

פרשת שלח

OVERVIEW

Israel approaches the borders of the holy land. There is no question that various hostile elements in the local population will resist the entry of the Jewish nation in the promised land. G-d instructs Moshe to designate a representative of each tribe to explore the land in preparation for the Jewish settlement. The twelve scouts leave on their mission. They remain in the land for forty days.

On their return they show the people samples of gigantic products of the land and voice their fears (with the exception of Joshua and Kaleb) that it would be impossible to conquer the giant warriors living there. A deep depression takes hold of the people. They demand the return to Egypt in order to avoid certain death in the desert. In vain Joshua and Kaleb attempt to calm the people by appealing to them to place their trust in G-d's help. Their plea falls on deaf ears. G-d condemns the entire generation to spend the rest of their lives wandering through the desert until their children, matured through the experiences of their fathers, are ready to enter the land. Now the people acknowledge their error and decide to attack the warriors in the land. But it is too late and their spontaneous attempt to crush the enemy ends with a bloody defeat at the border of the land.

After a brief description of the manner in which sacrifices were to be offered after the conquest, the text gives an account of a desecration of the Sabbath. A man who gathered wood on the Sabbath was put to death in the presence of all the people. - The Sidrah concludes with the law of Tzitzit that serves as a steady reminder to fulfill all of G-d's commandments.

COMMENTARY

The Scouts

The twelve tribal representatives were to prepare the ground for entry into the land. To facilitate the conquest, G-d could have elected to subdue the local population as He subdued Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Israel had to learn to use its own initiative and not to rely blindly on G-d's help. "Do not rely on miracles" is a fundamental rabbinical principle.

The messengers return bearing bad news: "The people in the land are too strong for us..... the cities are extremely great fortresses..... the land consumes its inhabitants..... there we saw the giants..... and we are as grasshoppers in our eyes.....". The commentators reproach the messenger for having confronted the people with the bad news instead of directly informing Moshe and Aharon and obtain their advice on how to handle the delicate situation.

All this happened in the night of the 9th day of Av. As the people moaned and wept, G-d exclaimed (according to the Midrash) "you weep in vain in this night, but there will come another night of the 9th day of Av when your cries will be justified". This, of course, refers to the destruction of the temple that occurred on Tisha b'Av.

"Send out men for you that they may explore the land of Canaan". Here the stress is on 'l'cha', 'for you', reminiscent of a similar grammatical construction "lech l'cha" in the context of G-d's command to Abraham to leave his father's house "for yourself". The analogy is obvious: Israel in the desert, Abraham in Ur. In both cases a definitive break with the past is needed to prepare for a future that will be uncertain and full of unknown dangers. Abraham embarks on the course of an exacting exile.

He is sustained by his firm trust in G-d. Israel, barely liberated, is expected to wage a war of conquest and has but one weapon for the bold undertaking: its firm trust in G-d. Both situations amount to a test of moral courage, of blind faith in divine assistance. In both cases we are able to judge the moral fiber of the participants: when Abraham leaves his parental home, it is "for himself", to display his true inner strength - and it is "for himself" that Moshe sends out the scouts to test the true dimension of the people's trust in G-d.

Viewed from a strictly human perspective it is little wonder that the ten scouts were overwhelmed and depressed by the discrepancy between the numbers and strength of the enemy versus those of Israel. It is in such a situation when Israel must learn to maintain a calm that renders it so different from the other nations. Try the "impossible"? But what do we call "possible"? Could it be measured purely by the human experience?

The episode of the scouts provides the answer – the same action is attempted twice: the first was with G-d's approval and this would have made it "possible". It failed because of Israel's lack of faith in the success of the "possibility". The second attempt was undertaken without G-d's approval (14:40) and it was bound to fail. The lesson is clear: only G-d's approving Will can guarantee success - its absence can bring only failure.

Those responsible meet with harsh divine punishment. The entry in the land is delayed by forty years, years of lessons learned in the "school of the desert". Again the question of "possible" vs. the "impossible" arises. Under any circumstances the survival of three million souls in the stark desert conditions is a challenge to any human experience. (In contrast, nomadic tribes who populate the region in our time number less than half a million and are used to change their

campsites at a moment's notice). The Israelites were a cumbersome mass of people who were in no way prepared for the challenges presented by the forbidding desert. They were beset by problems of shortages of water and food supplies and were constantly threatened by armed bands. Against the background of such dismal conditions, one positive element stands out as a shining beacon: the Will of G-d that made life in the desert "possible". This was the great lesson of the 40 years in the desert.

None of the men above the age of 20 was to enter the land. Only their children were able to participate in the conquest of Canaan. It almost seems as if G-d had decided on a new start on the road to statehood in the holy land. We are reminded of the generation of the flood that was doomed because of its evil ways. Similarly, the generation of the desert had failed its mission. It was beneficial for the future of Israel to replace the old generation with new blood and provide a fresh impetus for the prosperity of G-d's nation in G-d's land.

The Duty-of Challa

Among the three major duties of the Jewish woman is that of taking "Challa" (15:17-21). Having kneaded the dough, she takes a handful and burns it in the fire. This act reminds of the ceremony of Challa that was given to the priest at the time of the temple, who consumed it in a state of purity. This corresponds to levies for standing and harvested corn. Separating Challa from the dough followed by the baking of bread elevates the home's spiritual standing. Our bread must never serve purely selfish and materialistic purposes. G-d will bestow His loving kindness on those Jewish homes that are committed to the observance of all duties that are the essential ingredients of Jewish living.

The Man who gathered wood on the Sabbath

Our Sidrah places this episode between the two collective revolts (those of the scouts and of Korach's band), as a demonstration of individual acts of Sabbath desecrations. Gathering wood is an example of prohibited activities such as cutting, assembling and transporting the bundles. As the man performed the forbidden act in public there were no extenuating circumstances in his favor. Before sentence is handed down the evidence must clearly show the perpetrator's full awareness of the seriousness of his act. This is established by the testimony of two witnesses who explicitly warned him before his planned action. In this case, the only question was the manner of execution.

The Fringes

"So that you may remember and do all My commandments and become holy unto your G-d" (15:40). The Tzitzit-command contains two prescriptions: to attach fringes on the four corners of a rectangular garment, and to put a double thread on the fringes that must be white on one side and sky-blue on the other.

On each corner there are eight threads, that is to say four threads doubled over in the middle and passed through a hole in the corner of the garment and knotted together so that seven white threads and one blue thread hang down. (The blue color was present in all priestly garments; its exact composition based on animal products is no longer known - thus today we have only white threads).

The symbolic character of Tzitzit

Our garments are designated to be the bearers of this symbol of obedience

towards G-d. For they both owe their origin to the first recorded act of disobedience (Bereshit 3:7). When Adam decided on an action that would enable him to choose between good and evil, he lost the innocence of pure living and developed a sense of shame and chastity. The garment provided him with the means to display human dignity and it also served as a perpetual reminder of his first moral lapse. Thus the Tzitzit that are attached to the Jewish garment represent its true purpose: we must never use our human intellect to evaluate good or evil – it is G-d Who charts our way through life.

The Eight Fringes

The seven white fringes symbolize man's manifold activities, both during the week and the revitalizing peace of the Sabbath. They draw their strength and stability from the eighth thread of sky-blue wool, representing the Presence of G-d in our daily lives. At the same time we understand why the duty of Tzitzit applies only during the day and not during the night. The symbolic character of the sky-blue fringe manifests itself in the turmoil of life's problems and challenges that the Jew meets with dignity and unshakeable confidence, led by divine guidance.

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