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בס"ד

## Parashat Shelah-Lekha Part II

### 1. Other Variations between the Two Accounts

In our previous study we discussed the difference in perspective between *Parashat Shelah-Lekha* and Moses' fortieth-year review in Deuteronomy concerning the origination of the project to send men to reconnoiter the promised land. There are many other conspicuous differences between the two accounts. We will cite a number of them and briefly comment on several, but will not here undertake the task of reconciliation.

1) The Deuteronomy account speaks of "spies," as indicated by the terms used, namely, וַיִּקְפְּרוּ לָנוּ (Deut. 1:22) and וַיִּרְגְּלוּ אֶתָּהּ (Deut. 1:24), words that denote "digging" and "spying" respectively. In Numbers, the text frequently employs various forms of the root תּוּר, meaning "going around," "scouting" and does not use the standard terms for spying a single time. Spying is more consistent with a project conceived of by humans while scouting is a more appropriate term for a project under G-d's aegis.

2) In Deuteronomy, the emphasis is on the military battles expected to be waged upon entering the land. The assignment given to the men was primarily focused on searching out the land to determine "the route by which we shall ascend and the cities that we should approach" (Deut. 1:22). In Numbers, the information they were asked to obtain was much more comprehensive, whether the people were "strong or weak, few or many," if the land was "good or bad," "fat or lean," if the cities were "in encampments or fortified" and to bring back fruit samples. In Deuteronomy, they did bring fruit samples but it may have been incidental, since there is no mention of it being requested from them.

3) In Deuteronomy, the details of the spies' mandate appear to have been formulated by the people. Moses quoted them as having presented the plan to him,

about which he did not comment except to declare that the proposal found favor in his eyes. In Numbers, it appears that Moses formulated the particulars of the charge that was placed on the scouts. Since G-d gave the command in Numbers, one wonders why He did not define the details of the mission. It is inconceivable that He transmitted the formulation that Moses presented to the scouts, particularly questioning if the land was good or bad. Moses also asked the scouts to report if the people were strong or weak, few or many, and if the cities were fortified. Was there more that transpired, perhaps behind-the-scenes discussions with the people, about which we are not there told?

4) The Deuteronomy account speaks of exploring a relatively small area of the promised land. The spies ascended the mountain and reached the wadi Eshcol, which appears to be close to Hebron (information garnered from the Numbers account), a prominent grape-growing region. This is a distance of about seventy-five miles from Kadesh-barnea, where the Israelites were then encamped. In Numbers, in addition to the wadi Eshcol, the scouts traversed the length of the land from south to north, having reached Lebo-hamath (Num. 13:21), a city in Syria that constituted part of Israel's northern border (Num. 34:8; 1 Kings 8:65). This is more than 270 miles from the Israelites' encampment site, spanning an area not relevant to their immediate needs. Perhaps the intention was to symbolically lay claim to the whole land. Undoubtedly, in order to cover the whole land in forty days, it is likely that the twelve men had separated into groups, which in any event is the usual procedure in an information-gathering venture. In the Talmud (*b. Sotah* 34b), Raba interpreted the anonymous, unusual singular וַיָּבֵא עַד הַחֲבֵרוֹן ("and he came as far as Hebron" [Num. 13:22]), as referring to Caleb. He is credited with having explored Hebron as we learn from his statement to Joshua (Josh. 14:9-14), apparently indicating that he alone went there.

5) In the Numbers account, it is explicitly stated that the men returned after forty days, an understandable period of time for a mission as extensive as there described. In the Deuteronomy account there is no mention of their having been away forty days. Neither is there explicit mention in Deuteronomy that G-d decreed that the Israelites must remain in the wilderness forty years because of their transgression, one year for each day, as stated in Numbers. Nevertheless, Deuteronomy does recognize that the sinning generation had to die out and that the Israelites sojourned forty years in the wilderness.

6) In Numbers, when the people lose heart, only Caleb and Joshua address them, while Moses does not utter a single word to them. In Deuteronomy, however, it is Moses who speaks to the people while Caleb and Joshua are not cited in this regard.

7) A major feature of the Numbers account is Moses' prayer, to which G-d responded favorably, saving the Israelites from destruction. In Deuteronomy, Moses does not refer to his having prayed in regard to this episode. Neither is there any mention that G-d had first thought to destroy the nation because of this transgression. In Deuteronomy, such a first intention with Moses' recounting of his prayer that G-d accepted and relented is cited only with regard to the molten calf transgression (Deut. 9:18-19, 25-29).

8) In Deuteronomy, Moses describes G-d as having been angry at him בְּגִלְלֶכְךָ ("because of you" [1:37]), that is, because of the people's sin, perhaps because he approved their suggestion although it is not clear what was sinful with the plan to garner intelligence. Perhaps Moses did not take control of the project and allowed it to be structured in a manner that led to the transgression. In any event, as a result G-d decreed that Moses was not to enter the promised land. There is no mention of this in Numbers. In Numbers it is in conjunction with "hitting the rock" (Num. 20:12) that G-d decreed that Moses and Aaron will not enter the land. The latter episode appears to have nothing to do with the Deuteronomy account of the spies and occurred in the last period of the sojourn in the wilderness.

9) The only individual cited in Deuteronomy as being spared to live to enter the land from among the spies is Caleb. None of the other spies are mentioned by

name. Joshua survived because he was Moses' successor as Israel's leader (Deut. 1:36-38). In Numbers, one "paragraph" also only mentions Caleb in this regard (Num. 14:24), while another mentions both Caleb and Joshua (Num.14:30). It should be noted that in Caleb's statement to Joshua upon apportionment of the land (Josh. 14:6-12), recalling his experience as one of the spies, he does not refer to Joshua as also having been one of the spies. He implies that he himself was the only spy faithful to Hashem and reminds Joshua that "you heard...that Anakites (giants) were there and great fortified cities," apparently considering him as one of the people who was not personally there but heard the report from the spies.

Basically, Moses' Deuteronomy review comes across as a historical, naturalistic account, manifesting the people's immediate interests and concerns, and focused on their temporal agenda. The Numbers narrative, as Hashem's expanded communication, may be seen as standing beyond the immediate historical context, possessing a metaphoric dimension from its origination, and refers to much more than the issue at hand.\*

## 2. In the Psalms

Psalm 106 makes reference to our episode. Using words and phrases linked to both the Numbers and Deuteronomy accounts, it reads:

They disdained the desirable land,  
they did not trust in His word.  
They grumbled in their tents  
and did not hearken to Hashem's voice.  
(Ps. 106:24-25)

Interestingly, as in Deuteronomy, no mention is made of Moses' prayer concerning this transgression although the preceding verse speaks of Moses' great saving intervention in the case of the molten calf transgression.

This psalm describes the retribution for the sin of rejecting the promised land very differently than do the two Torah accounts. In contrast to Hashem's decree that the Exodus generation would expire in the wilderness and their children would inherit the land (Num. 14:28-33; Deut. 1:35-39), the fulfillment of

which Scripture unambiguously narrates to have been the case, the psalm's continuation has a variant set of consequences for the children. The psalm's continuation asserts that:

He raised His hand (in oath) concerning them  
that He would make them fall in the wilderness  
and that He would make their offspring fall among  
the nations  
and disperse them through the lands.  
(Ps. 106:26-27).

In Ezekiel 20 we find language reminiscent of these verses. While the Israelites were still in the wilderness, the offspring of the Exodus generation sinned. After Hashem recalled His decree that the fathers would not enter the land (Ezek. 20:15), He made an oath concerning their children. In retribution for following the precedent of their fathers He states that, "I raised My hand concerning them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the lands" (v. 23). Although there is common diction, this differs from the Psalms statement that views the affliction of the offspring as a direct consequence of the parents' sin and part of the same large context.

The sages, commenting on the verses in Psalm 106 together with the passage of Numbers 14, interpret the retribution of exile from the land as one of "measure for measure." The sin of having rejected the land associated with the spies is linked with the future retribution and exile from the land meted out to the descendants; they conceive of G-d's decree in the wilderness as containing a component of exile in the future (*b. Ta'an. 29a*). In Rashi's paraphrase (on Ps. 106:27): "From that moment destruction of the temple was decreed upon them, for they wept on the night of the ninth of Ab, and the Holy One, Blessed Be He, said, 'They wept needlessly so I will establish it for them as a day of weeping throughout the generations.'"

Such foreknowledge of a sworn decree made by G-d even before the Israelites entered the land is extremely problematic. It would seem to restrict the people's future free will to abide by the covenant and to deserve to remain in the land. It would inject a perpetual bleak and sad note into national life. The Torah does speak of exile if Israel sins in the land, but

such exile would occur only if they themselves sin after they enter the land. There is no statement in the Torah hinting at such a decree proclaimed during the wilderness period that was placed upon the children of the generation that left Egypt. True, some Torah assertions appear to be saying that in the future the nation will inevitably sin and it will lead to destruction or exile. (We will discuss these verses in coming studies.) But the notion does not appear that the nation's fate in the land was determined by the sinning before entering the land.

In the Torah, Israel is ultimately given the option to remain loyal to the covenant and remain on the land forever, such as stated in the verse, "In order that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied upon the land...as the days of the heavens above the earth" (Deut. 11:21).\*\*

Radaq interprets G-d's decree regarding the children, sworn while the Israelites were in the wilderness, as having been realized before they entered the land, while still in the wilderness, in the Israelite defeats at Hormah and Arad (Num. 14:45 and 21:1 respectively). In the latter episode, the Torah states that Israelites were taken captive without specifying a number. Although Israel subsequently defeated Arad, the Radaq assumes that the Israelite captives were not retrieved but were sold to other nations, fulfilling the psalm clause "and disperse them through the lands," even though such a consequence is not mentioned in the Torah's account.

Another suggestion sees the decree as referring to Hashem's original response to the sin, that is, to His thought to destroy the nation: אֶפְנֶה בְּדֶבֶר וְאֹרֶשְׁנֵם ("I will smite them with pestilence and destroy them" [Num. 14:12]). Such an outcome would have included exile, since in the natural order when pestilence strikes it kills a large portion of the population and the younger, healthier members who survive would go into exile. Since Hashem relented, the Torah did not depict how that destruction of the nation would have been carried out. The psalmist, however, in a poetic context, chose to elaborate on G-d's first reaction, which reflects the magnitude of Israel's transgression. It was unnecessary to go into the detail of G-d's acceding to Moses' prayer since that was a matter understood by all (*M. Y. Ashkenazi, Vayoel Moshe.*)

Ibn Ezra interpreted the Psalms decree of exile as conditional – it only applies if after entering the land the offspring follow in their fathers’ rebellious footsteps, in accordance with Moses’ exhortations to them in the Torah. Although not stated in the verse – and straightforward translation does not indicate it – Ibn Ezra understands the condition as necessarily taken for granted. What was predetermined was only the form of retribution that would be meted out if the nation eventually sinned, although such retribution was in accordance with the natural order of the world.

These interpretations do not appear to be the straightforward meaning of the psalm verse. And the oath in Ezekiel 20:23 is similarly problematic.

### 3. Conjecture

Perhaps, in an application of the principle that “the Torah speaks in the language of man” we may posit that the Torah describes even Hashem, when angry, as adding a hyperbolic dimension to His decree. Thus, He might threaten an action that would be called for in the realm of justice but that He does not intend to implement. Of course, He never changes His mind whimsically – אֱלֹהִים לֹא אִישׁ קָל וְיִכְזֹב וְיִגְן אָדָם וַיִּתְנַחֵם (“G-d is not a man that He should be false, a human who would change his mind” [Num. 23:19]). But in order that humans should more properly appreciate His disappointment at their major transgressions some statements may be employed that reflect the way an honorable and serious person would react in a situation, including some exaggeration. When the recipient of a great benefaction expresses abject ingratitude and defiance to his generous benefactor the latter may respond in an extreme, exaggerated fashion despite the fact that he may have other, deeper, considerations and does not truly desire the negative outcome he threatens. In response to the golden calf violation Hashem pronounced His intention to destroy the nation. But attached to it was His hint to Moses to pray for them, to mitigate His just-expressed intention, which obviously did not reflect His true position (Exod. 32:10; Deut. 9:14).

In *Parashat Ha’azinu*, Hashem declares that He would have made an end of Israel if not for side considerations related to how the enemy would have interpreted the events (Deut. 32:26-27). But surely those side considerations could have been overcome.

The explanation appears to be related to the following very understandable considerations. When one is committed to not overly injure the object of his anger, he may explain his restraint in a somewhat superficial manner, unwilling to state the true reason for his reluctance to act. He might not want to reveal his true position in order not to impede movement toward improvement on the part of an iniquitous party. Between the lines we may discern that Hashem’s complex statements reveal a deep commitment to Israel, demonstrating that He does not truly want to destroy it. But He does not want the object of His concern to take advantage of His commitment.

This perspective is supported by the passage in 2 Kings that shares some concepts and word usage with the relevant *Ha’azinu* verses. It explains why Hashem saved Israel when the nation was on the verge of being destroyed, and saved them through Jeroboam son of Joash, who is described as having done evil in Hashem’s eyes and having followed the sinful behavior of Jeroboam son of Nebat, causing Israel to sin. “Hashem saw the affliction of Israel, that it was extremely bitter, וְאָפֶס עֲצוּר וְאָפֶס עֲזוּב, and there were none to help Israel. And Hashem had not declared to blot out Israel’s name from under heaven” (2 Kings 14:24-27).

One may wonder whether an aspect of the pronouncements under discussion may be explained with a suggestion that we will proffer after reviewing several details. The Psalms statement was composed after the Israelites had committed the most serious of transgressions. They mingled with the nations and learned their ways, including idolatry and child sacrifice (Ps. 106:35-39). This description is reminiscent of the doings in the times of Manasseh (2 Kings 21), which resulted in the terrible calamities that befell Israel and eventually led to its exile (2 Kings 21:12-16; 24:3-4). The survival of the nation was literally at stake. These topics are depicted in the continuation of the psalm that we are dealing with (Ps. 106:40-43).

At some point Hashem took note of the people’s tremendous suffering and their cry, recalling His covenant and influencing their captors to have mercy on them (Ps. 106:44-46). There was a change in the people. The psalmist’s prayer was then for Hashem to gather them in from the nations (Ps. 106:47). The

Psalm itself seems to have been part of the effort to provide the people with a helpful perspective, to encourage them to be contrite and thus to foster the ingathering of the exiles.

Many of those in exile had considered the situation hopeless, their feelings expressed in the popular adage of the time, “Fathers ate sour grapes and the teeth of the children are set on edge” (Jer. 31:28; Ezek. 18:2). In light of the probable national disintegration that the prophets sensed was about to occur and the urgent need for increased incentive in order for the people to have hope for a better future and repent from their sinful ways, Psalm 106 manifests a potent strategy.

The source of the retribution that the people were suffering was retrojected to a much earlier time, a time before the Israelites entered the land after leaving Egypt, ignoring the theological conundrum. This was a type of extension of “visiting iniquities of fathers on sons.” With this approach, the prophets provided a new way of thinking and of relating to G-d. This was connected with the new policy of governance that Hashem was then implementing through the prophets, whereby it will no longer be said, “Fathers ate sour grapes and the teeth of the children are set on edge” (Jer. 31:28; Ezek. 18:2). The people were assured that from then on they will no longer be saddled with the burden of their parents, “But each individual shall die for his own sin” (Jer. 31:29) and “The soul that sins, it only shall die” (Ezek. 18:4).

This gave incentive toward repentance to many Israelites and increased their hope for national restoration. Based on the new prophecies the Israelites may think: What befell us was decreed from before our forefathers entered the land. It was an accumulation of sinning from the generation that left Egypt and their sons. Nevertheless, Hashem brought them into the land, and gave them a chance since He is merciful, but the nation continued to sin and were exiled. We should now repent and make a new start for we will no longer be judged with the sins of our fathers. G-d may forgive us and return us to our land. There is hope.

Israel’s dire situation that had pertained during the time of Jeremiah – the likely author of Psalm 106 –

and Ezekiel, was greatly alleviated by the efforts of these prophets.\*\*\*

## Endnotes

\* Rabbi S. D. Sassoon, in commenting on the relationship between the Numbers and Deuteronomy accounts, expressed the thought that on a deeper level, the Numbers account may have been a prophecy directed to the מְדִבְרַת הָעַמִּים (“the wilderness of the nations” [Ezek. 20:35]). This was the exile to other lands that the nation eventually fell victim to. In that context, Hashem pledged to judge Israel’s rebelliousness in a manner resembling His judgment of the fathers’ generation in the “wilderness of the land of Egypt” (the Deuteronomy account), purifying the nation through dispersal to foreign lands and returning the remnant to the covenant. Specifically, G-d states וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל מְדִבְרַת הָעַמִּים וְנִשְׁפַּטְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁם (“I will bring you into the wilderness of the nations and enter into judgment with you there” [Ezek. 20:35]) followed by כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁפַּטְתִּי אֶת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּמִדְבַר אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם (“As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt” [v. 36]).

\*\* Exile is not a contradiction to the scriptural notion that the grant of the land of Canaan to Israel is in perpetuity. That G-d’s intention was a grant in perpetuity is made clear in His promises to Abraham concerning his descendants, that their possession of the land would be לְאָחֲזֹתָ עוֹלָם וְעַד עוֹלָם (“forever” and “for an everlasting holding” [Gen. 13:15 and 17:8 respectively]). Moses cited the divine promise to the patriarchs with the term וְנִחַלְתֶּם לְעֹלָם (“that they shall inherit forever” [Exod 32:13]). Indeed, this is implied and taken for granted throughout Scripture. When and if exile was to occur, the land would await the repentant nation’s return. This is in accordance with G-d’s proclamation at the conclusion of the Leviticus chastisement (Lev. 26:42-45) and as Moses tacitly indicated at the beginning of the Deuteronomic covenant reaffirmation (Deut. 4:29-31) as well as explicitly stressed at its conclusion (Deut. 30:1-10).

\*\*\* For additional discussion on this topic see our study *Parashat Yitro Part IV: Visiting Iniquity of Fathers upon Sons*, section V.

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