

# Parashat Shlach-Lecha

## Free Speech?

Rashi (13:2) makes his opening comment to the parsha in the following way:

“Why is the story of the spies juxtaposed with the passage about Miriam? She (Miriam) was stricken (by Leprosy) on account of the slander that she spoke regarding her brother. These evil men (the spies - the delegation to Canaan) witnessed it all but did not learn the lesson.”

A frequent mode of inquiry raised by the classic Torah commentators relates to location or ordering of Torah parshiot (episodes or Torah passages.) The question usually takes the form of: "Why is story X put next to topic Y?" In typical representation of this genre, the great commentator, Rashi, opens his comments on the Parsha by asking why the account of the "spies" follows on directly from the story of Miriam's slander against her brother Moses.

Let us explain in greater detail. The final passage of last week's *parasha* tells of a negative comment made by Miriam in reference to her brother. Miriam is immediately summoned by God Himself, accused of improper talk regarding Moses - the leader and prophet - and emerges from her encounter with God plagued with Leprosy, the traditional punishment for slander - Lashon Hara. What connection may be found between that story and this? Why is the story of Miriam's inappropriate speech juxtaposed to the account of the fiasco of the "meraglim?"

Rashi answers simply. The sin of the "spies" was an act of slander against the Promised Land. Apparently, they blackened its name and maligned its reputation. The result was that the people of Israel turned their backs on that Land.

But let us question Rashi. Is the problem here one of slander? After all, can we really speak of slander when it comes to a Land, to earth, rocks, mountains and rivers? We can slander a person. He or she gets offended, the person blushes and is embarrassed, they feel unable to show their face in public. That is slander. But how can one slander a land? Can one slander a building? a valley? a town? Does the Land squirm and turn red? Does the building suffer pain?

### FORGIVENESS

The above question was posed by the revered Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, Rav Chaim Smulevitz [2] but he adds a second question which is more troubling. It is well recorded how God punished Israel after this episode by barring them from entering the land for an entire generation. This is as severe a punishment as one might imagine. It would appear that God is furious with his "stiff-necked", obstinate rebellious nation, and short of destroying them completely, he selects a punishment of extreme proportions.

Yet the way the punishment is phrased is strange and puzzling indeed. Immediately preceding the proclamation of this devastating

punishment, we read a statement of divine forgiveness:

“And the Lord said ‘I pardon, as you have asked’.”  
(14:20)

In the first tense filled moments of Yom Kippur, at the start of the Kol Nidrei service, the community invokes this verse chanting it in a threefold manner. We seize this statement of God's absolute forgiveness of Israel, as we ask God to wipe the slate clean of our past wrongdoing, asking God to repeat his act of the past once again. This verse, a mantra of supreme forgiveness originates here, as God tells Moses how he "pardons" the nation.

But does the nation in fact gain its pardon? Sephorno (on 14:20) comments:

“I have forgiven you to the extent that I will not destroy you (v.12)... I will not annihilate the nation at once, however I will kill you off in stages, year by year, and not one person will enter the Land.”

So are the people forgiven or are they not? Why would God tell us that we have been pardoned, let off the hook, when the next verse explicitly issues a punishment:

“Nevertheless, as I live and as the Lord's presence fills the whole world, none of the men ... shall see the Land that I promised on oath to their fathers, none of those who spurn Me shall see it...” (14:21-23).

So we have two questions. The first relates to the nature of slander. Can we slander a land? The second: If the nation was forgiven, then why may they not be allowed to enter the promised Land?

### SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Let us begin by examining a statement from Maimonides in his code of Law - Mishne Torah - where he outlines the laws of slander and evil talk (Lashon Hara). There he states:

“The Rabbis state, evil talk kills three: the speaker, the listener (lit. the receiver) and the object of their slander, the listener more than he who speaks it.”  
(De'ot 7:3)

This is a strange comment. We can well imagine that the person who spreads gossip is culpable and at the same time, the object of the slander is maligned. A person's life can be ruined by rumour and slander, and the perpetrator of that gossip is guilty. But what of the listener? Why does Maimonides include the person who hears the slander as someone who is "killed" by the information he hears?

We might suggest that in fact, the person most affected by slander IS the listener. When one hears something negative about a person, one's perception of that person changes. The way one relates to the object of gossip is transformed the moment that one receives that information. After this moment, the relationship is going to be different forever. Has this ever happened to you? You hear a piece of information about someone. The next time you meet that person, you can't look them in the face without that comment, that perspective floating to the surface. When you meet, you view that individual strangely; “Did he really do that? Did that really happen to her? How could he?”. We have been tainted as we can only receive that person through the prism of our newfound information. Maimonides is accurate in his choice of language. It is not so much

the listening to gossip that affects us. It is more than that. It penetrates deep, it seeps in. The gossip enters the listener and it never leaves him.

## ALTERED PERCEPTIONS

Can we talk of slander of a Land? We most definitely can! We can have slander of a school, a synagogue, a community, anything! How so? Whenever we hear some information that affects our image of something, our mind has been poisoned; we have become a victim of slander. If we hear something bad about a particular school, a scandal that took place in a certain community, we will look differently at them from this moment forth. With a school, a child will now not be able to learn as he did before, with a synagogue, we will be unable to receive the spiritual power, the opportunity for prayer and religious growth that we might have found before that moment when we heard that gossip. Our perceptions and our consciousness are altered forever.

The Land of Israel was to offer the Jewish nation a unique opportunity. It was to become the place where they would live out a dream. It would be a place where they could fulfil the values of ethical monotheism, the legacy of God's law. The question is, whether the people are receptive to the land. Are they open to that which the land can offer? Is the Promised Land seen as a land of promise?

Until this episode, the Land seemed good. It lay "flowing with milk and honey" in the collective consciousness. Until that auspicious day when the delegation returned from the land with the first eyewitness reports of the territory that this fledgling nation would have to conquer. The people knew that they were going to war but they trusted that God would not send them on a mission impossible. But then, the "spies" returned. The respected leaders came back with talk of giants and Amalek.

"They spread slander among the Israelites about the land they had toured saying, 'The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size.... we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.'" (13:31-33)

The people heard this and panicked. They cried all night long; "Why is the Lord taking us to that Land to fall by the sword?" (14:4). They are gripped by terror and an image of a land which spells imminent death for all who enter its borders. The shouts of Caleb and Joshua fell on closed ears. Ten spies returned with a negative report. Who would listen to the two who support for God's plan? The people rallied against God and His Land of Promise. They refused to enter the Land. They proposed a return to Egypt.

After this event, after Moses had prayed and the crisis was over, and God had pardoned them, what remained? The indelible mark of this episode still cast its stain over the public in their perception of the Land. A nation who have cried all night will never be able to relate to this land as a positive land offering them opportunity and promise. They will always have an image, lurking in the shadows, of this land as a land of death, an image that will readily surface at the first sign of defeat, at the first setback.

Were the people forgiven? Yes. Could they enter the Land? They were restricted entry. Why? For if they were to enter, the entire enterprise would be doomed to failure from the opening step. The first war, the first crisis, the first defeat would have everyone crying

again. Like the wounds of a trauma victim, the psychological wounds of this traumatic incident will not be easily removed from the national subconscious.

## CONCLUSION

So the slander did not affect the object; the Land. It affected the listener. In the words of Maimonides, the listener, the one who received the information into his heart and mind, was affected in the most extreme way. The Children of Israel, impressionable just like children (aren't we all?) could not erase their negative perceptions of the land from their minds and hearts.

Their not entering the land was not a punishment. Rather, it was a direct outgrowth of the incident. Yes they had been forgiven, but only the next generation, free of the haunting images of the land "which consumes its settlers", would go into the Promised Land. They would be able to take the land for what it was. They would not have the emotional scars of a night of tears.

Even today, we frequently speak disparagingly about Israel (or Israelis : "those Israelis are all ..."). Let us be reminded and cautioned. Let us not spoil what Israel might offer us by our careless words. Let us ensure that the Holy Land remain in a position that it can offer us spirituality, national promise, a sense of collective identity. Let us be careful lest our words destroy the opportunity - for ourselves, our children, communities and associates - to receive the promise that the Promised Land offers, even today.

Shabbat Shalom

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## FOOTNOTES

[1] The twelve man delegation are referred to in the Rabbinic literature as the "spies". In the Bible, they are simply described as "anashim" - men - giving no indication of a specific military role or covert objective in their mission. Moreover, the verb used is "LATuR" and not "RG" L. It is clear from the listing of names (13:4-16) that these twelve men are tribal representatives and not spies. My view - following many classical commentators - is to see the group not as spies but more as a national delegation who were supposed to prepare the way, maybe in terms of morale, maybe in some religious dimension, for the imminent entry into the land. These national representatives were meant to endear the people to their promised land rather than distancing the nation from it. To this end, it is inappropriate to talk about "spies". Nonetheless I will follow the traditional "labelling" of this passage in the course of this article despite the possible wrong impressions that may flow from it. For more on this topic see the article in "Reflections of the Rav vol 1" entitled "The Singularity of the Land of Israel."

[2] See the book, Sichot Mussar. It was published in Hebrew but has since been translated by Artscroll.