

Thoughts on פרשת דברים:

- We often do not do justice to the early portions of דברים, assuming it is just a rehash of much of what took place and therefore fail to give it the attention required. In fact in a number of locations seemingly different accounts of earlier events are provided. Rather than being viewed as contradictions, חז"ל saw them as complementary. A most striking example of this phenomenon is the account of the מרגלים. In פרשת וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר, שלח לך אנשים, shortly afterwards followed by a list of the 12 great נשיאים who were to lead this mission. In פרשת דברים we hear nothing of this Divine command nor of these נשיאים; instead we hear that משה רבינו came to בני ישראל with a request, one that he himself found acceptable. [רש"י (פי שלח) puts these different parts together, explaining that they first came to משה with this request, he consulted with ה', who in turn said if they wish to it was ok, but certainly not necessary.] But all of this begs the question. Why were some details placed in שלח while others reserved for דברים? It seems that the changes are related to the changed audience, as in דברים he is addressing the new generation that is about to enter ארץ ישראל. For them, one message and one message alone is needed: that you are responsible for our own fate, we cannot blame "bad" leaders, we cannot even blame the commands given by ה'; it is all up to us. So in דברים he only mentions their request to send the מרגלים out, [and yes, he also does acknowledge that he too found the idea acceptable]. This idea of accepting the responsibility, and not looking for ways to dump it on other people or other reasons, is a constant theme in the תורה. It is for this reason that major חטאים, such as the מקושש, the מקלל or even the לשון הרע spoken by מרים, are all left without full explanations. We are never told why he/she did it. The reason is clear, as then there would be the tendency to excuse the actions. "They had to do it" or "it was not so bad" because of such and such; instead, the תורה wants to close the door to these excuses and that we should stand up and take responsibility.

While I have refrained from using this forum for very specific applications, the events of this week demand comment, particularly for me with my father's יארצייט coming on Tuesday, and תשעה באב the next night. One of the largest and most dreadful moments of חילול שם שמים in our lifetimes' has taken place with this event. I do not know who these men are, and it really does not matter; a headline that speaks of a few dozen crooked politicians and five rabbis arrested is just beyond comprehension.

How does this relate to version #2 of the מרגלים? The answer to my mind is that we must take responsibility for this type of conduct. It only happens because it is accepted, tolerated and sometimes even smiled at. School that play games with the finances and the rules, stores that don't charge sales taxes, illegal business operating out of sight of authorities, businesses and individuals who don't pay taxes or follow other basic laws of the land; all of these are phenomenon that exist in the community. Where is the outrage? How many people will not patronize such a store or send their sons to such a Yeshiva? The answer is painfully few.

Several years ago one of the members of our community tried explaining that in his business sales tax is collected, bolstering his argument with "my rabbi said I must", the response from the customer was "find yourself a new rabbi". In simple terms, when it comes to these matters of honesty, ethics and potential חילול שם שמים, we will either be part of the problem or part of the solution. The events of this week pain us all, embarrass us all, but how many are shocked by these events? If we are not shocked, this too shows how deep the problem is and how much we must all act. I for one am not interested in letting the שם שמים, the תורה, the name of the Jewish people, be soiled by individuals whose values are clearly far from proper תורה values. How dare they do this to the תורה! How dare we let them do it!

There will be those who will attempt to "circle the wagons" and defend these people at all cost. To do that is to guarantee that we will not learn from this episode, and that others so tempted may well feel that even if caught they will still be accepted in good standing in the community. Yes, the same legal system that is indicting them says they are entitled to a fair trial and are not guilty until proven so; but the חילול שם שמים does not wait for that, and technicalities do not matter, the damage has been done. In the second version of the מרגלים story the נשיאים who failed so badly are not mentioned. Instead, we find that כלל ישראל moved on without them into ארץ ישראל, only aware of their own personal responsibilities to get it right. If we are going to move forward on the path of the תורה we too must do the same.

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