

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

SH'LACH

The Parasha opens with CHEIT HAMERAGLIM, the sin of the spies:

"Send men... and they shall spy out the Land of Canaan... and (addressing those chosen for the task) you shall see the Land for what it is" (13:2,18).

Two key words: V'YATURU - and they shall spy out, and UR-ITEM - you shall see.

The Parasha closes with the mitzva of tzitzit:

"You shall see it and remember G-d's mitzvot. You shall not stray after your own hearts and after your own eyes after which you go astray" (15:39).

Same two key words: V'LO TATURU, and the identical UR-ITEM.

It may be suggested that performing the mitzva of tzitzit contains a deeper meaning, which does connect us to CHEIT HAMERAGLIM. That helps us to not make the same mistake as the meraglim did in reporting on the Land, and in not going the way Am Yisrael behaved when they heard what the meraglim told them.

Let's first consider the mitzva of tzitzit. As an approach, the Gemara (Sotah 17a) offers the following insight into the t'cheilet (blue wool) in

Parashat Tzitzit. Each of the tzitziot on the four corners of the garment has four threads, tied and doubled. Three of the threads are lavan (white) and one - the longer one - is t'cheilet. Techeilet, the Gemara suggests, communicates the sea which, like the sky, spiritually connects with the KISEI HAKOVOD, G-d's celestial throne: the higher, the infinite, the beyond human perception, the beyond human understanding, and the unbound by time and space. We can also say that the lavan, in contrast to the techeilet, suggests clarity, purity, and accessibility.

The Torah tells us UR-ITEM OTO UZCHARTEM ET KOL MITZVOT HASHEM: you shall see it and remember all of G-d's mitzvot. 'It' is an entity that includes both the t'cheilet and the lavan threads. The lavan tells us to access the accessible: study Torah, practice the mitzvot, and keep what you learn clear in mind, incorporating it into your behaviour and mental operating system. The t'cheilet reminds us that there exists very much more than we can see, sense, or perceive, which we cannot access as we are only human. The limits of human understanding and human ingenuity do not extend to the infinite. This applies even to observable phenomena. For example, the simplest cell in a banana skin. Everything new we find out about cells opens another dozen questions

that until then were not even conceived.

Let's now turn to CHEIT HAMERAGLIM. Moshe told the men UR-ITEM ET HA'ARETZ MA HI - see the land for what it is. Make a brief assessment about the practicalities of conquest. As Rashi explains, if the cities are walled they are likely to be weaker as their defence depends on their city fortifications. If they cities are unwalled and open, the inhabitants are likely to be stronger as they rely and trust on their own strength. But he did not tell them L'RAGEIL, to actually spy out the land as sleuths do, although elsewhere (D'varim 1:24), the Torah reports that's what they did.

It was one thing to see the land and work out the logistics of conquest following Moshe's guidelines. They would then UR-ITEM, see and obtain a general impression of the Land of Canaan which was possible in a reasonable time frame. Like the lavan of the tzitzit, learn what could be learnt by touring. That would be enough; G-d would take care of the rest when the time would come. But it was quite another thing to raise that to the level of espionage which, unbidden, the meraglim had done. They did not know Canaanite culture, their way of looking at things. For example, they thought that they were like mere grasshoppers in the eyes of

Canaan's giant inhabitants. Yet following Egyptian pursuers dying in the Red Sea only a year previously, they had all been singing out loud "The people heard, they trembled... the inhabitants of Canaan fairly melted" (Sh'mot 15:14-15).

As the t'cheilet symbolises, there was lots they didn't understand and couldn't have understood as they didn't grow up among them. The meraglim thus looked too hard and got it wrong instead of following Moshe's instructions. Instead of keeping in the region of the lavan which was represented by the samples of fruit they brought back, they "strayed after their own hearts and after their own eyes" into what they drew the wrong, panic-inducing conclusions. As the t'cheilet implies, a little supposed knowledge of what you don't understand, but are certain that you do, is dangerous...

It is the lavan that symbolizes ours ideal day-to-day life. It is the t'cheilet that communicates G-d's Infinity that accommodates our aspirations. It is their combination that prompts us that things are not always as they seem, and that we often have to patient to give things time to unfold instead of immediately dismissing a challenge or rejecting a suggestion.

