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Fear – The Most Contagious Disease Courageous Action – The Only Cure

***Commentary to the Episode of the Spies
Recorded in Parashat Shelah L’kha***

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The matter of the twelve spies and the horrible effect they had on all Israel is not recorded in the Torah merely to inform us about an event in ancient history. The story of the twelve spies bears witness to us as a warning throughout our generations. We are warned that there will be a heavy price to pay for one of the greatest sins in the Eyes of G-d – the sin of cowardliness.

From reading the Torah, a conclusion that we must unfortunately make is that even after witnessing earth shattering, monumental miracles of the most stunning nature, miracles by themselves are not convincing enough to change what is in the hearts and minds of people. HaShem brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with a Mighty Hand and with overt miracles. He brought them to Sinai, where everyone there heard the Voice of G-d. Yet, soon afterwards, there were still some “bad apples” among the crowd who brought down ruin and havoc upon everybody. Woe to us that nothing has changed in all these years!

The story of the spies reveals to us how we Jews can sometimes act as our own worst enemy. Pay attention to the details of the story. Rashi makes it clear that the decision to send spies to check out the Land was not G-d’s command. Indeed, it wasn’t even Moshe Rabbeynu’s idea. It was the idea of the people.

Now granted, not all the people wanted to send spies. Some must have trusted in HaShem. Some must have shared the spirit expressed by Yehoshua and Kalev. Yet, their voices are never heard. The lesson to be learned from this is a frightening one – fear is a contagious disease!

The fear that was in the hearts of ten cowardly men spread through the entire Israelite population, silencing even those who would have felt or spoken otherwise. Although many might have shared the faith of Yehoshua and Kalev, nonetheless, they were all punished as if they did not. Here we learn about the concept of collective guilt and punishment that HaShem imposes upon His people.

Why, you might ask, if many others shared the faith of Yehoshua and Kalev were they not protected and spared, as were those two? The answer seems obvious. Yehoshua and Kalev were the only two to speak out against the masses. They were the only two willing to stand against the crowd and against public opinion. They were the only two willing to endanger their lives to stand up publicly for what they knew was right.

As for the others who might have shared with Yehoshua and Kalev their faith in G-d, they did not, however, share their actions. It was due to their lack of action that the other men of faith were punished. Sharing convictions is a nice thing to do. Yet, unless one shares in action and does the right thing, not just talk about it, one shares the fate of those who do nothing. They suffer the same penalty of those who lack faith. For faith without action is not enough! Actions are the things that count in HaShem's record book. No action, no reward, in spite of what one feels or believes in one's heart.

Being that action is so important, why then when the children of Israel wanted to rectify their fear by then challenging the Caananites and Amalakites were they not reinforced and supported by HaShem? We might think that if at first you get it wrong, then do it again and get it right. While we might think this concept to be correct, G-d did not. Unlike us, G-d knows the hearts of man. G-d saw that the fear that motivated the people to recoil from taking the Land was now manifesting as rebellion against His word.

G-d had already prescribed a remedy for Israel's collective illness of fear. That dreaded cancer was to be removed from the collective consciousness of the nation with the death of the adults who bore the fear in their hearts. It is of no use now to attempt an attack on the Caananite/Amalakite enemy. For the true enemy is an internal one, a psychological one. The external enemy is peripheral and would be defeated at the appropriate time. It is the internal enemy of psychological imbalance, the existence of fear and lack of faith that must first be battled. Only upon a victory here can external battles be fought and won!

Fear is like a cancer, it is a serious threat to one's spiritual, mental, emotional and physical well being.

The children of Israel were so terrified by the report of the spies that they wanted to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt. These people had not forgotten how bitter their lives were in Egypt. They could imagine how the Egyptians would treat them if they returned. Nonetheless, the terror of moving forward in faith so imbued their beings that they were willing to return to the harshest type of existence, as slaves, rather than to claim freedom by rising up to conquer Eretz Yisrael.

HaShem could only respond in the most necessary and appropriate manner. When He saw that the resolve and morale of the people had been broken, HaShem decided that it would be easier to tear down and start all over again. Were it not for Moshe Rabbeynu, there would be no children of Yisrael today, only the children of Moshe. HaShem wanted to wipe out the cancer of fear by destroying the entire Jewish people, (except Moshe). Moshe Rabbeynu entreated HaShem for mercy and we were spared.

Yet, in spite of the national repentance at that time, the spirit of fear still clung to the people's hearts. Indeed, it never left, nor could it leave. HaShem thus had to exterminate that entire generation in the wilderness. This is why the children of Yisrael lived in the wilderness for 40 years. The slaves had too much fear in their hearts; they could not understand, nor grasp, true freedom.

While, it is not my normal practice to quote from secular or non Jewish material, the following words about fear truly express its dangers and offers a way how to fight it. This is a quote from a science fiction novel, the details of which are unimportant. I interpret this message to be consistent with Torah, therefore, in the spirit of Ben Zoma (Pirkei Avot 4:1) who said, "who is wise? He who learns from every man" I offer you these words.

"I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn my inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain."

Dune, Frank Herbert (New York: Berkley Pub., 1987, c1965)

To these words, I add my commentary; the "I" spoken of at the end is the same "I" who spoke at Mount Sinai saying, "I am HaShem your G-d." Thus when we allow fear to dissipate, trusting in HaShem, we will find that fear will fade away like a morning mist. When this done, all that will be left will be the Presence of G-d. It is this Presence, the indwelling Shekhina that arouses a man and turns him into a champion and a hero (Gibor HeHayil). Such was the case, recorded in Shoftim (Judges) 6-8, of Gidon Ben Yoash.

Gidon is chosen by HaShem to redeem the Jewish people from the oppression of Midian. After being given a sign by G-d that he will indeed succeed, he gathered for himself an army of over 30,000 troops.

Yet, HaShem tells him that the army is too big. HaShem does not want Israel to believe that they have won this battle by means of arms. HaShem wants Israel to know that it is He who is saving them by His miraculous power. Following HaShem's command, Gidon's army is weeded down to a measly 300 men. On the other hand, the enemy troops, which include Midian, Amalek and the people of the East are described as being "numerous as a locust swarm, countless as the sand at the seashore" (Judges 7:12).

HaShem commands Gidon into battle, yet tells him, that if he is afraid, then he should sneak up onto the enemy camp and listen to what it is they are saying. Gidon does just this. He sneaks up close to the camp of the enemy and overheard two guards talking. One guard said to the other that he had a dream. The second guard interpreting the dream says that the Israelite army is ready to attack them and that they will all be defeated. This is a sound psychological principle – once the thought of defeat has entered one's psyche, however unconscious it is, the physical manifestation of defeat will soon manifest.

Gidon understood the power of dreams as being manifestations of the unconscious. Once he heard the guard say that he dreamed of defeat, this meant that defeat was in his soul. Moreover, if defeat was in the soul of one soldier, like a contagious disease, the spirit of defeat had spread to them all. All Gidon had to do now was to attack. Although he was heavily outnumbered, the fear that was in the enemy's heart proved their undoing. Gidon was able to completely and successfully rout his enemy.

Gidon was a brave man who fought a frightened enemy. Regardless of their overwhelming number, the fear in their hearts wrecked more havoc on themselves, than soldiers a hundred times their number.

Today, all too many religious people are frightened by a hostile secular culture into not standing up for Torah values, principles and beliefs. In our many sins, like our ancestors before us, many of us do not manifest the spirit of a Yehoshua, Kalev or Gidon. Until we conquer fear and manifest courage on an individual and national level, we will remain in our personal wilderness, losing the Land of Israel and losing our individual psychological resolve until such a point, G-d forbid that Torah Judaism is threatened.

Let us learn to overcome mortal fear – and to ACT WITH COURAGE for the sake of HaShem – as befits a Torah observant G-d fearing Jew (as well as Ger Toshav).