

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Shlach – The connection between the spies and the story of Yosef

In this week's Parasha of Shlach, we read about the unfortunate incident of the Meraglim (spies)¹. In last week's Parasha, Bnei Yisrael were marching towards the Holy Land, literally on the brink of entering. But this week it all comes crashing down. After the Meraglim come back with their negative report of the Land, the people lose faith. As a punishment, they are destined to wander in the Midbar for forty years and only their children are privileged to enter the Land.

There are a number of fascinating links between the incident of the Meraglim in our Parasha and the story of Yosef and his brothers in sefer Breishit. The obvious similarity is the topic of Meraglim. Our story is about Meraglim who spy out the Holy Land. In the story of Yosef, the brothers appear before him as the viceroy of Mitzrayim. Yosef recognises them but they do not recognise him.

*“And Yosef remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, ‘You are **Meraglim**; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.’”* (Breishit 42:9)

But the connections go even deeper. In his commentary on the above verse, the Baal HaTurim describes the subtext of this conversation between Yosef and his brothers. When Yosef called the brothers Meraglim he was alluding to the future sin of the Meraglim in our Parasha. Yosef specifically accused the brothers of being Meraglim, because Yosef was an ancestor of Yehoshua who did not give a negative report and was not liable like ten of the other spies. The brothers replied ‘לא היו’ – we are not spies. The Baal HaTurim points out that it was specifically Yehuda, as the leader of the brothers, who responded to Yosef. Yehuda denied the claim because his descendant (Calev) was the other spy that brought a positive report. The Baal HaTurim notes that the gematria of ‘לא היו’ is the same as the gematria of the word ‘Calev’.

There are numerous other connections between the two stories.² We present here two examples.

One of the reasons why the brothers hated Yosef is because Yosef gave negative reports about them to their father Yaakov.³ Despite the fact that Yosef had pure intentions, he was criticised by Chazal for speaking lashon hara. Yosef's speech about his brothers is described as ‘dibatam raah’ meaning bad speech. Similarly, the speech of the Meraglim in our parasha is described as ‘dibat ha'aretz’ – meaning evil speech about the Holy Land. The word ‘dibah’ only appears twice in the Torah⁴ – in the story of Yosef and the story of the Meraglim.

Similarly, the word ‘shlach’ (to send) appears in both the story of Yosef and the story of the Meraglim. Our Parasha is called ‘Shlach’ – the whole story of the Meraglim starts with that word, when Hashem tells Moshe to send the spies. The whole story of Yosef also begins with the word ‘shlach’ – when Yaakov tells Yosef that he is sending him on a mission, to check on his brothers.⁵

¹ This event is commonly referred to as ‘chet hameraglim’ (the sin of the spies). However, in Parashat Shlach they are not actually referred to as meraglim. This could be linked to the fact that the ‘spies’ were not true to the mandate that Moshe had given them. But that's a topic for another time.

² See the “The Sale of Yosef and the Spies”. By Rabbi Gefen (<https://aish.com/the-sale-of-yosef-and-the-spies/>) quoting from “The Real Heroism of Joshua and Caleb” on Alephbeta.org.

³ See Breishit 37:2 (Parashat Vayeshev).

⁴ The words ‘dibatam’ and ‘dibat’ are both derivatives of the word ‘dibah’.

⁵ See Breishit 37:13 and 14 (Parashat Vayeshev).

The parallels between the two stories are not just a point of interest. There is something much deeper going on here. The commentators explain that if the Meraglim had spoken well about the Holy Land, they would have rectified the sin of the sale of Yosef!⁶

What could possibly be the connection between praising the Land and the sale of Yosef?

Let's take a closer look at the sin of the spies.⁷ Hashem caused many Canaanites to die as the Meraglim passed through the land. Thus, the inhabitants of the Land were all busy attending funerals and could not focus on the strangers who were scouting out the Land. This was an enormous act of chesed by Hashem, as it protected the Meraglim from harm.

However, the Meraglim viewed and reported this same fact in a totally different way. They saw the funerals and described the Land as "a land that devours its inhabitants"⁸. But this doesn't make sense. If the Meraglim would have thought about the matter, they would have realised that the large attendance at so many funerals indicated that such an event was an unusual occurrence. If there were constantly numerous funerals taking place, people would not attend them in such large numbers. Society cannot function like that. It must have been a one-off occurrence.

The Steipler Gaon explains that Meraglim interpreted what they saw with a biased perspective. They *wanted* to see the worst, so that's what they saw. Why were the Meraglim biased? The Baal HaTurim, based on the Zohar, explains that the Meraglim all had positions of prominence, and they were subconsciously concerned that they would lose these positions when they entered the Land. Other commentators suggest that they preferred to live miraculously in the Midbar with the manna from Heaven, rather than having to work the Land. Either way, they were biased against the Land. The consequences of their bias for that generation of Bnei Yisrael were disastrous. Almost the entire generation would miss out on entering the Holy Land.

Similarly, the commentators explain that Yosef's brothers came to the conclusion that Yosef was a genuine threat that needed to be taken care of. Just like Avraham's son Yishmael, and Yitzchak's son Eisav, were excluded from the Jewish People, they believed that Yosef was not worthy to be part of the nation. But (at their unimaginably high level) the brothers had a slight bias, caused by the jealousy that they felt towards Yosef.⁹ This bias coloured what they saw and caused them to reach erroneous conclusions with (almost) disastrous consequences.

With this in mind, we can now attempt to explain the connection between praising the Holy Land and the sale of Yosef. The sin of the Meraglim and the sale of Yosef shared the same underlying problem. They both involved an underlying bias leading to clouded judgement which caused mistaken assumptions and inappropriate behaviour.

If the Meraglim had spoken well about the Holy Land, they would have rectified the sin of the sale of Yosef. But they did not. They criticised the land with disastrous consequences. That means that the sin of Yosef's sale has not yet been rectified. The sin is still outstanding. So now it is up to us.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of our subconscious (and sometimes not so subconscious!) biases.
2. When we are tempted to speak lashon hara or act in a way that harms another, try to understand what is driving our behaviour. Try to seek out the advice of an objective person before making a decision or acting.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ There are numerous sources for this idea, including the Chida (Lechem Min Hashamayim on Parashat Miketz) and the 'Gevurat Ari' by the Sha'agat Aryeh.

⁷ Based on "Subjective Proof" by Rav Yissocher Frand (<https://aish.com/subjective-proof/>).

⁸ Bamidbar 13:32.

⁹ It would be chutzpah for us to criticize the extremely righteous brothers. All we can do is repeat the ideas and the lessons that Chazal have taught us.