

A Doomed Plan

Sadly, the Torah portion of Shelach is dominated by the sin of the spies, and the eventual repercussions that ensued. This period of time was an indelible stain on the identity of the Jewish people. Even today, when commemorating the destruction of the Temples on the Ninth of Av, we recall as well on that day the decree handed down to the generation of Jews who exited Egypt received the Torah. Upon receiving this decree, where they would die in the wilderness, we are witness to an unexpected reaction by the Jewish people, followed by a plan doomed to fail.

After hearing the decree, the initial reaction seemed appropriate (Bamidbar 14:39):

“Moses related all these words to the children of Israel, and the people mourned greatly”

It would appear this was a pivotal moment, as the opportunity to repent was there for the taking. The Torah continues (ibid 40):

*“**They arose early in the morning** and ascended to the mountain top, saying, “We are ready to go up to the place of which the Lord spoke, for we have sinned.”*

It is important to note that they waited until morning, an indication that this was not simply a purely emotional reaction to God’s decree. There was some thought involved, and a seemingly sincere admission of sin, in their desire to enter Israel at that moment. Moshe, though, responds that this plan cannot succeed. God would not be with them, as they had *“turned away from Hashem”*. What was the response from those involved in this plan? (ibid 44)

*“They **defiantly (vayapilu)** ascended to the mountain top, but the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord and Moses did not move from the camp.”*

Their plan failed, many were killed, and the Torah moves on.

The Torah’s detailed description of the sin of the spies allows us to analyze and internalize, creating an awareness of that which causes a breach in the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The same must be said about this final sin, the overt disobedience against the strict command of God. Why did they do it?

The turning point of the story lies in the use of *“vayapilu”*, as noted by Rashi (ibid):

“a term connoting insolence; similarly (Hab. 2:4), “behold, it is insolent,” in old French, engres, a term denoting arrogant boldness....The Midrash Tanchuma (Buber Shelach addendum 19)

interprets it as a term denoting darkness; they [the Israelites] went in darkness, without permission."

Rashi offers two overall interpretations of this word. The first demonstrates the attitude of the people. However, the one from the Midrash does not seem to make much sense at first glance. What is the darkness being spoke of here? How is this tied to their lack of permission?

One would think that upon hearing the horrible news of the decree, at the very least the people would engage in the process of repentance. Indeed, the Torah seems to explicitly endorse this assumption. However, when we look at the order of the verse, there is a hint as to the lack of complete repentance. Rather than the verse begin with the admission of sin, followed by the desire to enter into the Land of Israel, the plan to enter comes first. Their focus seemed to be solely on executing the plan, the issue of repentance relegated to a secondary position. What then was their plan and their motivation? It could be the people involved in this attempt were not at first overtly challenging God's decree. They recognized the horrific nature of their sin. They also assumed that repentance should bring about a change in God's plan. After all, one of the hallmarks of God's mercy, as exhibited through forgiveness (*kapara*), is the changing of a verdict. These people expected that the decree would naturally be overturned through their repentance. They acted based on this supposition, refusing to believe that there are some sins that are so heinous, God will not change His decree. Their repentance hinged on the belief that it would bring about a reversal of said decree; therefore, the admission of sin follows the formulation of the plan.

Moshe confronts them head on, challenging their assumption. God would not be with them, they would fail, and their plan was a mistake. Moshe was giving them a clear warning, ensuring that their next step would be one based on all the facts, so to speak. When faced with the path of heeding Moshe's warning versus going ahead with their plan, they chose the hopeless path. It is this demonstration of arrogance that lies at the heart of Rashi's first explanation. The curtain was pulled back, so to speak, and the emotion driving them was now on full display.

However, it is Rashi's second explanation that requires a deeper understanding. The sin being committed here was, ironically, the reverse of the attitude they first exhibited at the time of the spies. When faced with the challenge presented by the spies, where the "odds" of the Jewish people being able to enter and conquer the Land of Israel seemed daunting, they recoiled. There was no way they could succeed. Their security in God was in fact an illusion. They were destined to die if they entered under God's conditions. Now, when faced with the decree, and Moshe's subsequent denial of their aspirations, they resolved that they would succeed without

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God at all. They could pull off the conquering of the Land of Israel, summoning some underlying courage. Sadly, their arrogance blinded them to the reality. The ability of the Jewish people to succeed in their future entering the Land of Israel would be based on Divine Providence. Without God's assistance and guidance, there was no chance they could succeed. This is the darkness being referred to by the Midrash. They sought to use the natural world in fulfilling this plan, thinking they could succeed. In fact, without God's assistance, they were wandering in the dark, unable to realize the reality that the only chance of success lie with God. In many ways, the plan of the Jewish people here was in fact the final step in the sin started with the report of the spies. There was a resistance in placing their security in God, and their refusal ultimately led to the tragic results.