

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



SH'LACH

The Tourists

In this week's Torah reading, the wheels really come off the bus! The grand march to the Promised Land comes to a grinding stop. The parade won't resume for 40 years. So, what caused the decades of detour?

I believe that the best way to arrive at the answer to this conundrum is to compare the two different versions of the story which appear in our Chumash, namely here and the first chapter of D'varim.

Although there are quite a few discrepancies between the two accounts, there are two which, I believe, help us to best understand the story, and its message for us.

The first is: What was the purpose of this expedition to the Holy Land? According to the version which appears this week they were sent to LATUR ET HA'ARETZ (the verb is used 13 times). This verb is variously translated as spy, scout, explore, search, reconnoiter, and check out. Actually, 'spy' is wrong, because the Hebrew word for that is RAGEL, which is used in the D'varim account.

So, this group was less a military spy

mission for the CIA, MI6 or KGB, and more a survey to convince the nation that this Land was a worthwhile destination. As opposed to the way the episode is reported in D'varim which uses the more military terminology. This week's account is more of a public relations job. This frames the entire story in a different perspective.

The second is: Who initiated the endeavor? Here it says: And God said to Moshe: Send men (ANASHIM, perhaps in this context 'agents') to TUR the Land of Canaan (Bamidbar 13:1-2).

This second question is indeed crucial to understanding the story. Our parsha is called The Sending, but who did that sending?

Rashi begins his analysis of the story by quoting God for us: According to your own judgment: I do not command you, but if you wish to do so, send them. Rashi explains that Moshe was being pressured by the Jews who basically demanded more information about the Promised Land. What exactly was this 'promise' we are expecting to receive?

On the other hand, the Netziv claims that the expression SH'LACH L'CHA is the classic format for a command or MITZVA from God. This was all logical and reasonable, but he has a very important question: Why didn't the Jews ask for a scouting mission

during the almost full year that the nation encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai (from Sivan 1 in year one until Iyar 20 in year two)?

His answer is disheartening. The Netziv explains: Now, when they stood at Chorev, they truly intended to enter Israel in this supernatural manner. But during these 3 journeys (in B'ha'alo-t'cha) they saw that it was difficult for them to continue in such a mode.

The series of troubles in the desert took the shine off the entire enterprise. The people had started to grumble and they weren't going to stop so quickly. God (and Moshe) saw that the hard facts about the Land were necessary for the now grumbling nation.

As Rav Yair Kahn noted: A careful reading of the parasha reveals an additional issue that is not purely theological. Following this initial expression of apostasy, the children of Israel begin to cry and complain... This reaction is not unique to the sin of the spies; it is characteristic of Yisrael's behavior from the time they were taken out of Egypt. However, we find that the volume of the complaint reaches new levels, as the people hysterically break into tears and reach the mutinous conclusion to overthrow Moshe and return to Egypt.

Clearly, the state of the people was a

PR disaster. How would the situation be saved? Well, by waiting an entire generation when the children would not be burdened by the same experiences and doubts.

We must look at the situation of this expedition to Eretz Yisrael as a genuine disaster, but why did such a distinguished group of individuals get their assignment so very wrong? There is an explanation by the Sheim MiShmuel (Rav Sh'muel Bornsztain, d. 1927) which I believe helps us to better understand the state of mind of the 10 spies who we see as getting it all so very wrong.

He claims that they understood the sanctity of being a SHALI'ACH (agent or emissary for another party). The problem was that they didn't see themselves as working for God or even Moshe. They saw themselves as agents of the Jewish people, who were already in crisis mode.

Why? Didn't Moshe send them with the authority of God? Well, yes, but they knew something Moshe didn't. They heard the prophecies of Eldad and Meidad (Bamidbar 11:26), which according to the Talmud was that Moshe wouldn't enter the Land of Israel, and that Yehoshua would lead them (Sanhedrin 17a).

These two men who stayed in the Camp (as opposed to the other 70 'appointed men') prophesied without

Moshe's power or support. As a result, Moshe didn't know the content of their prophecy.

So, the 10 spies acted in what they believed to be a responsible manner. They would act on behalf of the Jewish nation. It was a cool idea, but, sadly, misguided. The nation and the spies should have stayed loyal to Moshe and God.

This is a tragic tale! So much potential wasted under the desert sun. But these men chosen by Moshe Rabeinu were not evil or venal. They were misguided. When accepting an appointment, please, make sure that you are very clear as to who is your boss. And it's never a bad idea to answer to God. 🙏