

Youthful Living (Edited Transcript)

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Our Parsha, Shelach, relates how Moses sent the twelve spies into the Land of Israel. They are at the border, preparing to enter the Promised Land about which they have heard so much since they left Egypt. They send in the twelve spies, one from each tribe, and ten of them report back that although the land seems very prosperous, it is a land which devours its inhabitants (Caleb and Joshua, the righteous among the spies, came back with positive reports and tried to urge the people that G-d will help them and that they can, in fact, conquer the land). The spies describe the land as a cruel and difficult place and they tell the people that it cannot be conquered. The people lose faith and spend the night crying that they want to go back to Egypt. The entire plan of bringing the people from Egypt to Mount Sinai and on into the Land of Israel gets derailed; G-d punishes them and they remain in the desert for forty years until the next generation is worthy of entering the Promised Land.

The incident of the spies is one of the great calamities of Jewish history. According to the oral tradition, the spies returned on the night of Tisha B'Av, the first Tisha B'Av in history, foreshadowing the devastating consequences this sin had for years after.

The commentaries differ as to what exactly was the nature of this disastrous sin. The leaders of Israel - these spies were in fact the leaders of their respective tribes - did not rise to the occasion and displayed a gross lack of faith in Hashem. Rashi, based on the midrash, says that the criticism against the spies was that they did not learn a lesson from Miriam, Moshe's sister. The previous parsha concludes with Miriam's sin of speaking lashon hara about her brother, her resulting leprosy and her being sent out of the camp. The whole nation waited for her till she repented and was healed. Thus Miriam serves as a paradigmatic example of the consequences of speaking negatively about other people. The Midrash, which Rashi quotes, says that the spies should have learned from what happened to Miriam. They had seen what the consequences are for speaking lashon hara and, in spite of this, they spoke lashon hara about the Land of Israel.

Yet, we would think that losing faith in Hashem is much more severe than not learning a lesson from Miriam. In the grand scale of things, they had perpetrated one of the worst sins in Jewish history, and yet the Midrash seems to focus on minutiae - that they didn't learn a lesson from what had happened to Miriam. How can we understand this?

To answer this we must understand what led them astray in the first place.

The imperative of gleaning the messages from life's events

In this week's Haphtarah, the reading from the Prophets, we read about how Joshua sends two spies into Jericho to find out about the fortifications of the city, in order to facilitate their conquering of Jericho, which would then enable them to conquer the rest of the land. The spies are helped by one of the inhabitants of the city, a woman named Rachav, who is not Jewish and is in fact described as a zona, a prostitute. She looks after them and ensures the success of their mission at great personal risk; had the king of Jericho found out that she was handing over information, she'd have been charged with espionage and executed.

Why did Rachav risk her life for them? She did so because, as she said to them, she had heard of the tremendous miracles and wonders that Hashem had performed for the Jewish people - the splitting of the sea, the manna from heaven and the revelation at Mount Sinai -and was so inspired, she wanted to help them and become part of the Jewish people.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz of Mir discusses this striking contrast: on the one hand, we have the spies, leaders of the tribes of Israel who failed in their mission, and on the other hand we have Rachav the prostitute who is so inspired by what she heard that she risks her life to help them conquer the land. She only heard about the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the sea and the manna falling from heaven, whereas the tribal leaders had been there and experienced all these miracles firsthand and still they were

of little faith. How can we explain such a glaring contrast?

Rav Yerucham explains, based on the traditions of the teachers of the Mussar movement - the great movement of ethical introspection that arose in the 19th century within European yeshivas - that there are two forces in nature: growth and decay, and these two forces apply in the spiritual realm as well. To demonstrate this, he gives the example of two trees - a giant tree with very deep roots and lots of foliage and fruit, yet when it starts to decay, it's only a matter of time before it rots and collapses; and a tiny seedling that is just starting to grow and is sending down tiny roots. Which of these trees is more powerful?

Looking at the trees in their present state, we would think that the giant tree is much more powerful than the tiny seedling. But in truth, where the tree is holding in the present doesn't matter; the question is whether the tree is in a state of decay or a phase of growth.

This is also the case with people. The question isn't where they are holding now, but whether they are in a phase of decay or one of growth. The spies who were great leaders of Israel were in a phase of the decay, and so even though they were great, for them this incident was the beginning of the end. Rachav, on the other hand, may have been in the lowest position possible yet she was in the phases of growth, in the first stage of development.

Growth and decay

What are the defining characteristics of growth and decay? Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, says that our guiding light is the verse from the book of Hosheia, which says *Ki na'ar Yisrael va'ohavehu*, 'for Israel is like a young boy and I have loved him.' Rav Yisrael Salanter says that we learn from this verse that one has to strive to be youthful. You can have a very old person who is young at heart and a young person who is old in their state of mind. It's not in the state of the body but in the state of the mind and the spirit. The verse from Hosheia teaches us that G-d loves a youthful attitude and constant growth, not growing old and becoming stagnant. The definition of youth and old age, says Rav Yerucham, is really a question of growth or decay.

To explain this further, Rav Yerucham brings a Gemara about Rav Shimon Ha'amsuni, a great Talmudic sage who had developed a theory about how to interpret every single *et* that appears in the Torah. The Hebrew preposition *et*, spelled *aleph-tav*, does not have an obvious translation, and at times it appears it could be deleted from the verse without altering its meaning. For example, the very first verse of the Torah says *Bereishit bara Elokim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz*, 'In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.' Rav Shimon Ha'amsuni proposed that every time the Torah uses the word *et* it comes to include something that we would not have known otherwise. We know that no word in the Torah is superfluous, and so Rav Shimon went through the whole Torah, explaining every single *et*, till he came to the book of Devarim, chapter 10 verse 20, which says *Et Hashem Elokecha tira*, 'You shall fear the Lord your G-d.' This verse posed a problem to his theory, because how can the word *et* be understood in this context? How can it include fearing anything besides Hashem? So Rav Shimon concluded that his theory must be wrong, and he dispensed with his life's work. His students said to him, *rebbe what will become of all your work?* And he responded, in the same way that I will receive the reward for developing the theory, I will receive reward for walking away from it. Such was his commitment to truth. (Incidentally, Rabbi Akiva gave an answer to this apparent contradiction to Rav Shimon's theory, and explained that the seemingly superfluous or unexplainable *et* in the verse comes to include the obligation to fear Torah scholars.)

Rav Shimon Ha'amsuni teaches us about having an openness to change. Often we get stuck in our ways and are so convinced that we are right that we refuse to budge. Rav Shimon was prepared to change; after all those years of working on his theory, he had the open-mindedness to switch tracks. This, says Rav Yerucham, is the key to youthful thinking. Youthful thinking is about looking at the world with fresh eyes, being open to changing the way we think and to discovering new things. This is the power of growth, the opposite of decay where everything simply stagnates.

We can now understand the Rashi at the beginning of our parsha, which says that the spies were guilty of not learning from Miriam. They saw her speaking *lashon hara* and didn't learn a lesson from it. Their sin was that they were stuck in their ways; they weren't growing and innovating, they weren't thinking of how to apply these lessons to their own lives. The incident with Miriam had an inherent message for them, but they didn't learn from it because they lacked the openness to change.

What we learn from this is that we have to constantly grow and develop in the way that we live with Torah, and we must look for new, fresh ideas. The parsha we read every week mustn't be the same parsha as it was the year before; we must take a renewed interest in it. We have to learn from what is happening around us and apply it to our lives. What can we learn from a particular incident? How can we do our mitzvahs better? We must keep the commandments with a youthful attitude, and enhance the way we keep Shabbos, the way we daven, the way we do chesed and indeed all of the mitzvahs.

There are very young people who are set in their ways and whose minds are closed, and there are old people who are open-minded and want to learn, develop and grow in Hashem's Torah. Hashem wants us to be alive and youthful, to constantly develop a renewed interest in Torah, to learn new things and feel excitement and freshness in everything we do.