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Children Are a Gift

The Jewish People, Rahsi informs us, were not very happy with the blessing Moshe gave them. "May God, the Lord of your fathers," he had said, "add a thousandfold more like you and bless you as He spoke to you."

"Only that and no more?" the people responded. "Is that the full extent of your blessing? Hashem blessed us (Bereishis 32:13) to be 'like the dust of the earth that is too numerous to count.'"

"You will surely get the blessing Hashem gave you," Moshe replied. "This is just my own personal blessing to you."

What exactly was Moshe's reply? What additional benefit would the Jewish people derive from his blessing of a thousandfold increase if they were already receiving

Hashem's blessing of virtually limitless increase?

The Chasam Sofer explains that Moshe was testing them. Why did they want children? Was it because children were useful, because they help carry the household burden, provide companionship and are a source of security in old age? Or is it because each child is a spark of the Divine, a priceless gift from Heaven, a piece of the World to Come?

So Moshe gave the Jewish people a test. He blessed them with a "thousandfold" increase in their population. If they had wanted children for their usefulness alone, they would have said, "Thank you, but that's enough already! A thousandfold will suit our purposes just fine. We have no use for any more right now." But that was not what they said. They wanted more children. They wanted children "too numerous to count." Obviously, they were not thinking about their own material and emotional needs, but about the transcendent blessing that each child represents, and so, they proved themselves worthy of Hashem's blessing.

Hundreds of years earlier, these two conflicting attitudes toward children had already become an issue. Yaakov and Eisav had made a division. Eisav was to take this world, and Yaakov was to take the World to Come. When Yaakov came back from Aram, Eisav welcomed him at the head of an army four hundred men strong. In the tense early minutes of the confrontation, Eisav noticed Yaakov's many children.

"Who are these children?" Eisav asked.

"These are the children," Yaakov replied, "that Hashem graciously gave to your servant."

The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* expands the dialogue between Yaakov and Eisav and reveals the underlying argument.

“What are you doing with all these children?” Eisav asked. “I thought we made a division, that I would take this world and you would take the World to Come. So why do you have so many children? What do children have to do with the World to Come? Children are a boon in this world!”

“Not so,” Yaakov responded. “Children are sparks of the Divine. The opportunity to raise a child, to develop a Divine soul to the point where it can enter the World to Come, is a privilege of the highest spiritual worth. That is why I have children.”

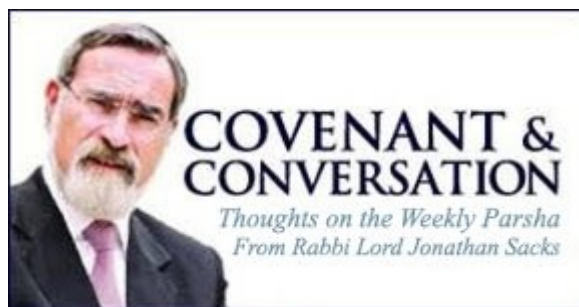
Yaakov wants children for their own sake, but Eisav views them as an asset in this world. Children are an extra pair of hands on the farm. They can milk the cows and help with many other chores that need to be done in agrarian societies.

Modern man has progressed beyond agrarian life. He has moved off the farm and does not have such a need for children anymore. In fact, he has made a startling discovery. Children are a tremendous burden. They are expensive, time consuming and exasperating. Who needs children?

But what about companionship? Loneliness? No problem. Modern man can get a dog. Dogs are wonderful. Instead of coming home to a house full of clamoring, demanding, frustrating children, he can come home to an adoring, tail-wagging dog who will run to bring him his slippers and

newspaper. So why does he need children? This is the attitude of Eisav adapted to modern times.

Yaakov, on the other hand, understands that the purpose of children is not for enjoying this world or for making our lives easier. Each child represents a spiritual mission, a spark of the Divine entrusted to our care and our guidance, an opportunity to fulfill Hashem’s desire to have this soul brought to the World to Come.



Followership

In the last month of his life, Moses gathered the people. He instructed them about the laws they were to keep and reminded them of their history since the Exodus. That is the substance of the book of Devarim. Early in this process, he recalled the episode of the spies – the reason the people’s parents were denied the opportunity to enter the land. He wanted the next generation to learn the lesson of that episode and carry it with them always. They needed faith and courage. Perhaps that has always been part of what it means to be a Jew.

But the story of the spies as he tells it here is very different indeed from the version in Shelach Lecha (Num. 13-14), which describes the events as they happened at the time, almost 39 years earlier. The discrepancies between the two

accounts are glaring and numerous. Here I want to focus only on two.

First: who proposed sending the spies? In *Shelach*, it was God who told Moses to do so. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Send men ...’” In our parsha, it was the people who requested it: “Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ...’” Who was it: God or the people? This makes a massive difference to how we understand the episode.

Second: what was their mission? In our parsha, the people said, “Let us send men to spy out [*veyachperu*] the land for us” (Deut. 1:22). The twelve men “made for the hill country, came to the wadi Eshcol, and spied it out [*vayeraglu*]” (Deut. 1:24). In other words, our parsha uses the two Hebrew verbs, *lachpor* and *leragel*, that mean to spy.

But as I pointed out in *Covenant and Conversation Shelach*, the account there conspicuously does not mention spying. Instead, *thirteen times*, it uses the verb *latur*, which means to tour, explore, travel, inspect. Even in our parsha, when Moses is talking, not about the spies but about God, he says He “goes before you on your journeys—to seek out (*latur*) the place where you are to encamp” (Deut. 1:33).

According to Malbim, *latur* means to seek out what is good about a place. *Lachpor* and *leragel* mean to seek out what is weak, vulnerable, exposed, defenceless. Touring and spying are completely different activities, so why does the account in our parsha present what happened as a spying mission, which the account in *Shelach* emphatically does not?

These two questions combine with a third, prompted by an extraordinary statement of Moses in our parsha. Having said that the spies and the people were punished by not living to enter the promised land, he then says:

Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also, and He said: you shall not enter it either. Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Strengthen him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it. (Deut. 1:37-38)

This is very strange indeed. It is not like Moses to blame others for what seems to be his own failing. Besides which, it contradicts the testimony of the Torah itself, which tells us that Moses and Aaron were punished by not being permitted to enter the land because of what happened at Kadesh when the people complained about the lack of water. What they did wrong is debated by the commentators. Was it that Moses hit the rock? Or that he lost his temper? Or some other reason? Whichever it was, that was when God said: “Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them” (Num. 20:12). This was some 39 years after the episode of the spies.

As to the discrepancy between the two accounts of the spies, R. David Zvi Hoffman argued that the account in *Shelach* tells us what happened. The account in our parsha, a generation later, was meant not to inform but to warn. *Shelach* is a historical narrative; our parsha is a sermon. These are different literary genres with different purposes.

As to Moses' remark, "Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me," Ramban suggests that he was simply saying that like the spies and the people, he too was condemned to die in the wilderness. Alternatively, he was hinting that no one should be able to say that Moses avoided the fate of the generation he led.

However, Abarbanel offers a fascinating alternative. Perhaps the reason Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the land was not because of the episode of water and the rock at Kadesh. That is intended to distract attention from their real sins. Aaron's real sin was the Golden Calf. Moses' real sin was the episode of the spies. The hint that this was so is in Moses' words here, "Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also."

How though could the episode of the spies have been Moses fault? It wasn't he who proposed sending them. It was either God or the people. He did not go on the mission. He did not bring back a report. He did not demoralise the people. Where then was Moses at fault? Why was God angry with him?

The answer lies in the first two questions: who proposed sending the spies? And why is there a difference in the verbs between here and *Shelach*?

Following Rashi, the two accounts, here and in *Shelach*, are not two different versions of the same event. They are the same version of the same event, but split in two, half told there, half here. It was the people who requested spies (as stated here). Moses took their request to God. God acceded to the request, but as a

concession, not a command: "You *may* send," not "You *must* send" (as stated in *Shelach*).

However, in granting permission, God made a specific provision. The people had asked for spies: "Let us send men ahead to spy out [veyachperu] the land for us." God did *not* give Moses permission to send spies. He specifically used the verb *latur*, meaning, He gave permission for the men to tour the land, come back and testify that it is a good and fertile land, flowing with milk and honey.

The people did not need spies. As Moses said, throughout the wilderness years God has been going "ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go" (Deut. 1:33). They did however need eyewitness testimony of the beauty and fruitfulness of the land to which they had been travelling and for which they would have to fight.

Moses, however, did not make this distinction clear. He told the twelve men: "See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwallled or fortified?" This sounds dangerously like instructions for a spying mission.

When ten of the men came back with a demoralising report and the people panicked, at least part of the blame lay with Moses. The people had asked for spies. He should have made it clear that the men he was sending were not to act as spies.

How did Moses come to make such a mistake? Rashi suggests an answer. Our parsha says:

“Then *all of you came to me* and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us.’ The English does not convey the sense of menace in the original. They came, says Rashi, “in a crowd,” without respect, protocol or order. They were a mob, and they were potentially dangerous. This mirrors the people’s behaviour at the beginning of the story of the Golden Calf: “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they *gathered against Aaron* and said to him...”

Faced with an angry mob, a leader is not always in control of the situation. True leadership is impossible in the face of the madness of crowds. Moses’ mistake, if the analysis here is correct, was a very subtle one, the difference between a spying mission and a morale-boosting eyewitness account of the land. Even so, it must have been almost inevitable given the mood of the people.

That is what Moses meant when he said, “because of you the Lord was incensed with me too.” He meant that God was angry with me for not showing stronger leadership, but it was you – or rather, your parents – who made that leadership impossible.

This suggests a fundamental, counterintuitive truth. There is a fine TED talk about leadership.¹ It takes less than 3 minutes to watch, and it asks, “What makes a leader?” It answers: “The first follower.”

There is a famous saying of the Sages: “Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend.”² The order of the verbs seems wrong. You don’t make a teacher, you acquire one. You don’t acquire a friend, you make one. In fact,

though, the statement is precisely right. *You make a teacher by being willing to learn. You make a leader by being willing to follow.* When people are unwilling to follow, even the greatest leader cannot lead. That is what happened to Aaron at the time of the Calf, and in a far more subtle way to Moses at the time of the spies.

That, I would argue, is one reason why Joshua was chosen to be Moses’ successor. There were other distinguished candidates, including Pinchas and Caleb. But Joshua, serving Moses throughout the wilderness years, was a role-model of what it is to be a follower. That, the Israelites needed to learn.

I believe that followership is the great neglected art. Followers and leaders form a partnership of mutual challenge and respect. To be a follower in Judaism is not to be submissive, uncritical, blindly accepting. Questioning and arguing part of the relationship. Too often, though, we decry a lack of leadership when we are really suffering from a lack of followership.

Shabbat Shalom

NOTES

1. Derek Sivers, ‘How to Start a Movement.’
2. Mishnah, Avot 1:6.



Joshua: The Model Student

Devarim, 1:38: Yehoshua, who stands before you he will come there, you should strengthen him, because he will inherit Yisrael.

Baal HaTurim, 1:38: Because serving is greater than learning.

Moshe recalls how God instructed him that he would not enter the land of Israel, and instead he would be replaced as leader by Yehoshua Bin Nun. The Baal HaTurim cites a Rabbinic saying to explain this, that 'serving a wise man is greater than learning from him'. Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch explains that the Torah's use of the words 'who stands before you' as opposed to who learns from you, indicates that the fact that Yehoshua stood before Moshe to serve him was the key aspect that caused him to merit to be the leader ahead of the other great people of the time.

This idea is all the more powerful based on the fact that the commentaries offer proofs that Yehoshua was not the greatest person in the nation apart from Moshe Rabbeinu¹: The Ramban writes that the twelve spies were named in the order of their spiritual greatness – Yehoshua is only fifth in that list, indicating that four of the spies were on a higher level than him. Likewise, the Rambam² only names Yehoshua

as Moshe's student, after Elazar and Pinchas, implying that they were on a higher level. Yet, the Midrash states that Yehoshua merited to succeed Moshe as leader because he served him with all his energy, and accordingly, he would also serve the Jewish people as their leader. This is why, of all Yehoshua's positive traits and deeds, the Navi singles out the fact that he served Moshe³.

This is not the only time that we see that one who served a great man merited to attain a higher level than people who were otherwise greater: The Navi tells us that Eliyahu was about to go up to the Heavens. There were fifty other Prophets, known as the Bnei HaNeviim, who asked Elisha about what was happening to Eliyahu. Rashi notes that when they referred to Eliyahu they called him, 'adonecha' – 'your master', as opposed to 'our master'⁴. This teaches us that they were Eliyahu's equals, and they must have been on a higher level of Nevuah than Elisha, who was not Eliyahu's equal. If that is the case, why, then did Elisha merit to become the leading Navi instead of them?

The Be'er Moshe⁵ explains that Elisha merited this honor because he excelled in the area of *shimush Chachamim*, serving Torah scholars. Indeed, Chazal's source that '*shimusha gedolah milimudo*' – serving a wise man is greater than learning from him is Elisha's serving of Eliyahu: The verse says that "he [Elisha] got up and he went after Eliyahu and he served him⁶." The Tanna Debei Eliyahu⁷ notes that the verse does not say that Elisha 'learnt' from Eliyahu, instead it says that he 'served' him, and it must be

because serving a wise man is considered a higher level than learning from him. This is why Elisha merited to lead the nation instead of the Bnei Neviim, even though they were originally on a higher level than him.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot⁸ also proves that *shimush chachamim* is essential in succeeding in Torah, as it is one of the 48 ways in which the Torah is acquired. This means that even if a person constantly learns, and even has teachers, he cannot fulfil his potential in Torah if he does not in some way serve chachamim.

Indeed, the Gemara⁹ states that a person who has learnt but has not served Torah scholars, is a bor – an ignorant person. Rav Yaakov Emden¹⁰ explains why *shimush chachamim* is so vital: He writes, “By serving, one does not move away from his teacher, as it says with Yehoshua, ‘he did not move from the tent’. Through this, he sees and knows all the ways of behavior of his teacher. Also, in *derech erez*¹¹, nothing is hidden from him, and even the ‘idle chatter’ of Torah scholars needs to be studied. It emerges that the earlier generations who were fearful and trembled for the word of God, that even minor matters and non-holy discussions, that they heard from their teachers was beloved to them.”

Rabbi Emden is teaching us that *shimush chachamim* does not merely mean serving them but it means that through serving them, one spends time with them and observes their every action and word. It seems that this trait separates some Torah scholars from the *Gedolim* – as well as being people one who learnt constantly - they were invariably

dedicated to spending as much time with their great teachers as possible.

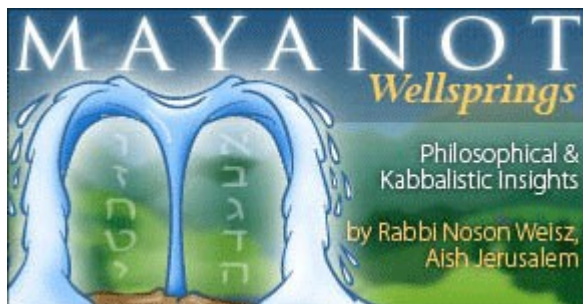
Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman was someone who exemplified the example of a student who made extreme efforts in not just learning from, but serving and observing his teacher, the great Chofetz Chaim. While the other students learnt Torah from the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Wasserman saw the Chofetz Chaim as a living Sefer Torah and strived to learn from his every action and word. Whenever he heard that someone spoke with the Chofetz Chaim he would ask (if it was not private) the person to reveal exactly what he had said. His dedication was to such a great extent that he became a genuinely new person through his serving and observing of his great teacher.

We cannot aspire to the same level of *shimush Chachamim* as these great men, but the examples of Yehoshua, Elisha and Rav Elchanan teach us that it does not suffice to learn Torah without striving to learn from and serve a great Torah scholar. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon that this aspect of a person’s *Avodat HaShem* can be neglected through lack of awareness of its importance. A person can say that it is difficult to make a connection with a Torah scholar, and no doubt that is true, but many people have proved that, with enough effort, it is possible, and those people often attain greater heights than their contemporaries, who may be more intelligent and even learn for more hours.

NOTES

1. Hakdama to Yad Chazaka.
2. Bamdibar Rabbah, 21:14.
3. Rashi, Melachim Beis, 2:3
4. Cited in Mishbetsot Zahav, Melachim Beis, p.24.

5. Melachim Aleph, 19:21.
6. Tana Debei Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 5.
7. Avot, 6:5.
8. Brachos, 47a.
9. Lechem Shamayim, Avot, 6:5.
10. This can mean a number of things – in this context it refers to the way one acts in everyday life.
11. Mishbetsot Zahav, Yehoshua, pp.8-9.



Assigning Blame

The Jewish calendar and the Shabbat Torah readings were arranged to intermesh. Parshat Devarim is always read on the Shabbat immediately prior to the 9th of Av. The reason for this is related to the special theme of the Parsha, "*Tochacha*," commonly translated as reproof.

'*Tochacha*' is a difficult concept to translate into English. Reproof, reproach, rebuke, chastisement are all candidates, but none of them either individually or collectively fully suffices to convey the exact flavor of what is meant by '*tochacha*.' We shall explore the subject of '*tochacha*' in the context of this essay but before we do that let us attempt to comprehend the connection between '*tochacha*' and the 9th of Av.

THE 9TH OF AV CONNECTION

We read Moses' words of rebuke in public to remind ourselves that the tragedy we are about to commemorate on the 9th of Av, the destruction of both Temples, signifying the withdrawal of the physical manifestation of the Divine Presence from our midst, was a tragedy we suffered needlessly. God didn't inflict it on us; we brought it on ourselves through the failure to correct our sins.

But there must be some added significance to the fact that we read the '*tochacha*' before the commemoration of the tragedy. Although sins are no doubt the ultimate cause of the destruction, and indeed of all tragedies, sins are never the immediate cause. The immediate cause of all tragedies is invariably the same: the failure to listen to words of '*tochacha*.'

God never retaliates hastily against public sins committed by the Jewish people. Before He initiates concrete corrective measures He sends us messages of '*tochacha*.' The destruction only arrives if we fail to react to the words of '*tochacha*' and make no move to institute changes in our lives to mend the spiritual flaws that caused us to sin.

SIN IS INEVITABLE

Sin is an inevitable phenomenon in human affairs. As King Solomon stated, "*for there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he does good and never sins.* (Kohelet 7,20)" Sin alone never brings on destruction. God is just; it is He who made us mortal and fallible and gave us free will. If He were to destroy us for the sins we

commit, the destruction could be laid at His own doorstep. That is why he initially sends us *'tochacha'*, not destruction.

If we pay attention to the *'tochacha'* and put ourselves on the track of mending the flaws that led us to sin, even if we never fully manage to correct these faults, we are sheltered against destruction. God takes note of the fact that we have set out on the road to self-correction, and no matter how slowly we proceed, as long as our intent to reach the destination is sincere, that is enough for Him to keep our world going.

When we reject *'tochacha,'* our sins become an inherent part of our natures. If we do no work on ourselves our character flaws will never mend; by refusing to listen to words of *'tochacha'* we condemn ourselves to remain in a state of sin. The conscious decision to reject *'tochacha'* and the implicit choice to remain permanently flawed that lies in such rejection is the factor that kindles Divine anger and brings on the destruction.

EVEN FLAWS HAVE A POINT

God may have fashioned man with flaws that make it impossible for him to avoid sin, but there was a point to creating him this way. His built-in defects allow man the opportunity to perfect himself, so that he can be his own creator.

When man rejects the *'tochacha'* that impels him to self-improvement, he voluntarily embraces his structural defects and accepts them as permanent parts of his being. The existence of character flaws is neither a tragedy nor does it cause tragedy, but their establishment as permanent facets of one's personality turns them

into the sort of Shakespearean 'tragic flaws' that inevitably presage tragic events.

It is therefore important for us to understand exactly what is meant by *'tochacha'* and why it is so hard to accept.

UNDERSTANDING 'TOCHACHA'

We can highlight the problem by examining the actual content of the speech of *'tochacha'* that begins our Parsha. Rashi breaks down the words of the first verse and explains how each one serves as a marker that points to one of the places the Jews sinned in the desert. *"These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, concerning the Wilderness, concerning the Araba, opposite the sea of reeds, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth and Di-zahab."*

Wilderness -- a reference to Exodus (17,2-3); The people contended with Moses and they said, "Give us water that we may drink!" Moses said to them, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you test God?" The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and it said, "Why is this that you have brought us up from Egypt to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst?"

Araba -- a reference to the sin of harlotry with the daughters of Moab and the worship of Baal-peor (Bamidbar 25) -- the locale was Arboth Moab -- hence Araba.

Sea of Reeds -- when the Jewish people encamped next to the sea of reeds saw the Egyptian columns approaching them they said: "Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us

to die in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Is this not the statement that we made to you in Egypt, saying, "Let us be and we will serve Egypt-for it is better that we should serve Egypt than that we should die in the Wilderness!" (Exodus 14,11-12)

Paran -- a reference to the sin of the spies who were dispatched from the wilderness of Paran -- All the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the entire assembly said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this Wilderness! Why is God bringing us to this land to die by the sword? Our wives and our children will be taken captive. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?" (Bamidbar 14, 2-3)

Tophel -- the complaint against the Manna -- and the spirit of the people grew short on the way. The people spoke against God and Moses: why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this wilderness, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food. (Bamidbar 14,5)

Hazeroth -- a reference to the dissension with Korach which took place there-Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the wilderness, yet you seek to dominate us, to dominate further? (Bamidbar 16,13)

Di-zahab -- a reference to the golden calf [zahav means gold in Hebrew] -- the background to this sin was Moses' declaration that he would return at the end of forty days. When he was tardy according to the people's calculations, they ran out of patience and fashioned the golden calf to

replace him. There is an undercurrent strongly implying that the sin was Moses' fault.

How does a list of one's past inequities constitute chastisement? All the incidents mentioned by Rashi were clearly recognized by everyone in the audience as sins. In most of the incidents referred to, people died at the time as a consequence. In the case of some we still suffer the consequences down to the very present.

The most prominent examples -- the 9th of Av -- is the anniversary of the 'night of tears,' a consequence of the mass lamentation quoted above, the Jewish public's response to the spies' report. As retribution for shedding these pointless tears, we were condemned to shed tears on the anniversary of this event over genuine tragedies. The story of the Golden calf took place on the 17th of Tammuz. Some two thousand years later, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem on the same calendar date.

The three-week period between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av is referred to as '*bein hamezarim*', the period of time between the two constrictions. This period has become a period of mourning; it is forbidden to celebrate weddings or listen to music etc. We are still caught up in the dire consequences of these events. It was clearly unnecessary to remind us of their existence. What then is '*tochahca*'?

HOW WE RELATE TO TRAGEDY

We can get a glimpse into what Moses was attempting to teach us by considering the way we typically react to tragedies. When we fall

victim to cosmic events such as the Holocaust or when we are compelled to confront seemingly insoluble situations such as the phenomenon of suicide bombers, the shock and the horror we experience are invariably accompanied by a feeling of painful perplexity.

We Jews are a nation of believers. Believers never accept events, especially tragic ones as being the result of chance. There must always be someone to blame.

Reish Lakish taught: one who suspects the innocent will suffer bodily harm in retaliation, as it is written, *Moses responded and he said, "But they will not believe me and they will not heed my voice for they will say, 'God did not appear to you'."* But God knew that Jews are a nation of believers. God said to Moses, "**They** are believers who are the descendants of believers; whereas **you** will not believe in Me in the end. They are believers, as it written, *And the people believed, and they heard that God had remembered the children of Israel and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves.* (Exodus 4,31) They are the children of believers, as it is written [about Abraham], *and he trusted in God, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.* (Genesis 15,6) Whereas you will not believe in the end, as it is written, *God said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel..."* (Bamidbar 20,12) (Shabbat, 97a)

One of the fundamentals of belief in God is that He is just. Although justice requires that actions have consequences, and therefore it is to be expected that sins will be punished, it also dictates that the punishment suffered must be in

proportion to the crime committed. When tragedy strikes, the believer is tied up in knots by the contradiction between his ideology and the events taking place in the real world.

JEWES ARE NOT EVIL

Jews are not an evil people nor have they ever been such. If you compare them to the rest of humanity, they generally measure up quite favorably. Statistics show that they give charity out of all proportion to their collective share of the social pie. They tend to be idealistic and are to be found in the vanguard of movements for social justice out of all proportion to their numbers. The list of Jewish merit is quite extensive and everyone knows it; there is little need to spend time trumpeting our virtues.

It is true that we all have faults, and no doubt every individual Jew can afford to tighten up, perhaps even considerably, but no way have we committed the sort of atrocities as a people that could reasonably make us liable to suffer horrors such as the Holocaust or suicide bombers. It is totally irrational to accept such tragedies as deserved acts of retribution for Jewish faults.

This obvious fact accounts for our immediate reaction when such tragedies befall us; they cannot possibly be our fault. As we believe that God is just and tragedy must therefore be somehow proportional with blame, the horrendous tragedies of Jewish history must be someone else's fault. If we sift through the list of sins mentioned by Moses in his speech of chastisement, the theme of shifting blame is a clear thread that runs through the list.

SHIFTING BLAME

Take the first one for example. The Jews find themselves in the desert without a source of potable water. Do they deserve to be in this situation? Clearly not. What caused them to face this difficulty, after all? They followed God's instructions relayed to them through Moses, left their homes in Egypt and followed him into the desert. For having done this they deserve to die of thirst? Ridiculous! So how come they are in the situation that they have nothing to drink when they are innocent as a people of any major wrongdoing? It must be Moses' fault. Somehow he must have misunderstood his instructions and they landed in the wrong place at the wrong time through his compounded errors.

This feeling of being the innocent victim of circumstances is the theme that unites all the incidents listed by Rashi. In some, it is clearly stated, in others only implied, but the theme of innocent victim runs through them all. This is especially true of the major incidents, the golden calf and the sin of the spies.

Let us attempt to place ourselves back at the scene to imagine how we as a people must have felt.

The Golden calf: Moses, having promised to return, left us leaderless, stuck in the desert with no one to guide us out of it. We had said our final goodbye to Egypt four and a half months before, we had signed our historic covenant with God forty days prior, and here we were, left leaderless and rudderless with no idea where to go or what to do next. A tragic situation we clearly did not deserve to suffer; we were clearly the victims of irresponsible if not downright

incompetent leadership. Weren't we entitled to remedy a bad situation that was certainly not our fault? How could anyone think that we were not entitled to attempt to reestablish contact with God to obtain fresh instructions by employing the best means at our disposal? How could anyone judge such an attempt as a great sin, worthy of enormous punishment such as the immediate annihilation that God threatened?

The spies: we left Egypt with the promise of being led to a land of milk and honey where we could live in safety and comfort. God didn't tell us to follow him blindly, He promised through Moses that He was finally fulfilling the oath He made to our forefathers and leading us to the holy land. But when we dispatched our spies to see what would be involved in the conquest we discovered that it was an impossible dream. There was no way on earth we could drive out such powerful nations and settle the land in their place. God Himself had told us that wiping out everyone there was not an option. We did not have either the numbers or the expertise to immediately take full possession of such a large area and make everything work. The population would have to be subdued and enlisted to help us in our initial settlement effort.

We had cut our Egyptian bridges behind us on the orders of God in the mouth of Moses; the land we were being taken to was unattainable; we were stuck in an impossible situation facing a national disaster of enormous proportions through no fault of our own. No wonder we rebelled! How could God possibly place us in such a predicament? It must be someone's fault! How can anyone blame us for our justified resentment and consequent desire to rebel

against the One who placed us so unjustly in such an impossible situation? Where is the great sin? How are we supposed to accept Moses' chastisement? Why didn't anyone respond to them with justified outrage?

UNDERSTANDING EVIL

To begin to understand, we must first learn to relate to the Torah concept of good and evil. We are accustomed to think of evil as something horrendous and gross; Nazis are evil, terrorists are evil, repressive tyrants are evil. Our neighbors are not evil and neither are we. But the Hebrew word *Ra*, which means evil, doesn't mean evil in this sense. A *rasha*, one who does *Ra*, is not necessarily an evil person. *Ra* means temporary [see Nachmonides, Genesis 1,4] and a *rasha* is a person who is entirely focused on the temporary.

Thus said God: If not for my covenant, I would never have made the night and day (Jeremiah 33,25). This maxim is often repeated by the Sages in various ways [see Rashi, genesis 1,31]. The observance of Torah is a condition of creation. The repeated stressing of this idea is meant to reorient our attitude towards Torah observance. Whereas we understand the need to observe as a moral imperative, the sages are attempting to teach us that observance fits into reality in the same fashion as the laws of physics. Observance is like oxygen; a plentiful supply is needed to sustain human life. We can comprehend the implications of this message by focusing on purpose.

Sins do not violate the plan of the universe; they fit into reality as God designed it. All people have free will and must inevitably fall into sin at

times. But the universe was created with purpose. Reality is violated by human life lacking in purpose. People who are going nowhere and just getting through life without any goal except to survive in the most pleasant way they can are not evil people. Many of them are good people with nice characters; they fit into society and are often model citizens. But their lives have no purpose. They are not striving to perfect either themselves or the world. They give no thought to what will follow their earthly existence and do nothing to prepare themselves.

Such people do not require this world at all and it was not designed to sustain them. What sense does it make to place human beings into the problematic circumstances of this earthly life whose only positive value is that it offers the potential for the exercise of free will when they are not at all interested? The answer: no sense at all. But if people do not need the world, God withdraws it. Whenever this happens tragedy strikes.

THE NEED FOR TESTS

A purposeful life must be seen as a series of tests. Moses' chastisement was precisely this. He was not interested in reminding the Jewish people about its past sins. He was attempting to point out the flawed attitude that led them to commit these sins. Let us attempt to unravel what he might have been really saying. It may have sounded something like this:

When you find yourself being pursued by the Egyptians through no fault of your own don't disassociate yourself and say, "This obviously has nothing to do with me. I have done absolutely nothing to deserve being pursued and

slaughtered. Obviously this tragedy cannot be justly addressed to me; I have to discover who is really to blame." No, you are being tested.

You are correct in thinking that you cannot be punished as long as you have done no wrong. But that doesn't shelter you from the shocks of life. In the face of the threatening danger God expects you to say, "Look this cannot be accidental. Here I am, being threatened when I haven't done anything. Something is clearly being demanded of me. What can it be? Perhaps God is trying to teach me not to take life for granted. I should turn to Him and say, 'Look, I realize that You owe me nothing, and that there is no such thing as a right to life. But let me live so that I can accomplish something with my life. Let me raise my children to serve you, let me work on myself, let me attempt to raise the consciousness of mankind to the purpose of life.'" There can be no other reason why a loving, benevolent, God should confront the innocent with potential tragedies they have done nothing to deserve.

Before he died, Moses was anxious to teach the Jewish people to coexist with God in an atmosphere of affectionate co-operation. The secret: neither holiness or purity but living with ambition and purpose; never satisfied with just continuing to be the people we are today but always setting goals to be a different, more noble people tomorrow.

SPIRITUAL SHELTER

A Jewish people who lives with spiritual goals is always safe. It matters not that they sin, it matters not that they are not so holy or observant right now; the future is all. A Jewish

people marching down the highway of self-improvement is a Jewish people safely sheltered from national tragedy. As long as we are marching forward maintaining a purposeful existence, we need the universe for the purpose that God set for it. God is ready and willing to renew it for us with total grace. He is patient and ready to wait a thousand years for the process of self-perfection to reach completion. As long as there is movement forward and the Jewish people are free of apathy and moral stagnation we are safe in the palm of God's Hand.

But when we grow apathetic and fall into the rut of spiritual stagnation, God grows impatient with the world. When it has no purpose, He cannot renew it. He sends people to chastise us, and if there are no people available, He sends us little tragedies. If we pay attention, wake up and take some steps to change, the good times resume; God's patience is reawakened no matter how much improvement is required and no matter how long it will take. But if we ignore the *'tochacha'* there is no hope of progress. The stagnation is forecast into the future as continuing indefinitely. In this situation, even a Jewish people who is widely observant, finds little favor in His eyes. We were created to accomplish not to stagnate, at whatever level.

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