

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Shelach

### Slander, Exile and Redemption: Lessons from the Episode of the Spies

#### BACKGROUND: THE PUNISHMENT(S) FOR THE SIN OF THE SPIES

The tragic episode in our parsha known as the sin of the spies, only began with the spies. However, it quickly developed and became the sin of the people, in believing the slanderous reports of the spies about the nature of the land and their inability to conquer it. As we know, the punishment received by the people was for that generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years, where they would die out and not be able to enter the land. According to the Sages, there was another element of punishment which would reverberate much later on in history. The Gemara in *Maseches Taanis*<sup>1</sup> relates:

אותו לילה ליל תשעה באב היה, אמר להם הקב"ה: אתם בכיתם בכיה של חנם, ואני קובע לכם בכיה לדורות

*That night was the night of the Ninth of Av. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to them: You have cried (on this night) for nothing, I will establish for you (on it) a crying for future generations.*

Indeed, the notion that exile at some future time was already part of Hashem's response to the episode of the spies is stated explicitly later in Tanach. In *Tehillim* Chap. 106,<sup>2</sup> relating to that episode, it states:

וַיִּשָּׂא יְדוֹ לָהֶם לְהַפִּיל אוֹתָם בַּמִּדְבָּר. וְלְהַפִּיל זֶרְעָם בְּגוֹיִם וּלְזָרוֹתָם בְּאֲרָצוֹת.

He raised up His hand (in an oath) against them to cast them down in the wilderness, and to cast down their descendants among the nations, and to scatter them among the lands.

Similarly, the prophet Yechezkel<sup>3</sup> writes:

גַּם אֲנִי נִשְׂאתִי אֶת יָדִי לָהֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר לְהַפִּיץ אוֹתָם בְּגוֹיִם וּלְזָרוֹת אוֹתָם בְּאֲרָצוֹת

*I also raised up My hand (in an oath) against them in the wilderness to scatter them among*

1 29b.

2 Verses 26-27.

3 20:23.

### **BETWEEN THE EYE AND THE MOUTH**

The book of Eichah (Lamentations) describes the destruction of the first Holy Temple. The verses of each chapter follow the order of the aleph beis. However, there is one anomaly to this pattern. Unlike the actual order in the aleph beis, the verse starting with the letter peh [פ] comes before the one which starts with ayin [ע]. The Gemara<sup>5</sup> explains that this is based on the event which lay at the root of the destruction which was, as we mentioned, the slanderous report delivered by the spies about the Land of Canaan on the ninth of Av.

מפני מה הקדים פה לעין? מפני שאמרו בפיהם מה שלא ראו בלשונם

*Why does peh come before ayin? Because they [the spies] spoke with their mouths things that they did not see with their eyes.*

The Gemara is noting that the Hebrew letters *peh* and *ayin* are also words, which mean “mouth” and “eye,” respectively. A true report would have been based on what they actually saw, with the eye preceding the mouth. In the case of the spies, however, the order was reversed, and this becomes reflected in the order of the verses which chronicle the devastating results of this episode many years later.

These words of the Gemara require some elucidation:

1. What exactly did the spies say which was not true? Everything they described was based on what they saw. Perhaps they had no right to conclude that the land could not be conquered — with Hashem’s help anything is possible — but their physical description per se seems accurate!
2. The first four chapters of Eichah all follow the order of the *aleph beis*. If we look at the opening chapter we will see that the letter *ayin* comes before *peh*, as it should! It is only starting with the second chapter that the order is reversed. Why is this aspect not reflected already from the first chapter, but only in the subsequent ones?

### **PASSING THROUGH WITH HONORS**

The commentators explain that the spies did in fact say things which were untrue. They proclaimed, for example that “אָרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הִוא” – *the Land consumes its inhabitants.*”<sup>6</sup> Is this assessment based on anything that they saw? The answer is yes — and no. The Gemara<sup>7</sup> explains the background to their statement:

*Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, “I intended this for their benefit. Every place they passed through the most important official died, in order to make the population preoccupied with their mourning so that they wouldn’t inquire regarding the spies.*

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4 According to the Seforno (Bamidbar 14:28), the punishment of exile is referred to in the Chumash as well. Hashem prefaces the punishment for believing the spies by saying, “כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם בְּאָזְנֵי כֵן אֶעֱשֶׂה לָכֵם” – *as you have spoken in My ears, so shall I do to you*” (ibid.). With these words, Hashem was informing the people that with their ill-founded fears and concerns, they were themselves pronouncing their own verdict. In addition to saying that they would die in the desert, the people cried, “נָשִׁינוּ וְטַפָּנוּ יִהְיוּ לְבָז” – *our wives and our children will be taken captive!*” (Ibid. verse 3). This found expression in the exile from the land many generations later on that day.

5 Sanhedrin 104b.

6 Bamidbar 14:32.

7 Sotah 35a.

*They interpreted it negatively and said the land consumes its inhabitants.”*

It turns out that the statement of the spies was indeed based on something they saw, but it was nonetheless the opposite of the truth. Are the spies to be faulted for not interpreting correctly? After all, they did in fact see funerals wherever they went!

Upon reflection, we will see that there is no meaningful way the funerals could have led them to their conclusion. First, all of the funerals were attended by everyone in town. That itself should have served as an indication that these deaths were an unusual event. If it was indeed the nature of the land to kill its inhabitants, then this would have been an everyday occurrence, and would not have caused such a disruption to the town.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, if the death rate of the country was so alarmingly high, then how were there so many people living in it?

Clearly, they misinterpreted what they saw. The land did not devour its inhabitants. Yet if the correct interpretation of what the spies saw was so obvious, what led them to draw the opposite conclusions? The answer is that, for various reasons, the spies did not want the people to enter the land. The Zohar explains that each of these spies had a position of authority in the desert. They were concerned, on some level, that when the Jewish people would enter the Land of Israel there would be a reshuffle and new appointments would be made. Therefore, they preferred to stay in the desert.

This comment is most disturbing. Amongst all the other factors which must have been involved in the spies' decision to stay in the desert was a desire for honor, which affected the way they looked at everything they saw. We do not know how conscious the spies were of this motivation. All we know are the results.

### **SEEING AND BELIEVING**

The concept of “seeing” has a number of levels. On a basic level, it refers to visually seeing with the eye. On a deeper level, it refers to the way one interprets and understands that which he has witnessed. When one reaches an understanding of something, he says “I see.”

Did the spies see before they spoke? On a superficial level, yes. Their words were based on things that they saw. But on any level beyond the visual, namely, interpreting correctly and “seeing” what was really going on, they spoke before they saw. This is why the first chapter of Eichah still has the letters ayin and peh in order. The first chapter represents the initial act of seeing. From that surface point of view, the order of seeing before speaking was preserved. However, on every level beyond physically seeing, represented by chapter two and onwards, the order was reversed. In terms of truthful interpretation, they spoke before seeing anything at all.

How interesting it is to consider in this light the way the Torah phrases its warning at the end of Parshas Shelach, which we say in the third paragraph of the Shema every day: “**וְלֹא תִתְּרוּ אַחֲרָיִךְ לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרָיִךְ עֵינֵיכֶם** – *And do not stray after your hearts and after your eyes.*”<sup>9</sup> The Torah mentions the heart before the eyes because what we want in our heart to be true very often affects what we then see with our eyes.

### **THE ORIGINAL EXILE**

As we have mentioned, the book which describes the calamities of the destruction of the Temple on the ninth of Av is named after its opening word, “*Eichah*,” which may be translated as “*alas*,”

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<sup>8</sup> *Bircas Peretz* (R' Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, the Steipler Gaon), Parshas Shelach.

<sup>9</sup> Bamidbar 15:39.

a word which bemoans calamity. According to the Midrash,<sup>10</sup> the origins of this terrible word are in the sin of Adam and Eve. After he has eaten from the tree of Knowledge, Hashem appears to Adam and opens with a startling question, “אַיִכָּה — *Where are you?*”<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew letters which form the word *ayeka* are identical to the letters of the word *eichah*.

These words of the Midrash need to be pondered. Although it is true that the letters of the two words are the same, nonetheless they remain two very different words with completely different meanings! The word *איכה* comes from the word “איך” which means “*how*”, while the word “אַיִכָּה” relates to the word “אייה - *where*”, with the letter *kaf* simply denoting someone being addressed in the second person! How does “*where*” become “*how*” or “*alas*”?

To understand the intent of the Midrash, we must first consider the more basic question of what exactly Hashem was doing by asking Adam where he is, when Hashem clearly knows. In asking Adam this question, Hashem is communicating a message to him regarding what he had done what has happened. The question of “*where are you*” means as follows: “I placed you in a garden where all the trees are of benefit to you with one exception, which is very harmful. By the time you came to eat from that tree, *your vision of your surroundings shifted* and you saw yourself as being in a garden where only one of the trees was of any benefit to you, and all the others were of no use whatsoever! That is a very different place than the one where you started. Where is that place? It is certainly not where I put you!”

Subsequent to this rebuke, Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden. On a certain level, in altering their vision of their surroundings as a prelude to them eating from the tree of knowledge, they had already left.

### **SETTING THE SCENE FOR FUTURE EXILE**

Thus, the shift in mindset represented by the question “*Ayeka* — *Where are you?*” is the root of the “*eichah*” lament over the exile from the Land of Israel, which was rooted in the sin of the spies. The description of the land that they brought back in no way matched that of the land itself. In superimposing their negative interpretation of events they were effectively describing a different place than the one they were in. In effect, we could say that this was the full measure of the tragedy with the spies: They set out to inspect the land of Israel, but they never got there!

In this way, the spies were sowing the seeds of exile. In future generations, the Jewish people may forfeit their right to dwell in Hashem’s Land if they are not really “*living there*” in the meaningful sense of the word. For the idea of “*exile of the mind*” can pertain to any individual in any setting. This idea is communicated concisely in a Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos*<sup>12</sup>, which states:

הקנאה התאוה והכבוד מוציאים את האדם מן העולם

*Jealousy, desire and honor remove a person from this world.*

At first glance, this Mishnah seems rather extreme. Do these things really physically “*remove one from the world*”? In truth, or course, they are capable of doing exactly that. The news on any given day will likely contain a story of someone who left — or was removed from — the world due to jealousy, desire or honor. That said, for most people who are not actually physically killed on account of these things, how do we understand the message of the Mishnah? How can a living person leave the world, and if he can, where does he go?

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10 *Bereishis Rabbah* 19:9.

11 *Bereishis* 3:9.

12 4:28.

The answer is, anyone who is chronically affected by one or more of these traits will indeed be removed from the world, for he exists in his own world, one which has only a marginal semblance of the world as it really is. If this disposition should take hold of the nation as a whole, the process of exile has been initiated.

### A LONELY CITY FULL OF PEOPLE

The opening verse of Eichah reads:

אֵיכָה יֹשְׁבָה בְּדָר הָעִיר רַבְּתֵי עִם הָיְתָה בְּאַלְמָנָה

*Alas, she sits alone, the city full of people, was like a widow.*

The standard interpretation of the verse is that it describes Jerusalem sitting alone, contrasting the glorious past with the desolate present; although she was once a city full of people, now she is like a widow.

R' Azaryah Fego,<sup>13</sup> however, explains that all the phrases in this verse are referring to the same time, which then reads: "Alas she sits alone, the city full of people," i.e., the prophet is describing Jerusalem as having been alone *even when she was full of people*.

The verse begins "אֵיכָה – Alas," but as we have seen it also asks, "Where are you"? With the streets teeming with people, where do they all live? The answer is, each one in their own world, pursuing their own fantasies and agendas, but there was no one who actually "lived in Jerusalem"; the city itself was alone. With its residents virtually in exile even while they occupied its houses and walked its streets, the consequence of physical exile was practically inevitable.

### REDEEMING VISION

The redemption from our exile, for which we are waiting, has many aspects to it. If the first step of exile takes place in the mind, then redemption likewise involves us being prepared to leave our own world behind and rejoin the world of Hashem – wherever we are, seeing to it that we are present in every place that we are found. May we soon merit the full return of the Jewish people to their land – in every sense of the word!

13 *Binah Le'itim*, drush 50.