the land and bring back a report on specific attributes, לתור את הארץ. This command was followed by the order of וראיתם את הארץ מה היא. The spies were misguided and had the wrong agenda. When used in connection with military terms, the word לתור means to find the weaknesses of the nation one is seeking to conquer. For example, when the brothers appeared before Joseph, he accused them of being spies: (בראשית מב-יב):
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם לֹא כִּי־עֲרֹנֹת הָאֶרֶץ בָּאתֶם לִרְאוֹת:

In a military context, the purpose of spying is to find the weak points in the local defenses, where it would be easiest to mount a successful attack. However, they were not charged with spying from a military perspective. After all, they would not be waging war on their own. Gd was on their side. Regardless of the capabilities of the enemy, they were guaranteed to be victorious.

It would appear that the spies left for their mission with a hidden agenda. First in that agenda was to find the faults and weaknesses of the land, לתור. They were keen on disparaging the land and therefore they focused on the negative. The term וראיתם means more than to see. It means to contemplate and consider something more deeply in order to better understand it (see Baal HaTurim כב-ב). The spies inverted their mission. Had they fully accepted and understood that the land was good, as Gd promised them, there would have been no reason to go in the first place or at least they would have been more circumspect in their negative reports. They were intent on sewing discord about the land from the inception of their mission as their hidden agenda overwhelmed them.

The end of the Parsha uses similar words but the order is reversed: וראיתם אותו וזכרתם... ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם. Parshat Tzitzit commands the Jew to see first, וראיתם אותו, not to follow the negative aspects associated with a spying heart that seeks the negative instead of the positive. Had the spies followed that format, of seeing or understanding first that Gd was in control and then accepted their spying mission, they would not have sinned as they did, causing the people to wander in the desert for an additional 38 years.

It is interesting to note that the reaction of the people to the negative report

returned by the spies was to rebel and to plot a return to Egypt, (במדבר יד - ד)
נתנה ראש ונשובה מצרים. In Parshat Korach, Dathan and Aviram argued with Moses saying they would not meet with him. They complained that they were misled in being taken from a land flowing with milk and honey. They were yearning to return to Egypt. According to Chazal, Dathan and Aviram were among the officers punished by the Egyptians when the Jews failed to meet their daily quota of bricks. Yet now they yearned for a return to that very place. Their entire perspective was warped. The juxtaposition of Shlach and Korach is important. Dathan and Aviram missed the message of Tzitzit. The central theme of Parshat Tzitzit is that Gd took us out of Egypt and it is a place we are never to return to.

The Torah admonishes the Jew in various places to separate from the Egyptian ways we were exposed to in Egypt. Apparently Egypt plays a central role in the Jewish psyche and nation. Even before the exodus, we find Egypt playing an important role in the formation of the Jewish People. When Abram enters the land of Canaan and encounters a famine, he departs for Egypt. Sarah is taken to the house of Pharaoh and Abram attains great wealth in Egypt, but he is sent away by Pharaoh immediately. The central takeaway is that Abram was not supposed to tarry in Egypt. Remaining in Egypt was incompatible with his mission to found a nation based on Torah and not the hedonistic ways of the Egyptians. The ברית בין הבהתרים, which foretold the enslavement of the Jews in a foreign land, required our subjugation in a land that was antithetical to our desired way of life. When Isaac was confronted with famine, he also considered traveling to Egypt, only to be told by Gd he should remain in the land of Canaan. Ultimately, Jacob and his family were brought to Egypt in order to survive the famine that gripped Canaan at that time. It would appear that Egypt seemed the place of plenty, that was immune to famine. Indeed when everyone else suffered from famine, the Egyptians seemed to always get by, as all the neighboring nations came to Egypt and Joseph to purchase food in order to survive the famine that gripped them all.

The people in the desert, confronted with disappointing food rations and a sudden lack of hope began to yearn for the place that provided them with safe harbor in the past from such situations. They considered returning to Egypt. When Dathan and Aviram complained about Moses' leadership, they too fell back on the canard that Egypt was their haven.

According to the Maharal (See גבורות השם ה - יז), Egypt was selected as the place to birth the Jewish nation. Egypt provided the opposite of what the Jew was to be. It was a land and people interested in hedonistic pleasures, steeped in idolatry,

corrupt and immoral. It was the mirror image of what the Jew was to be. In order to form a new entity, it is important to form it from its opposite: דבר והפוכו. The Jew had to realize that the life style they observed in Egypt was inappropriate for and incompatible with them. They had to be immersed in it so they could assert their identity, to make them immune from the corrupting influence that was Egypt. If they were unable to break free of the Egyptian lifestyle, they could not bind with the One True Gd. The process of slavery, exodus and wandering in the desert was designed to test the Jew if he truly removed the contaminating influences of Egypt:

(דברים ח-ג):

וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־כָּל־הַדָּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר הִלִּיכָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֹתָהּ אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לְמַעַן עֲנֹתָהּ לְנִסָּתָהּ לָדַעַת אֶת־
אֲשֶׁר בְּלִבָּבָהּ הִתְשַׁמֵּר מִצֻּוֹתָיו [מִצֻּוֹתָיו] אִם־לֹא:

Like the silver that is placed in the forge to remove all impurities, so too the Jewish people were forged in the land of Egypt. While it was easy to take the Jew out of Egypt, it was more difficult to remove Egypt from the Jew.

Gd reminded the people of this several times in the Torah. The underlying reason for various transgressions of the people in the desert was their warped recollection of a life in Egypt that somehow elided the terrible afflictions visited upon them and replaced their memories of suffering with a false narrative of an unfettered idyllic life with plenty to enjoy. That is why Gd tells them again in Parshat Tzitzit that He took them out of Egypt, with the intent of making it clear that Egypt and Egyptian society was not the ideal. Rather, it is the Mitzvot of Gd that are paramount and that are the true antithesis of their Egyptian experience. There can be no synthesis of Egyptian culture and Judaism. It is either or.

We find this idea in Parshat Eikev (Chapter 8). The Torah tells us how Gd has brought us to a land that is the very antithesis of Egypt. Where Egypt is an arid land irrigated by man made ditches and canals, the land of Israel is nourished by rain from heaven, which is designed to produce an abundance for the Jewish People. They are warned to beware of the haughtiness that can set in when they are rewarded with plenty:

הַשָּׁמַר לָךְ פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְבִלְתִּי שָׁמֵר מִצֻּוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מֵצוֹנֶה הַיּוֹם:

פֶּן־תֹּאכַל וּשְׂבַעְתָּ וּבָתִּים טוֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁכַּבְתָּ:

וּבְהָרָה וּצְאָנָה יִרְבְּלוּ וּכְסֹף וְזָהָב יִרְבֶּה־לָּךְ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לָּךְ יִרְבֶּה:

וְרָם לְבָבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמוֹצִיאֲךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

We must always resist falling into the trap of emulating Egyptian society. We were brought to Egypt to observe the dangers of falling prey to such a philosophy and we were taken out of Egypt specifically to resist such temptation. Pursuit of such a philosophy will lead to the downfall of the Jewish nation and the exile of its inhabitants.

It is interesting to note that Moses engages the memory of Egypt whenever the Jews sin and he pleads for mercy and forgiveness from Gd. He appeals to Gd to consider what the Egyptians would say upon hearing of the punishment Gd visited upon his people. Why should Gd care or consider the opinions or statements of the Egyptians? Perhaps because Moses seized on the focus of the mission of the Jew as the total antithesis of everything the Egyptians embodied and represented. Egyptians were corrupt and merciless. The idea of forgiveness was something completely foreign to them. In a situation like the Golden Calf or the event of the spies, Egyptian justice would have said kill them all. There is no mercy. In a situation where an Egyptian leader was unable to deliver a victory against his enemy, he would prefer to murder his own soldiers to hide his own failure. Moses pleaded with Gd was to spare the people, if for no other reason than to prove the Egyptians wrong, that their way of life was to be utterly and completely rejected. Gd always has a better way to solve the problem. תשובה, repentance and forgiveness, completely nullifies and contradicts the Egyptian approach. It is דבר והפוכו.

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