

Parshas Shelach Lecho – Marc Cohen

כ"ו סיון תשע"ט – 29th June 2019 – שבת פ' שלח לך

In this week's sedra, the generation of the spies are punished with having to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness. In this d'var Torah, I would like to suggest an explanation as to what this punishment was meant to achieve. I would like to start by looking more widely at the concept of teshuva.

The Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva 2:7 tells us that, "Yom Kippur is the time of teshuva for all." We all know this. However, if we look later in Hilchot Teshuva, the Rambam describes a ba'al Teshuva (chapter 7, halachah 7)- "How exalted is the level of teshuva! Previously, the (transgressor) was separated from G-d.....He would fulfill mitzvot, only to have them crushed before him. Now, he is clinging to the shechinah." (Translated from Moznaim translation by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger.) I used to find this Rambam very difficult. The Rambam seems to be describing an exalted act which changes the whole personality of an individual. This happens, but is unlikely to be more than once or twice in a lifetime. How can this be something which we all need to engage in at a set time every year-old on Yom Kippur.

A few years ago, I found a transcript of an address given by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein (the previous Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion), which allowed me to understand what is going on here. The transcript was of a lecture which Rav Lichtenstein gave at Yeshiva University's Gruss Institution in Jerusalem on 7 Tishrei 5766, October 9 2005. The talk was entitled "Teshuva of Norm and of Crisis" and can be found on the Yeshivat Har Etzion website. In the address, Rav Lichtenstein distinguishes between two types of teshuva. The teshuva which the Rambam describes in chapter 7 halachah 7 of Hilchot Teshuva is described as "crisis teshuva." However, there is another type of teshuva, which is described at the beginning of Hilchot Teshuva. In chapter 1 halachah 1, the Rambam states, "If a person violates any of the mitzvot of the Torah.....when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before G-d." Rav Lichtenstein describes this second type of teshuva as "normal teshuva" which is less dramatic than the "crisis teshuva" of chapter 7. In the words of Rav Lichtenstein, "normal teshuva" is "a routine part of our spiritual maintenance" and Yom Kippur is a time for this activity.

So what does this have to do with our sedra and the punishment of the spies? In order to bring this together, I would like to look at the way the Rambam understands the beginning of Parshat Beshalach. Parshat Beshalach begins by stating (Shemot 13:17)- "When Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For G-d said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So G-d led the people around by the desert road toward the Reed Sea."

The Rambam in the Guide to the Perplexed 3:32 explains these pessukim in the following manner- "Here G-d led the people about, away from the direct route which he had originally intended, because He feared that they might encounter hardships too great for their present strength. So He took them by a different route to achieve His original objective. It is a well-known fact that traveling in the wilderness without physical comforts such as bathing produces courage, while the opposite produces faint-heartedness. Besides this, another generation rose during the wanderings that had not been accustomed to the degradation of society.

(I found this Rambam in Rabbi Sack's Covenant and Conversation parsha sheet for parsha Shelach Lecha in 2017/5777 and I have used his translation for both the Rambam and the pessukim in parshat Beshalach.)

I would like to suggest that this Rambam, in the Guide to the Perplexed, can help us to understand the two types of teshuva which Rav Lichtenstein described for us and also answer the question which we began with- why the generation of the spies were punished with having to wander forty years in the wilderness. There are times when we realize that we are traveling on the wrong path in life. This can bring about a "crisis teshuva". However, it can take time to change, years of engaging in "normal teshuva". The sin of the spies was such an occasion- it showed a fault in Am Yisrael which would take forty years, and the birth of a new generation, to rectify.

(I would like to thank Rabbi Cohn for reading through the draft of this D'var Torah.)
