

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5781, 2021:

Of Anashim and Meraglim

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shelaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with Moshe sending the tribal leaders of our people to *Eretz Yisrael* in order to discover the beauty and bounty of the land. He did this with great anticipation, coupled with the conviction that he would soon be leading our nation to the Promised Land. Had this happened, he would have been the *Mashiach*, the builder of the eternal *Beit HaMikdash*, and the entire world would have recognized the truth of monotheism, the greatness of the Almighty, and our special role as the *am hanivchar*.

What, then, took place, that nearly brought Hashem's plans for our people to a screeching halt? The answer is starkly clear: We failed to live up to His expectations, and the goals He established for us. Rashi (1040-1105) teaches us that Moshe, with Hashem's acceptance, sent forth the leaders of each tribe to undertake a thorough reconnaissance of the Land:

Send for yourself: According to your own understanding. I am not commanding you, but if you wish, you may send. Since the Israelites had come [to Moshe] and said, "Let us send men ahead of us," as it says, "All of you approached me..." (*Sefer Devarim* 1:22, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These were mighty and prestigious men who seemed determined to carry out the task set

before them. After all, the Torah calls the tribal princes “*anashim*” (“men”), a label Rashi suggests was an honorific appellation that bespoke their righteousness. These men were unquestionably the greatest leaders of the *Dor Hamidbar* (the Generation of the Desert). Their duty was defined as exploring, searching, examining, and discovering. This is borne out by *pasukim* 13:2, 13: 21, and 13:25, wherein we find the terms “*v'yaturu*,” “*vayaturu*,” and “*meture*” — all expressions of exploration and discovery.

Something, however, went terribly wrong. Inexplicably, with the exception of Yehoshua and Kaleb, these great leaders ceased to be *anashim* and morphed into something else entirely, namely, *meraglim* (spies). This transformation is clearly portrayed in the first chapter of *Sefer Devarim* 22-24:

And all of you approached me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us so that they will **search out** the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come.” And the matter pleased me; so I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe. And they turned and went up to the mountain, and they came to the valley of Eshkol and **spied it out** (*va'yiraglu otah*).

The *Meraglim* failed to maintain the proper spiritual perspective, which caused them to squander one of the greatest opportunities ever given to humankind. Instead of fulfilling their spiritual mission to discover the essence of *Eretz Yisrael*, they acted like mere spies on a “black-ops” military mission. Looking at everything through the lens of the laws of Nature, they seemed to forget that, as Hashem’s *am hanivchar*, our entire existence is solely dependent upon His *hashgacha* (Divine Providence). This resulted in their viewing their role solely in military terms, instead of as an opportunity to be *mekadash shame shamayim* (sanctify Hashem’s name) by wholeheartedly fulfilling Moshe’s mandate. Little wonder

then, that the *Meraglim* returned to the people and issued a report that focused on “the facts on the ground,” rather than the potential of what might be. In short, their myopic vision prevented them from seeing a glorious, Hashem-suffused future.

Sadly, the people’s response to the *Meraglim*’s report changed the course of history:

The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night. All the children of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon, and the entire congregation said, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this desert. Why does the L-rd bring us to this land to fall by the sword; our wives and children will be as spoils. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?” They said to each other, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:1-4)

Our forebears’ capitulation was met by swift and angry words from the Almighty:

The L-rd said to Moshe, “How long will this people provoke Me? How much longer will they not believe in Me after all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with a plague and annihilate them; then I will make you into a nation, greater and stronger than they.” (14:11-12)

Fortunately, just as he had done at the time of the Golden Calf debacle, Moshe interceded on our behalf and saved our nation from extermination:

Now, please, let the strength of the L-rd be increased, as You spoke, saying. “The L-rd is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgression...Please forgive the iniquity of this nation in accordance with your abounding kindness, as You have borne this people from Egypt until now.” And the L-rd said, “I have forgiven them in accordance with your word.” (14:17-20)

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6, and the subsequent discussion in the Babylonian Talmud, teach us that the *Meraglim* returned from their journey to *Eretz Yisrael* on the night of Tisha b’Av. Although the people were saved through Moshe’s pleading, their reaction to the *Meraglim*’s report led directly to the divine decree that forbade the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert) from entering the Promised Land: “*b’Tisha b’Av nigzar al avotainu she’lo yichnasu*

l'aretz." In pathos-packed prose, our Sages note that *lail Tisha b'Av* was set aside for destruction ever since that moment. Indeed, both *batei mikdash* (Holy Temples) were destroyed on this day (586 BCE and 70 CE respectively). Then, too, the Spanish Expulsion (1492), as well as World War I (1914-1919), which arguably laid the foundations for World War II and the Holocaust, began on this most ill-fated of days. Amidst uncountable tears and immeasurable rivers of blood, the monumental failure of the *Meraglim*, and the faithless behavior of our ancestors, continue to reverberate until our own day.

May the time come soon and in our days when we are finally free of the *Meraglim*, and the stirring words of *Dovid HaMelech* will be fulfilled: "*Yisrael ba'tach b'Hashem ezram u'maginam Hu*" ("The Jewish people trust in Hashem; He is their help and their shield, *Sefer Tehillim* 115:9) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.