

The Lesson of the Maapilim

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

In the aftermath of the Jewish people accepting the report of the spies there is a small and perplexing incident. I refer to the story of the Maapilim who, as a reaction to the punishment of spending 40 years in the desert, want to rectify the error of the Jewish people by entering Israel and fighting, as was the original plan. Moshe tells them that this is not Hashem's will and they ignore him and are all killed in battle by two indigenous tribes (Bamidbar 14:40-45). While it is true that they ignored Moshe's instructions, at first glance the objection to their suggestion seems strange. What was wrong with their reaction? Upon hearing that they had done the wrong thing by accepting the negative report of the spies and giving up hope of conquering Israel, they immediately admit their mistake and are ready to cement their repentance by going into Israel and acting on their regret by fighting for the land. Isn't that exactly the type of recognition of guilt and restorative behavior that constitutes repentance? Sounds like some pretty great Teshuva (repentance) to me. The answer, of course, is that they were not following instructions, but there is a deeper lesson here.

The beginning of the answer is understanding what would motivate them to ignore Moshe. They showed a wonderful sense of regret for not doing the right thing initially and suggest an idea for how they might rectify the situation. Moshe tells them that isn't what Hashem wants – what would keep them from listening to Moshe? I believe this incident speaks to our fundamental need to control things. This incident reveals this basic human need in one of its most surprising manifestations. Even when we are willing to admit and repair our errors, we still want to do so on our own terms. This may be connected to our fear of vulnerability. Brene Brown, in her famous TED talk¹, speaks about the fear of vulnerability but also the fact that it takes a powerful person to exhibit vulnerability. Our deep desire to control things when we admit wrong likely stems from our anxiety over being so vulnerable in our admission of our errors.

The Maapilim needed to admit their wrongdoing and cede control to Hashem for how they could rectify things. They did not get to control how they made things right – this was in the hands of the One they had sinned against. This likely would have put them well outside their comfort zone and perhaps they were unable to do so. This sense of needing to stretch ourselves (in this case through being vulnerable) is really an engine of spiritual growth that is fundamental to the Torah. Years ago, I was interviewed by a group of middle school students at a local community day school. They were conducting a class project where small groups would interview rabbis of different denominations to better understand how different streams of Judaism differed in thought and practice. One of the young ladies asked me, as an Orthodox rabbi, if there were any parts of the Torah I had trouble understanding or keeping. I told them that there were aspects that didn't feel as comfortable to me or even bothered me, however, I felt it was important that we stretch ourselves to fit the Torah rather than stretching the Torah to fit us. When they wrote thank you emails (they had a good teacher who also stressed etiquette) this young lady told me that this idea had really struck a chord with her.

¹ The Power of Vulnerability, Brene Brown - https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en

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The idea of ceding control, especially when we have made an error, may help to explain something that always puzzled me about sefer Melachim (the book of Kings). There is a cycle that takes place a number of times in Melachim where a king sins and is told that his house will no longer rule but that this loss of control will occur only during his son's reign and not his own. It first occurs to Shlomo who is told that his son, Rechovom, is the one who will lose most of the tribes of Israel when the kingdom is split during his rule (see Chapter 11). In chapter 16 again, we have Baasah who has sinned and receives a prophecy that he will be punished, yet we find that his son, Elah, is the one who is murdered and has the kingdom taken from his house. This always seemed odd. In Devarim 24:16, it seems that people are held responsible for their own sins, and we don't punish children for the sins of their parents. Of course, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 27b) is clear² that this is only if they do not repeat the errors of their parents and in these cases it seems clear that they kings were no better than their fathers. Still, we may understand why punishing the next generation does not violate the rules of divine law, but it does not explain why Hashem would not just punish the perpetrator. Just because punishing the child is an option, doesn't make it the best one. Perhaps the answer is tied to this same concept.

Recently, I dropped off my oldest child at the airport for her to fly by herself across the country, knowing that in a few years it will be across the world. I had a moment where I felt incredibly powerless. I realized that often I convince myself that I have more control than I really do but when we have children, especially as they become independent, it is hard to keep that illusion of control. Perhaps this can help to explain the reason for punishing the children in Melachim. Perhaps it is the same idea as the Maapilim: in the punishment/rectification there needs to be a sense that we do not have control and that is best shown through the children where it is clearer, and we can't fool ourselves. In telling these kings that their children would lose the kingship, Hashem sends a clear message that they have made mistakes and that they are very much not in control.

This concept is also apparent in the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) according to Rashi's explanation. Rashi (Shemot 31:18) understands that the command to build the Mishkan was a direct result of the sin of the golden calf. Over and over during the building of the Mishkan the Torah says that they built the Mishkan "as Hashem had commanded." Many commentaries seek to explain this repetitive phrase and its significance. We can suggest³ that this is exactly the point the Torah is trying to convey. The Jewish people were able to recognize their sin and rectify it in exactly the way they were told. They were able to overcome the need to control the rectification process (unlike the Maapilim). It is noteworthy that a creative endeavor, such as

² Really, the perceives contradiction between the Aseret HaDibrot where it says that Hashem punishes up to the fourth generation and this pasuk in devarim (that the Gemara seeks to explain) is a matter of considerable discussion. The targum, followed by Rashi, says that children are punished even for their parent's sin when they continue the sin of their forefathers, just like the Gemara. However, there are other explanations. The Rashbam understands that the verse in Devarim refers to human punishment in court where we can only punish the person for their own sins, but divine justice can include the child being punished for a parent's sin. The Ramban understands this stringency to be specific to the sin of idol worship (all commentaries in Shemos Ch. 20).

³ See the Brisker Rav on Parshat Ki Tisa who has a similar approach to this issue

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designing and building a portable temple, is a place where this challenge can be most acute. We want to control the creative process and own it. Building the Mishkan was an incredible example of a creative process and maybe it was picked specifically since it was more challenging to cede that control to Hashem.

The demand that we try to overcome our innate desire to control things and embrace the vulnerability of learning from our mistakes is a substantial ask. Really, this is the beauty of the Torah, in its role as a handbook for being the best people we can be. May we never lose the ability and desire to stretch ourselves and grow in the ways of the Torah!