

A Muse: Devarim 2008

“All of you approached me and said ‘let us send men ahead of us and let them spy out the land and bring back word to us: the road upon which we should ascend and the cities to which we should come’. The idea was good in my eyes, so I took from you twelve men, one man from each tribe...They took in their hands from the fruit of the land and brought it down to us and said, ‘Good is the land that God gives us’. But you did not wish to ascend and you rebelled against the word of God...You slandered in your tents and said ‘because of Gods hatred for us did he take us out of the Land of Egypt...To where shall we ascend’? Our brothers have melted our hearts saying ‘A people greater and taller than we, cities great and fortified to the heavens and even children of giants have we seen there.’”
(Deuteronomy 1: 22-28)

The opening chapters of Devarim are a review by Moses of the trials and tribulations of the Israelites during their forty year trek in the dessert. In the report that Moses gives, the episode of the twelve spies sent out to foray the Promised Land, is critiqued in great detail. This isn't the first time this episode is mentioned in our text. It is first mentioned in Numbers chapter 13 but the account there varies from the current account. Nechama Leibowitz makes a point of comparing the two versions.

Significant however, is the fact that while the episode of the twelve expeditioners is detailed for a second time, no mention is made of a significantly profound event impacting on Moses and the Israelites – the Golden Calf. The chapter of the Golden Calf symbolized a lack of faith in God and Moses, however, the incident relating to the expeditionary force had far reaching implications.

The infraction of the spies was not so much that they came back with a partially negative report but that they demonstrated a lack of confidence in themselves and their people. The forty year trek in the dessert was intended to forge a faith based people, a new people, a strong people. Examples of this can be seen in texts which begin or end with phraseology such as “bechukotehem lo teilechoo”, indicating the desire to forge a new and different people, a people who believed in God as well as themselves. So for the expeditionary force to return exhibiting a lack of confidence and faith in themselves suggested the possibility that they still might not be ready to receive entry to the Land.

Moses in surveying this particular event critically was suggesting some lessons that might be learned from the event: Accountability for weakness was underscored. Meaning, that if you “will” something strongly enough, it can be done. “Im tirzu ein zeh aggadah”, shrinking from the challenge shouldn’t have been considered an option. This was to be a precious lesson which needed to be processed into the national psyche.

Another lesson to be internalized by the Israelites was that which Nachmanides pointed to; that not only the spies, but those listening to the spies were to be punished. “Is the listener who is misled by the seducer freed from all moral responsibility” asks Nechama Leibovitz? What the spies insinuated was accepted by the people. Rather than think for themselves they relied on others. People cannot excuse themselves on the basis that it was others who misled them. Ultimately every person is responsible for his own actions.

Not because of the sins of Titus were we exiled from the land but because of our own sins. Is this not the message of Tisha B’av?