



From the desk of
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TORAT

Parashat Shlach

HAMELECH

Man's Obligation to Avoid Selective Vision

Our Sages Explanation For the Position of the Parshiot

The Midrash [*Bamidbar Rabbah*, *Shlach* 6] states that the previous week's *parasha* concluded with the episode of Miriam's speaking *lashon hara* about Moshe. This week's *parasha* relates the episode of the spies who spoke negatively about *Eretz Yisrael*. Says the Midrash, "Why was it fitting for *Parashat Shlach* to appear in the Torah after the episode with Miriam? It was revealed before *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that the spies would speak *lashon hara* about the land. Said *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, 'So that they should not say they did not know that there was a punishment for speaking *lashon hara*.' Therefore *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* placed the episode of Miriam's speaking about her brother and receiving *tzaraat* near the *parasha* of the spies. This way they would know that there was a punishment for speaking *lashon hara*. If they would want to speak *lashon hara* they would look at what happened to Miriam. Yet they still did not wish to learn..." Rashi writes similarly, albeit succinctly, at the very beginning of the *parasha* [13:2].

Questions:

The *parasha* speaks about the sin of the spies who stumbled by speaking *lashon hara* about *Eretz Yisrael* and, by doing so, dissuaded the entire Jewish Nation from going to *Eretz Yisrael*. Because of this, a harsh decree was decreed against the spies and on all the Jews. This continues to be a reason for tears for each subsequent generation thousands of years later. Our tears are on account

of the two Temples that were destroyed on the date of the spies' sin and other terrible decrees that continue to occur during this time period. In order to clarify what the sin of the spies was and what we are meant to learn from it, we will first ask a number of questions on the *parasha*.

1. We find that the spies are referred to in the *pasuk* as distinguished men, as the *pasuk* refers to them as "*anashim*," which is a respectful title. They were also the leaders of their respective tribes. Additionally, they were chosen by Hashem, so they were certainly righteous and wise. Therefore, how could they have possibly stumbled and sinned in this manner?

2. Yet there is something even more puzzling. The *Chafetz Chayim* states that in order to glean even a slight understanding of *Tanach* one must be aware of our Sages statement, "If the earlier ones were like angels, then we are like human beings. And if the earlier ones were like human beings, we are like donkeys, and not even like the donkey of R' Pinchas ben Yair." If one contemplates this, he will realize the following: If in the Gemara's time they understood that the difference between one generation and the next was like the difference between a man and a donkey, the two of which have not the slightest bit of comparison, how much more so will the difference be if we try to figure out the difference between us and the generation of the desert? How much more so does this apply to the leaders of their congregation who were certainly the most exceptional individuals of the generation? There is no way to describe and measure their



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righteousness, wisdom, and every good trait. Therefore, given all of these outstanding qualities, how could they have sinned?

Honor Removes a Person From the World

In order to explain the entire episode of the spies, we will begin by relating the words of the *Zohar* [ot lamed in the *HaSulam* edition] which teaches that even though the spies were indeed esteemed and righteous individuals, however, they sought to guard their positions of honor that they held in the desert. In the desert they were the heads of their tribes, and they suspected, perhaps, that when they enter *Eretz Yisrael*, Moshe would remove them from their posts and appoint new leaders in their stead. They therefore decided to speak *lashon hara* about the land. This way, they hoped to influence the Jews to remain in the desert. We see therefore, that according to the *Zohar* what brought them to sin was their thirst for honor. They were jaded by this and were therefore unable to see the truth. The word for "speech" mentioned in the *pasuk* is *dibah* [דיבה]. Perhaps we can say that this word is the *roshei teivot* of **יצא בגלל הכבוד**, "דיבורם יצא בגלל הכבוד", "Their words were spoken for the sake of honor."

Why Bribery Blinds the Eyes of the Righteous and the Wise

The *pasuk* states [*Shemot* 23:8] "Do not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the wise and corrupt the words of the righteous." Additionally it states [*Devarim* 16:19], "You shall not distort judgment ... and you shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise and make crooked the words of the righteous." The Gemara states in *Ketubot* [105a], "Our Rabbis taught: 'For

the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise' – How much more so will it do so to the foolish. 'And make crooked the words of the righteous' – how much more so for the wicked. [Asks the Gemara:] Are the foolish and the wicked judges? Rather this is what it means: 'For the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise' – even if he is a great *chacham*, if he accepts bribes, he will not leave the world without his heart becoming blind. 'And make crooked the words of the righteous' – even one who is totally righteous but takes bribes will not leave the world without losing his mind ... Said Rava: Why is bribery prohibited? It is because once an individual accepts a bribe from someone else he begins to think similarly to him and becomes like his own body, **and a person does not see bad things about himself**" We see from the words of our Sages that by taking a bribe the giver becomes like his own body and becomes close to him. It is to the extent that just as he cannot see faults in himself, so too, he cannot see faults in the one who bribed him. He will therefore exonerate him. Our Sages say that even the slightest bribe, such as the one offered to R' Yishmael, who was brought produce that was rightfully his, but it was brought to him a day early by someone who had an upcoming trial. R' Yishmael refused to accept it, but nevertheless did not serve as a judge. He examined himself and saw just how much the Torah knows the intricacies of man's soul, and how even such a bribe can prevent one from seeing the truth.

Self-Interest is the Greatest Form of Bribery

According to this, R' Elchanan Wasserman explained the *drasha* of our Sages on a *pasuk*



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found at the end of the *parasha*, "And you shall not stray after your hearts and your eyes." Our Sages expounded, "After your hearts' – This refers to heresy." R' Elchanan asked why the Sages expounded this on a *pasuk* that deals with the heart; is not heresy in one's head? In *Kovetz Maamarim* he explains that heresy begins from a personal bias towards oneself. Benefitting oneself is the greatest form of bribery that there is, and it brings one to think about whatever is good for him, until he can no longer see the truth. Therefore the root of heresy lies in the individual's character traits and the desires in his heart. It is this self-bias which begins in the heart which blinds him and is the root of heresy.

Why is an Individual Blamed for Being Blinded by Bribery?

We can therefore ask a very strong question: Since it is natural that one who accepts bribes can no longer see the truth, why were the spies at fault for wishing to protect their honor and being unable to overcome their feelings? After all, everyone is naturally out for their own self-interests and are unable to see their own faults as stated above. Therefore why were they punished?

They Are Blamed For Seeing and Not Accepting *Mussar*

In their wisdom, our Sages answered that the spies were intended to learn from the episode of Miriam but did not. They're blamed and referred to as wicked because they saw the repercussions of evil-speech by others yet did not learn the severity of speaking *lashon hara*. Particularly from Miriam, as the commentators state. Miriam risked her life to save Moshe, and even now only spoke out of

concern and for his benefit. Furthermore, Moshe was the humblest man alive, and he was totally unaffected by her words. Nevertheless, she was sentenced to a harsh punishment, experiencing disgrace before the entire Nation. Miriam the great prophetess, sister of Moshe and Aaron, was put in solitary confinement the entire week because of the *tzaraat* she was stricken with. Yet the spies nevertheless did not learn a lesson to examine their ways and take heed not to speak negatively. This is why they are considered to be wicked and why they were punished. You see therefore that even though we are talking about the greatest individuals of the generation of the desert who saw the episode with Miriam, nevertheless they could only see others' shortcomings but not their own. This is because they justified their actions in order to satisfy their needs for honor, as the *Zohar* explained. Because of this, their vision became selective and they saw their deeds as being only good, always interpreting everything they did in a way that would alleviate their conscience. If this applies to great individuals such as these, how much more so does it apply to individuals nowadays who live mistakenly and in the dark. They think that they are walking along the correct path and serving Hashem, but they do not see their wicked deed and character traits. This is because it is man's nature to have selective vision. When it pertains to his friend he sees all of the shortcomings and even knows how to reprove and admonish. Himself, however, he praises and considers a servant of Hashem. Unfortunately, he does not realize his true level. The holy Baal Shem Tov has stated that every act someone sees his friend perform is shown to him to stir him to repent for



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his own deeds, as he is unable to notice them on his own. Man is therefore required to serve Hashem with truth, to know that he is unable to assess his own deeds accurately. Therefore when Heaven ordains that he should see the deeds of his fellow, it is only to stir him to repent for the very same shortcoming. Or he should follow the advice of the Tanna in *Pirkei Avot* to "Make for yourself a *rav*." This way he will be able to ascertain if what he is doing is correct or not, because he will be receiving advice from an impartial party.

Short Story

A distinguished *Rosh Yeshiva* once told me that there a young *bachur*, yeshiva student who was caught using an impure device on which he was able to view forbidden things. It lead him to commit a lowly act. The *Rosh Yeshiva* who, in his wisdom, understood the trials facing today's youth, attempted to help him. Some of the parents heard about this, at which point a number of the mothers met and expressed shock at how the *Rosh Yeshiva* could allow such a *bachur* to remain in the yeshiva. They stared to question his leadership and the quality of the yeshiva. Following the conversation, one of the mothers gathered her strength and decided that she must speak to the *Rosh Yeshiva* about the matter. She called the *Rosh Yeshiva*, and told him about her grievances. The *Rosh Yeshiva* said, "I would like to ask you something: What would you say if this *bachur* was your son? How you would like me to act with him?" She understandably was unsure how to answer and

began to stammer... "Because the truth is," said the *Rosh Yeshiva*, "the *bachur* in question is actually *your son*. Now tell me, how would you like me to act, with mercy or strictly?" He then continued, "In this case, we are dealing with your son. However, all of my students are like my own sons, and I must help a student deal with his life trials in order to succeed. To simply shirk my responsibility is not proper *chinch*." We can learn from this story to what extent a person has selective vision; when it comes to others he will create quite a storm, but when it comes to himself he acts the opposite.

Words of Mussar

We can learn from here that any individual who wishes to discover the truth about his Divine service in areas between him and Hashem and between him and his fellow man should do either one of two things: 1) Follow the advice of the Baal Shem Tov - Take note of the incidents that he sees, because they are being shown to him so that he should take care not to stumble in the very same deed. This is unlike the spies who saw but did not take heed; 2) Make a *rav* for oneself from whom he can seek council in every one of life's matters. Only by doing so, will he be saved from bribery and self-interest, things which make his path in life crooked, living a life full of mistakes and delusions without ever noticing them.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka