

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

SH'LACH 5786

Mistaken Repentance

In the wake of the calamitous sin of the spies, HaShem decrees that the people would have to wander in the desert for a total of 40 years, and the generation that left Egypt (all males above the age of 20) would die in the desert (14:28-34). Upon hearing this crushing news, the Torah relates (14:40) that on the morrow, the people “arose and ascended toward the mountaintop saying, ‘We are ready, and we shall ascend to the place of which HaShem has spoken, for we have sinned.’” Moshe forewarns them not to transgress the word of HaShem, “for they will not succeed”, but they defy the warning and are annihilated by Amalek and Canaan (14:41-45).

The question asked by many of our commentators is this: If, as the text states, the people confessed and declared KI CHATANU (We have sinned), why wasn't this confession accepted as a sign of their repentance and why didn't this result in reversing the severe punishment that had been pronounced upon them?

When we survey the various answers to this question, we arrive at a better understanding of what it means to

sincerely repent and why the people were deficient even with their apparent confession.

The first approach, suggested by R. Dovid Goldman, would have us read the above verse this way: “We shall go to the place, for HaShem has said that we have sinned.” In this atypical, repunctuation of the text, the people were actually not confessing at all. They were stating that it is Gd who claims we have sinned. They themselves were not admitting to anything. (Iturei Torah, Bamidbar, p. 89, s.v. HIN'NI)

When a person refuses to take responsibility for his own mistakes, there can be no teshuva. Hence, the people, by placing their admission of guilt in Gd's mouth, in effect, chose not to repent at all.

A second answer asserts that the people misunderstood exactly what their sin was. As explained by the Ramban, S'forno and Abarbanel (among others), the people assumed their sin was in listening to the report of the spies. Now, after the death of the spies and the HaShem's decree, they were prepared to do what they were commanded to do at the very outset and invade the Land. But it was too late.

HaShem had decided their fate otherwise. But why?

In their initial refusal to enter the

Land, they were convinced by the spies that it was futile, that it didn't make sense to them. Now, in the aftermath of the sin and Gd's punishment, conquering the Land made eminent sense to them. The point here – and it is fundamental – is that what was driving their behavior was their own assessment. What HaShem said was irrelevant. They would be the sole arbiters of what was the proper course of action. Therefore, when they said, “we sinned”, their confession failed not because Gd rejected their repentance, but because they completely misunderstood the root of their sin.

They mistakenly understood that any decision about what to do rested exclusively upon their judgment. Genuine teshuva means to submit and subjugate your own opinion to what Gd determines is correct. The people had asserted their own self-will to be the deciding factor, and in their intransigence, they rejected Gd's new command not to ascend.

In a word, because the people failed to grasp the essence of their sin, their teshuva was stillborn.

Compare the people's response here with their genuine confession when, in the wake of their ingratitude, they were punished with poisonous snakes. Their response in that episode was, "We have spoken against HaShem..."

(Bamidbar 21:7) That confession was accepted and the people were healed.

A third approach is that of the Netziv. He maintains that the teshuva of the people was actually sincere and the fact that they were willing to courageously conquer the Land spoke to their brave M'SIRAT NEFESH (uncommon sacrificial zeal). The reason why this repentance was insufficient was because of the nature and gravity of the sin itself. The Talmud states (Yoma 86a) and is so codified by Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva 1:4), that while teshuva and Yom Kippur can atone for most sins, there is one offense in particular that is so grave and severe that in addition to repentance, Yom Kippur and suffering (YISURIM), only death can provide the final penance. And that sin: to be guilty of Chilul HaShem, of desecrating the Name of HaShem in public.

When the spies publicly spurned HaShem's plan to quickly bring them to Israel, when they demonstrated an abysmal and indefensible ignorance of the Almighty's ability to ensure their success in conquering the Land, they perpetrated an unforgivable Chilul HaShem. Their behavior telegraphed to all the nations that Gd's chosen people had chosen to forsake the very Gd Who was responsible for their very existence. Such a grievous sin, argues the Netziv, could not be

cleansed by teshuva alone. A far harsher punishment would be necessary.

The Talmud contends (Yerushalmi Pe'ah 1:1,3a) that nothing can stand in the face of a penitent individual.

“The gift of teshuva has the paradoxical power of reversing a past transgression, and when motivated by love, can actually transform an intentional sin into a merit. (Yoma 86b). But for this to occur, certain prerequisites are required. In light of our discussion, we can list three.

First, take ownership of your mistake. Do not pass it off on another. Admit the blunder, regret having done it, and be utterly ashamed of yourself for having committed the sin in the first place.

Second, have complete clarity about the nature of your sin. At bottom, every transgression is an insult to Gd. Therefore, teshuva begins when you are ready to listen and accept that only what Gd says is right and proper. You must submit to His Will, be it in your observance of His mitzvot, or in your welcoming the reality of Gd's Presence in every aspect of your life. Morality must be driven not by the relative, changing morals of society, but rather by HaShem's absolute standard, one which can only be determined by the halacha. If you are going to return (the literal translation

of teshuva), then you have to know exactly what you have to return to, and that begins when you understand what HaShem wants of you.

And finally, understand that while your teshuva may elicit HaShem's pardon and forgiveness, often, on some level, there may be additional consequences to your misdeed. Yes, the ill-gotten money will have to be returned, apologies and appeasements will have to be made, but, depending upon the enormity of the sin, HaShem may have His own means of purging a person of his sinful behavior - what Chazal mean when they speak of YISURIM. To be able to patiently bear and suffer HaShem's inscrutable judgement is also a part of the teshuva process.

When we reflect upon the events in our Parsha, we wonder how the history of our people may have unfolded differently had they understood how to repent properly. But, at least, because of their mistakes, we can learn and hopefully avoid the pitfalls that once spelt such disaster for our people. 🙏