

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Devarim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Devarim – The same story from different angles

In this week's Parasha of Devarim, Moshe begins his farewell speech to the Jewish people. He summarises Bnei Yisrael's history and their various experiences that they had while wandering in the desert. One of the key events that Moshe discusses is the infamous case of the meraglim (spies)¹. Except for Yehoshua and Calev, the spies gave a negative report to Bnei Yisrael of the land. This caused Bnei Yisrael to lose faith in Hashem and His promise to bring them into the land. Ultimately, they were punished with 40 years of wandering in the desert (until that generation died out) before being allowed to enter the land.

Six weeks ago, we read Parashat Sh'lach which contained the same story in 'real time'. A comparison of Moshe's summary of the incident in our Parsha with the narrative in Parashat Sh'lach reveals a number of discrepancies, including the following:

- **Whose initiative was it?** In Parashat Sh'lach, it is recorded that Hashem instructs Moshe to send the spies. In Parashat Devarim, Moshe reports that Bnei Yisrael approached him to make the request.
- **Who was sent?** In Parashat Sh'lach, the spies were described as 'princes' – the leaders of the tribes. In Parashat Devarim, Moshe describes the spies as 'men', just ordinary people.
- **What was the mission?** In Parashat Sh'lach the mission was described as 'vayatur' – to scout out the land. The word 'vayatur' shares the same root as 'tayar' - the Hebrew word for tourist. In Parashat Devarim, the mission is described as 'v'yach'pru' which shares the same root as 'lachpor' – the Hebrew word meaning 'to dig'. This implies that the men were searching intensively for evidence, or 'spying'.
- **What was Moshe's role?** In Parashat Sh'lach, Moshe gives detailed instructions to the meraglim, about what information to look for and how to report back. In contrast, Parashat Devarim does not include any instructions from Moshe at all.
- **How did the story end?** In Parashat Sh'lach, the story ends with the meraglim providing a negative report about the land which causes Bnei Yisrael to lose all hope of successfully conquering the land. In Parashat Devarim, Moshe does not mention the meraglim's negative report. The meraglim are recorded as simply bringing back samples of fruit and reporting that the land is good. However, Bnei Yisrael's response is described as follows: "but you [Bnei Yisrael] did not want to go up, and you rebelled against the word of Hashem your G-d".²

These discrepancies are so significant that it almost seems that we are reading about two different events! Yet, Chazal teach us clearly that both narratives are referring to the same event. How can we account for these differences?³

Many commentators⁴ reconcile the two accounts and explain that they are in fact both accurate. However, some details are simply included in one account but excluded from the other account. Only by reading both versions together, can we obtain the full picture. Even regarding details which appear to be contradictory (such as who initiated the mission – Hashem or Bnei Yisrael), the two versions can be reconciled. The commentators explain that Bnei Yisrael made the original request, and Hashem subsequently responded with his command to Moshe.

¹ Devarim 1:22-40.

² Devarim 1:25-26.

³ The following analysis is inspired by a shiur from Rav Chanoch Waxman of Yeshivat Har Etzion:
<http://139.162.248.205:8080/en/i-am-lord-heals-you-shemot-1526-spy-stories-and-heroic-measures>.

⁴ See for example the commentaries of Rashi, the Ramban and the Ibn Ezra.

However, even if we can reconcile all of the differences, we are still left with a question. Why does the Torah contain two incomplete records of the same story?

Perhaps the two accounts represent the different perspectives of Bnei Yisrael and Moshe.

In Parashat Sh'lach, the story is told from Moshe's perspective (which would more closely represent Hashem's perspective). Bnei Yisrael have just received the Torah and are supposed to be on their way towards the Holy Land. However, things are not looking good. Bnei Yisrael start to complain about the difficult journey and the lack of meat⁵. Hashem wants to turn things around. He instructs Moshe to choose princes of the tribes – men of stature who would be able to influence the people. They would (hopefully) tour out the land in accordance with Moshe's instructions and come back with a glowing report, thus inspiring Bnei Yisrael to march into the Land with emunah and optimism. However, the princes bring back a negative report and they influence Bnei Yisrael in the opposite way from what Hashem (and Moshe) were hoping.

In Parashat Devarim, the story is told from Bnei Yisrael's perspective and reflects their agenda. Their emunah is not as strong as it should be. They are nervous about entering the land without taking the usual precautions. They therefore request that spies be sent in to the land to provide military intelligence. From their perspective, they only want to send the spies because they are concerned about their ability to conquer the land and achieve military victory. Therefore, details such as whether the spies are princes, and Moshe's request for information about how the good the land is, are irrelevant and are thus excluded. Finally, the narrative ends by describing the rebellion of Bnei Yisrael and their lack of faith in Hashem. The negative report by the meraglim is almost irrelevant from this perspective and is thus excluded.

Though both versions of the story are the truth, they serve to represent a different angle or perspective of the same facts. The details that are highlighted by the two accounts of the story vary depending on whose perspective the Torah is describing. This teaches us that our perception of the 'truth' can vary, depending on whose perspective we take.

Some important lessons emerge from this analysis.

The importance of tolerance: Though our own way of approaching an issue might be absolutely true, it is not the only legitimate way of looking at a situation. Since we usually tolerate ourselves and see our own perspective more easily, we must be careful not to look down on other people for holding different views or behaving differently to us. Their version of the truth is based on their subjective view and might be equally true. We can never fully know another person's circumstances and see the world through their eyes.

As the old saying goes: "Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes". (And of course, the important postscript: "That way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them... and you have their shoes!"⁶)

Learning from other people: We can learn something from everyone. Since everyone has a different perspective, they may be able to shed some light on an issue that we were not able to glean by ourselves. As we learn in Pirkai Avot: "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone"⁷. When someone is talking to us, we need to listen carefully to what they are saying, even if we think that we already know what they are telling us. They may have a fresh approach or a new insight that we have not yet considered.⁸

Let's try something this week:

1. When we don't see eye to eye with someone, try to remember that everyone has their own perspective.
2. Take more care to give our full attention to someone who is speaking to us, even when we think we already know what they are going to say. We may be surprised at their fresh insights and contrasting perspective.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ See Chapter 11 of sefer Bamidbar (Parashat Beha'alotcha) which precedes the incident of the meraglim.

⁶ Jack Handey, comedian.

⁷ Pirkai Avot 4:1. (And demonstrated by the fact that in a Torah Parasha sheet we just quoted a non-Jewish comedian!)

⁸ In addition, it's preferable not to interrupt someone who is telling us a story we have heard before, also for their sake, so as not to 'steal their thunder'.