

This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Michael Chernick, HUC-JIR

This Shabbat we will have the privilege of reading פרשת שלח. As we all know, the פרשה begins with the episode of the spies sent by משה to explore the Land of Israel as a prelude to entering into it. The Hebrew verb used to describe the spies' activity is ת-ו-ר, to explore or wander. This verb appears more than ten times in the spy narrative that covers the events from the spies' original dispatch until God's decree that the people who accepted their negative report regarding the Land would spend forty years in the desert and die there for refusing to enter כנען. Repetition is the Torah's way of catching our attention and making us think about what the verb ת-ו-ר means.

In the spy narrative ת-ו-ר means exploration. Explorations can be subjective or objective. They can be limited to the immediate facts or they can place the facts within a larger context. Ten spies returned with an objective report based on the immediate facts that met their eyes. The Land was good; its produce was abundant—just look at its grapes, for example. But as big as its grapes are, that is the size of its inhabitants and fortresses.

We can never conquer them. Let's go back to Egypt. Why did we ever leave? Just to die in this desert? "And they disparaged the Land they had explored-- אָשַׁר תָּרוּ אֶתֶּהּ—to the children of Israel, saying, 'The Land we have passed through to explore-- לְתוֹר אֶתֶּהּ—is a Land that devours its inhabitants. All the nations we saw there were gigantic."

But two spies, יהושע and כלב, came back with a subjective report. It too was based on immediate facts but with a view that put those facts into a larger context. That larger context was God's powerful defeat of an empire greater than the inhabitants of כנען. Hadn't he defeated that empire by plagues and splitting a sea? Hadn't He shown His might on הַר סִינַי? If the Amalekites were one of the Canaanite tribes living in the Land, what of it? They had been defeated earlier at Rephidim by the very יהושע who now stood before the assembled people and told them that they could defeat them again.

The issue was whether one was to believe what was before one's eyes or to believe what was part of one's memories. The people chose to believe

what was before their eyes. By making that disastrous choice they denied God's power as it had been displayed in the past, and by doing so gave up hope in His power for the future. The result:

בְּמִסְפַּר הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר תָּרַתֶּם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם יוֹם  
לְשָׁנָה יוֹם לְשָׁנָה תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת עֹונֹתֵיכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה  
וַיִּדְעַתֶּם אֶת תְּבוּאַתִּי:  
אֲנִי ה' דִּבַּרְתִּי אִם לֹא זֹאת אֶעֱשֶׂה לְכָל הָעֵדָה הָרָעָה  
הַזֹּאת הַנּוֹעְדִים עָלַי בְּמִדְבַּר הַזֶּה יִתְמוּ וְיָשֵׁם יָמָתוֹ:

You shall bear your punishment for forty years, corresponding to the number of days -- forty days -- that you scouted the land: a year for each day. Thus you shall know what it means to thwart Me.

I, the Eternal, have spoken: Thus will I do to all that wicked band that has banded together against Me: in this very wilderness they shall die to the last man."

It is for this reason that the verb ת-ו-ר appears again at the close of today's סדרה in what seems to be a context having no relation to the episode of the spies namely, לא תתורו אחרי פרשת ציצית. There we are told לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם "Do not wander after your heart and after your eyes."

Immediate impressions and surface appearances do not do justice to most of

what we experience in our lives. There is a tendency to focus on the aggravations and frustrations in life, as the spies focused on the difficulties of conquering ארץ כנען. We tend to forget how many ברכות and חסדים, blessings and acts of God's loving kindness we have received over a lifetime and usually on a daily basis. Therefore, God asks of us, "Do not wander after your heart and after your eyes" like the spies. Rather, like כלב and יהושע look at the deeper reality of life and know that God is present there. A life of that kind of faith allows us to say as כלב and יהושע did, "Have no fear...for ה' is with us."

Shabbat Shalom!

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