

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Shelach

The Spies, the Jewish People and Moshe Rabbeinu

וַיִּהְיֶה כָּלֵב אֶת הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלָה וְנִרְשָׁנוּ אֶתָּה כִּי יָכוֹל נוֹכַח לָהּ

Calev silenced the people toward Moshe and said, “We shall surely ascend and conquer it, for we can surely achieve it!” (13:30)

The simple meaning of this pasuk is that Calev endeavored to silence the people’s complaints towards Moshe. It is noteworthy, however, that the Torah itself has not yet made mention of any complaints on the part of the people. So far, all we have heard are the reports of the spies. What, then, is Calev silencing? Additionally, it is somewhat puzzling as to why Yehoshua did not join together with Calev in silencing the people at this stage.

In truth, the negative and fearful position of the people itself needs to be examined. Why were they reluctant to believe that Hashem would take them into the land? Even if it would require a miracle to do so, were they not accustomed to miracles on a daily basis?

Eldad and Medad’s Prophecy

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, lies in the episode of *kivros hataavah* recorded in last week’s parsha,¹ during which two individuals, Eldad and Medad, achieved a state of prophecy.² The Gemara informs us that the content of that prophecy was: “מֹשֶׁה מֵת וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ מְכַנִּיס לְאַרְץ – *Moshe will die and Yehoshua will bring them into the land.*”³ Knowledge of this prophecy changed everything. While the people were indeed accustomed to miracles, they ascribed them to the presence of Moshe Rabbeinu. As such, they reasoned that if Moshe would not be leading them into the land, the miracles which would be required in order to conquer it would not occur. In a sense, the people had become overly focused on Moshe as the basis of Hashem’s providence over them.

¹ Perek 11.

² Ibid. pasuk 27.

³ See Sanhedrin 17a.

It was this focus that Calev needed to disrupt. This is what the pasuk means when it says “Calev silenced the people *toward Moshe*,” i.e. he sought to silence and neutralize the state into which they had entered where they were “toward Moshe” – exclusively focused on him and his elevated status as the reason behind all their miracles.

This is the meaning of Calev’s emphasis “We shall surely ascend... for we can surely achieve it.” Calev was asserting that the Jewish people themselves were worthy recipients of Hashem’s miracle, even without Moshe Rabbeinu. Indeed, in many respects, the spiritual relationship between Moshe and the people was just the opposite, whereby his level was dependent upon theirs. Thus, we find, for example, that during the years in the wilderness when the people were in a state of disfavor, Moshe’s own communication with Hashem was also on a much lower level.⁴

“On your account”

Taking this idea one stage further, the Meshech Chochmah explains that it was this very fixation with Moshe that was the cause of his inability to bring the people into the land. While the generation in which he lived yet witnessed the fact that he was a physical being who had children, future generations might mythify him into an entirely spiritual being, perhaps even a deity, ascribing the miraculous entry onto the land to his independent power. To this end, it was already decided at this stage that he would enter the land, a decision that was rendered irrevocable by it being communicated to and voiced by other prophets. This is the meaning of Moshe’s words later on in Chumash Devarim, where he says to the people: “גַּם בְּי הַתְּאַנֵּן ה' בְּגִלְלַתְכֶם לְאֹמֵר גַּם אֶתָּה לֹא תָבֵא שָׁם – Hashem also became angry with me on your account saying, ‘Also you will not come there’.” Moshe refers to his inability to enter the land as being “on account of the Jewish people,” since it is was on account of their potential drastic misinterpretation of the implications of his leading them in.⁵

There is a very tragic irony here, for it was the problem of the people’s fixation with Moshe that led to his being unable to bring them into the land. This inability

⁴ See Mechilta Parshas Bo, cited in Rashi to Vayikra 1:1 s.v. *leimor*.

⁵ There is a certain chiddush in this interpretation, for although Moshe reference to himself not entering the land follows his discussion of the people not entering, his inability (in the form of Eldad and Medad’s prophecy) actually preceded theirs (on account of believing the spies).

in turn led to that generation doubting that they themselves could enter – and ultimately dying in the wilderness.

Moshe and Yehoshua

Returning to the report of the spies, we can now understand why it was specifically Calev who “silenced the people toward Moshe,” and not Yehoshua, for Yehoshua was the second half of the equation in Eldad and Medad’s prophecy – “Moshe will die and Yehoshua will bring them into the land”! Clearly, the people would not be prepared to hear Yehoshua telling them to remove focus from Moshe, since they would suspect that his intention was to shift that focus onto himself. Therefore, at this juncture it was specifically Calev, who did not stand to be the leader either way, who was in a position to try and “silence the people” in terms of their ascribing the miracles to Moshe himself.

At a later stage, however, Yehoshua does address this point. In Sefer Yehoshua,⁶ just before the people cross the Jordan River into Eretz Canaan, Yehoshua says to them:

בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי אֵל חַי בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהוֹרֵשׁ יוֹרֵשׁ מִפְּנֵיכֶם אֶת הַכְּנַעֲנִי

Through this you will know that the Living God is in your midst, and He will surely drive the Canaanites away from before you.

With these words, having already taken over leadership of the people, Yehoshua is ensuring that there are no traces among them of any ascribing independent power to Moshe Rabbeinu, for even Moshe had already passed away. Rather, it is only the Living God, i.e. the Eternal Omnipotent God who is the One who drive away your enemies and enable you to inherit the land. Indeed, says Meshech Chochmah, understanding Yehoshua’s specific intent in terms of the message he wished to impart on that occasion will explain why this is in fact the first time in Tanach that Hashem is referred to with the term “א-ל חי – the Living God.”

⁶ 3:10.