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*With  
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ב"ה

Parshas Shelach

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## Holiness and Hollywood

Out of all of the events in the entire Torah, none has been more historically devastating to the collective Jewish people than the story of the meraglim. Nothing was even remotely as catastrophic as the negative report the twelve spies gave. Nothing brought with it nearly as many negative ramifications as this episode did. If not for the spies, the Jewish people would have been free to enter the land of Israel easily. If not for the spies, we would have erected the Bais Hamikdash as soon as we entered the land. If not for the spies, Moshe would have led us into the land instead of Yehoshua. If not for the spies, our spiritual utopian bliss we were promised would have been actualized.

And yet, because of the spies, none of this materialized. Because of the spies, the entire generation was killed out. Because of the spies, we had to wait an excruciating forty years to enter Eretz Yisrael. Because of the spies, Moshe did not lead us into the land. Because of the spies, the building of the Bais Hamikdash was prolonged hundreds of years. Because of the spies, the spiritual utopia we were supposed to enjoy never came to be. Because of the spies, Hashem declared (Sotah 35a), "The day the spies committed their sin will be a day of sadness and tears for generations."

That day was the ninth of Av and became the genesis of Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year. The original day that lives on in infamy. The day in which enormous amounts of spiritual and physical destruction ravaged the Jewish people for thousands of years, including the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash, the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash, the Romans killing 580,000 Jews in the city of Beitar, the start of the first Crusade (August 15, 1096), the expulsion of Jews from England (July 18, 1290), the expulsion of Jews from France (July 22, 1306), the expulsion of Jews from Spain (July 31, 1492), Germany's entrance into World War One (August 2, 1914), Heinrich Himmler formally starting the Final Solution and the start of the Holocaust (August 2, 1941), the mass deportation of the Jews from the Warsaw

Ghetto to Treblinka (July 23, 1942), and the AMIA bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, killing and injuring hundreds of Jews (July 18, 1994). All because of the twelve spies.

The question is, what exactly did the spies do wrong? What was their horrific sin? Did they go out on their mission and come back with lies and gross exaggerations, dissuading everyone from wanting the land? No. The Ramban (Beraishis 2, 9) cites a Pirka d'Rabeinu Hakadosh that says that the meraglim said the absolute truth. So, what was the issue?

The common explanation is that the spies stoked unnecessary fear in the eyes of the people and exclaimed that they were incapable of defeating the inhabitants of the land. They overly stressed the fact that the land harbored dangerous and giant people, when they should have been faithful in Hashem's protection. Hence, they were punished.

Yet there is an obvious issue with this explanation. How could these Jews, some of the greatest who ever lived, truly think that Hashem wasn't strong enough to wage war against the nations of the land? Didn't Hashem just a few months prior wipe out the entire Egyptian army and bring perhaps the mightiest empire in world history to its knees? Did He not just take an entire ocean and split it in half? Did He not just rain manna from the sky and send miraculous clouds and fire to protect the Jewish people? Did He not just wage war against Amalek and send them flying? Wasn't Hashem's credibility established at this point? Wasn't His reputation as an all-powerful, all-encompassing G-d proven without a doubt by now? How could they have possibly doubted Hashem? What was going through their minds?

### **The Fear of Success**

The Lubavitcher Rebbe offers an enlightening approach. The spies were not afraid of the seven nations inhabiting the land. There was no fear that the all-powerful Hashem would fail in His protection of them. The spies did not fear failure; the spies feared success. The spies saw in the land the exact opposite of what their existence was in the desert. They saw land that would need to be farmed and lakes that would need to be fished. They saw houses that needed to be built and fields that needed to be plowed. They saw an existence that in their mind cut G-d out. In the desert, their life was one enveloped in G-d's protection, with Hashem feeding them with miraculous food, clothing us with miraculous clothing, quenching our thirst with miraculous water, and protecting us with a miraculous cloud. The land of Eretz Yisrael was the diametrical opposite of that.

Not that it was dangerous and uninhabitable. On the contrary, precisely *because* it was safe and inhabitable. Because humans with their own hands could maintain a civilization on the land, the spies feared that G-d would be cut out. The spiritual rendezvous would come to an end.

That was too much for the spies to handle. “Why go into this land when it is only a step down in our relationship with Hashem?” they told themselves. “Why promote a land that will do nothing but claw us away from the intimate relationship we have with G-d?” Therefore, they convinced the nation that the land was too much for them. They convinced the people that the land was not the place they ought to be.

But they made a grave mistake. What in their mind was perceived as a desire to remain close to Hashem was in reality a fear of having to maintain the relationship on their own. They wanted spirituality handed to them and the land wouldn't do it. So, they wanted out.

This mentality was lethal and had to be uprooted. The very purpose of the Jewish people in this world is to inject holiness into the mundane. To develop a spiritual relationship with Hashem in a seemingly unspiritual world. To inculcate godliness into the fields, forests and rivers flowing on this earth. Basking in a spiritual incubator does not accomplish that. Entering the land and spiritually developing it does.

### **The Holy Number Seven**

In Judaism, the number seven is holy. Only after seven days is an infant holy enough to get a bris milah. The seventh day of the week is Shabbos. The seventh year is shmitah. After the 49<sup>th</sup> year is yovel. The seventh month of the year counting from Nissan is the holy month of Tishrei, home of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succos. The seventh month of the year counting from Tishrei is the holy month of Nissan, the month of our spiritual redemption and Pesach. Succos is seven days long, as is Pesach. There are seven special fruits in the land of Israel. Following this pattern, it would make sense that the seventh word in the Torah is likewise holy. The seventh word in the Torah is the word ha'arets. The land. The ground. The earth. Perhaps it is telling us that the land isn't a landscape waiting for us to build our materialistic temples on it, rather it is there waiting for us to sanctify it. It is the ultimate medium for spreading Hashem's holy glory. It is the place for us to plant our seeds of spirituality and have them grow across the globe.

The world offers a never-ending tsunami of immorality and mundanity. It is the job of the Jew to inject it with holiness. As Reb Hirsch explains, the Jewish nation is called the mamleches kohanim – a Kingdom of Priests – to mean

that what kohanim are to the Jewish people, the Jews are to the rest of the world: safeguards and injectors of unadulterated holiness.

## **The Jews Of Hollywood**

I once had a fascinating conversation with a man named David Sachs. David Sachs is a famous movie and TV show writer living in Los Angeles who contributed to some of the most popular shows of all time. More importantly, he is an Orthodox Jew. I asked him the following question.

I said, "Why, in your opinion, are there so many Jews who succeed in Hollywood? In the movie, TV, and Broadway show business, virtually everywhere you look you'll find Jews – be it the actor, the producer, the writer or the director. Why is that?"

He looked at me, smiled and proceeded to give me a refreshingly sophisticated answer to the age-old question.

He said, "Jews have been around a long time. From the times of Avraham in ancient Mesopotamia to the times of Moshe in the desert. From the times of Shlomo Hamelech to the times of the Jews in Iran or Iraq. We've lived in Italy and Spain, Germany and France, Morocco and Tunisia. From the Jews in Russia and Ukraine to the Jews in Canada, Greece and Bolivia. Jews have been through virtually every villain the world has seen and have experienced almost every triumphant leader. The Jew has been through every possible plot twist and backdrop. Through every climax and every conclusion. The Jews have experienced every background and every falling action. The Jews have not only witnessed every possible form of drama on life's huge stage. The Jews have taken part in every drama on life's stage.

"Therefore," he looked at me with a glow in his eye, "the Jew has developed an almost supernatural ability to tell stories, for the Jew has been through the duration of life's stories. The Jew was there to teach history how to act. The Jew was there nurturing the world through its highs and its lows. The Jew has been there as a shining light when the world got dark. The Jew, no matter where it was sent, went with the Torah in its hand, ready to bring holiness to its new destination. Every Jew has a story to tell, for we are the safeguards of life's stories."

We are all living in a world scrambling for physicality. The Jew's job is to inject it with spirituality. The spies were afraid of that. They lost out on the zechus. It was our job then, and it remains our job now. The setting might be different, but the mission is very much the same: take an unholy world ... and make it holy.