

How could we have sunk so low as to reject God's Promised Land?

Few groups in the Bible begin a project so full of promise and optimism, only to disintegrate so swiftly into shame and disgrace, as the 'spies' in this week's Sidra (Numbers Cap. 13). My aim is not to rationalize or justify the sins of our ancestors as recorded in the Book of Numbers, especially not those of this ill-fated expedition to reconnoiter the Land of Canaan. A sin is a sin, a blunder remains a blunder; calumny, lies and betrayals leave a stench long after they are gone. And yet, the profuse detail with which the Torah embellishes every stage of the narrative invites, nay, begs us to confront our own prejudices; to wrestle with the text. Surely it cannot be taken at face value?

We are taught to express unquestioning faith in the Torah and in its interpreters and commentators, to accept their reading of the text at face value - and they have nothing nice to say about the spies. On the other hand, we are constantly warned against assuming we understand the motives of those exalted people described in these texts, our ancient ancestors. What ought we to do? Should we regard the spying episode as a total failure, and are we commanded to see ourselves as failures for having been a part of that generation, in spirit?

I think not. Every noble act we ascribe to our heroic predecessors was a risky endeavor at the time; each success was once a dubious gamble. Furthermore, many historical events were considered failures in the short term, yet with the passage of centuries and on reflection, they have come to be seen in a more positive light.

The worst thing ever said about us as a nation was said by God to Moses at the affair of the Golden Calf. It is recorded in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 32:9): 'God said to Moses, "I have seen the people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people."' We took God's insult and made it into our greatest virtue and asset, thereby proving that it was never expressed as an insult, though it may have read like that at the time. We're stiff-necked, yeah - Great! See what we've achieved with it in thirty five centuries? Just look at us!

In the previous week's Sidra (BeHa'alotcha) we examined the case of Aaron and Miriam who spoke against Moses. We saw how their sin was not so much a conscious decision to err, but more a question of allowing themselves to follow a baser instinct, chasing a strange and disembodied pleasure. We also saw how their sin, although recorded as a transgression, was *L'Shem Shomayim* - in heaven's name in the truest sense.

This week's story is much worse. The spies were not acting out some visceral and unnamed longing; they thought in advance about what they were going to say and do. They planned it deliberately - it wasn't spontaneous. How can such a vile deed work itself out for good even in the long run? How can it become something positive? Can a sin done with malice-aforethought possibly redeem itself?

The narrative would seem to indicate that such a thing is not possible. The spies died horrible and gruesome deaths, while everyone else was condemned to a delayed but equally certain demise. All the promises God made to us in Egypt - to bring us forth and deliver us all into the land He had promised our forefathers, to give us as an inheritance - became null and void. We were all punished during the following forty years, as God told us, 'In this wilderness your carcasses will fall - every one of you twenty years old or more, who was counted in the census and who has complained against Me.' (Num. 14:29)

Since all but two of the men in that generation (namely, Joshua and Caleb) died there in the wilderness, we must assume that all the rest of us complained and were duly penalized. When the

biblical narrative causes such *Yi'ush* – desolation and despair in us who merely read about it, can we even imagine the feelings of the protagonists, the Israelites in the wilderness upon realizing what a shambles they had made of their hopes, and how far beyond repair they had reduced everything?

I am reminded of a famous conversation between the two Hasidic masters, the brothers Reb Zusya and Reb Elimelech. They argued for some time over the following: one brother asked, 'We were all there inside Adam. All the souls who would be born until the end of time were combined and pooled within Adam's soul. How then did we allow him to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? How could we have sat by letting him destroy everything, without interfering to save him, us and the entire world?'

'Had we intervened,' replied the other brother, 'Adam would never have been able to get over his certainty that 'if-only' he had eaten of that tree he would have become a god. If only we had not prevented him he might have become a titan. He would have blamed us for keeping him down from fulfilling his potential; he would have pondered the 'what-ifs' for all eternity.'

We are taught that we all stood at Sinai, even those who are born today. It thus stands to reason that when the spies brought back their wicked report, we all complained against God. How come none of us did what Zusya and Elimelech thought of doing - standing up and shouting, 'Hey! I want to go into the Land of Canaan, now, without delay!'

To think that I was there and said nothing is too shameful to bear, and it doesn't feel like me. It's hard to imagine myself so dumb, accepting or stifled. It's out of character. Surely something else must have been going on, for me to have fallen in with the group-think to such repulsive levels of self-pity, despair and disloyalty. In order to explain events we need to look at the textual continuity of the Sidra with the following chapters.

Immediately after the story of the spies, we are given the chapter of the *NESACHIM* – Libations. These are offerings of wine which were poured on the base of the sacrificial altar in the Temple at the same time as the offering itself was burned on the pyre. There has to be a very good reason these two chapters are juxtaposed side by side: together, they form a subtext which can help us explain those aspects of the spy story we find so puzzling.

The Midrash says the following:

This is how R. Tanchum b. Abba (in the name of Hanina, father of R. Acha) unwrapped the chapter of Libations. He said, 'This is why R. Hanina opened with the quote from Ecclesiastes (9:7) 'Go your way - eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works,' because he was connecting the Libations with the story of the *AKEDA* – Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22). When God said, 'Go your way, etc.' He was actually talking to Abraham.

God commanded him to sacrifice his only son, and Abraham rose early in the morning, taking Isaac with alacrity to offer him up on Mount Moriah at God's bidding. When God subsequently told him, 'Do not raise your hand to the lad,' Abraham said, 'Master of the World, was it for nothing You told me to offer up my child, my only one, the one I love?'

God explained to him that it was not for nothing. In fact, the reason for the *AKEDA* was to make the whole world aware of Abraham's greatness, that it was not just his son that Abraham was offering at the *AKEDA*, it was his own life and heart and soul that he stood ready to sacrifice.

Abraham said, 'Master of the World, it's impossible for me to descend from this place without *some* sort of sacrifice.' God responded, 'Your sacrifice has been waiting since the Six Days of Creation.' Abraham opened his eyes and saw the ram. For, as our sages have taught,

Abraham's ram was created at twilight on the Sixth Day of Creation. Abraham took it and offered it up as a burnt offering, as the text tells us 'in place of his son'. Now since the verse tells us that Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering, was it really necessary to remind us it was in place of his son?

Abraham said, 'Master of the World, behold I slaughter this ram before You, let it be as though my son is slaughtered. See this blood I sprinkle [let it be] as though it were Isaac's blood I sprinkle for You. This skin I flay from the ram, see it as Isaac's skin flayed for You. This meat I burn, regard it as my son's ashes heaped up on the altar.'

God replied, 'I swear it was really your son, whom you offered up first. This ram is merely in place of him.'

Abraham said, 'Master of the World, I am not moving from here until You promise to me that You will never, ever test me again. For had I not listened to You I would have lost everything I worked so hard for in life.'

According to R. Hanina, God said, 'I swear, it is true, had you not listened the way you did, you would indeed have lost everything you worked so hard for all your life.' At that time, God swore an oath to Abraham that He would never again test him, saying to Abraham, 'Go your way - eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works,' (Eccl. 9:7).

It is no coincidence, says the Izbicy rebbe, that this Midrashic reading of the *AKEDA* story is situated here and not in Genesis, where it rightfully belongs. The chapter concerning Libations is very different from every other aspect of Temple sacrifice. Generally speaking, Libations were wine offerings accompanying a main sacrifice. Peace or thanksgiving offerings brought by individuals, or communal sacrifices paid for with public funds, sin offerings and burnt offerings, all required Libations of wine. Libations could also be brought as stand-alone offerings by individuals who were so inclined. Libations differ from other sacrifices in this: only a Jew may bring a Libation stand-alone offering. Gentiles are welcome to bring peace-offerings *accompanied* by Libations, but may not offer a Libation stand-alone.

The reason, explains the Izbicy, is that no gentile will allow him or herself to be vanquished by God, the way a Jew will do. As we discussed in last week's Sidra, a Jew's very essence pivots around this availability to God. We say 'Yes' to God, whatever the mission. We don't ask why or wherefore. We don't demand recognition, nor do we expect the laws of nature to be rewritten in our favor or the rules of consequences to be bent on our behalf. We simply offer ourselves saying, '*HINENI* – Here I am.'

After the story of the spies, after we had been condemned to die in the wilderness without ever entering the Promised Land, we were given the chapter of Libations to restore our soul. The chapter can hardly be mentioned in rabbinic literature without someone prefacing it with the verse from Ecclesiastes, 'Go your way - eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart,' because God wants us to cheer up. And not merely cheer up, but to be merry! Why? 'For God has already accepted your works.' This is another one of those incidents when we did the will of God by sinning to the core of our souls, with malice aforethought and the intent to defy God. In giving us the commandment to bring Libations with all our sacrifices and especially with the caveat that only a Jew may offer an unaccompanied Libation, God is hinting to us not to take this whole episode to heart. God's delight can be our delight - His merriment, ours.

The Midrash is not out of context, when it that places Abraham's demand (that God swear an oath to him not to test him again) here at the story of the spies. The sages are teaching us another

great mystery. We, the Jewish People refused to move from that place until God swore to us He would never again have us commit another collective sin like this one. He would not demand it, or engineer it, or even let it happen.

These last thirty-five hundred years or so have demonstrated that while we may sin individually, in groups or communities, the Jewish People as a single entity have never rejected God or His commandments. We have never turned our backs on God the way we did that night in the wilderness.

And to tell the truth, it would have been very embarrassing for God, if we had turned up on the doorstep at the Land of Canaan, expecting to be allowed in. After all, we were a generation early having been redeemed from Egypt before the appointed time. God had not been able to let things slide another minute, for we had been in danger of disintegration. So God found Himself with a nation on His hands in the wilderness, and nowhere to take them because as He had promised Abraham (Gen. 15:16), 'the fourth generation will return here – because the sin of the Emorites will not have run its course until then.' We of the Exodus were only the third generation.

It was just another example of the Jewish People - us, you and I being available to God, to be the villains of any narrative if that is what advances God's plan. And though our hangover the following morning was cosmic, although we felt we had revealed ourselves corrupt to the core of our very souls, contemptible and unworthy of redemption, nevertheless we saved the day for God, and that's what counts.