

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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פרשת שלח
כ"ג בסיון תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 13:1-15:41

In this *parasha*, Moshe sends scouts to explore the Land of Israel; ten of them convince the people that it will be too difficult to conquer the land; Hashem responds to their lack of confidence by punishing *Bnei Yisrael* with 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The people are given the commandments of meal offerings, libations [liquid offerings], *challah* [an offering of dough], and *tzitit* [fringes on four-cornered garments].

A lesson derived from this *parasha* is “שביל הזהב” (*shvil hazahav*; the Golden Mean), a fancy name for the virtue of moderation.

The *parasha* begins with the story of the spies. The מרגלים (*meraglim*; spies) are sent to Canaan to scout out the land. They return and, with the exception of two men, they verbally “trash” the land. Their statements are clearly exaggerations and hyperbole. As a result of their egregious statements and lack of faith in God, the Bnei Yisrael were destined to wander the wilderness for forty years and to have only the younger generation enter the Land.

As a response and in contradistinction to the *meraglim* arose the מעפילים (*ma’pilim*; literally, daring or audacious ones). Many people are familiar with the *ma’pilim* of the second *aliyah* at the beginning of the 20th century. They were the 15,000 Jews who arrived in Palestine between 1934 and 1939, escaping from European poverty and persecution (and eventually death). The British Mandatory government called them “illegal immigrants,” but the Jews called them *ma’pilim*, which they translated as “pioneers” rather than “audacious ones”.

Fewer people are familiar with the Biblical *ma'pilim*. Chapter 14, verses 39-45 states:

לט וַיִּדְבֹּר מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֶל-כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיִּתְאַבְּלוּ הָעָם, מְאֹד. מ וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ בִבְקָר, וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל-רֹאשׁ-הָהָר לֵאמֹר: הֲנִנּוּ, וַעֲלִינוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר ה'--כִּי חָטָאנוּ. מא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, לָמָּה זֶה אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת-פִּי ה'; וְהִיא, לֹא תַצְלַח. מב אֶל-תַּעֲלוּ, כִּי אֵין ה' בְּקִרְבְּכֶם; וְלֹא, תִגָּפוּ, לִפְנֵי, אֹיְבֵיכֶם. מג כִּי הָעַמְלִקִּי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי שָׁם לִפְנֵיכֶם, וְנִבְלָתֶם בְּחָרֵב: כִּי-עַל-כֵּן שָׁבַתֶם מֵאַחֲרֵי ה', וְלֹא-יְהִיָּה ה' עִמָּכֶם. מד וַיַּעֲפְלוּ, לַעֲלוֹת אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר; וְאַרְוֹן בְּרִית-ה' וּמֹשֶׁה, לֹא-מָשׁוּ מִקְּרֵב הַמַּחֲנֶה. מה וַיֵּרֶד הָעַמְלִקִּי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי, הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּהָר הַהוּא; וַיַּכּוּם וַיַּכְתּוּם, עַד-הַחֲרָמָה.

39 And Moshe told these words to all the children of Israel; and the people mourned greatly. **40** And they got up early in the morning, and went up to the top of the mountain, saying: 'Behold, we are here, and will go up to the place which Hashem has promised; for we have sinned.' **41** And Moshe said: 'Why now do you violate the commandment of Hashem, seeing that it shall not succeed? **42** Do not go up, for Hashem is not among you; so that you be not smitten down before your enemies. **43** For there the Amalekite and the Canaanite are there before you, and you shall fall by the sword; since you turned back from following Hashem, and Hashem will not be with you.' **44** But they dared to go up to the top of the mountain; but the ark of the covenant of Hashem, and Moshe, did not depart out of the camp. **45** Then the Amalekite and the Canaanite, who dwelt on that mountain, came down, and smote them and beat them down, even until Chormah.

In response to the spies, the *ma'pilim* took the dramatically opposite position. They wanted to go immediately into the Land. But the time was not right. And, as we see from the text, they failed miserably.

The *meraglim* and the *ma'pilim* were each at separate ends of the spectrum. The *meraglim* said, "We'll never be able to conquer the land." The *ma'pilim* said, "We can conquer the land right now."

Which brings us to *shvil hazahav*, the Golden Mean. Maimonides [12th Century Spain/Egypt] states that, with few exceptions, everything should be done in moderation. Bnei Yisrael's mistake at this point in their sojourn in the wilderness

was that they were behaving in extreme manners. The attempt to go up to the Land at that point was not the correct response to the spies' out-and-out rejection of the Land. The correct measure would have been to discard the report of the spies and to put their faith in and follow the word of God.

And so we learn from the juxtaposed stories of the *meraglim* and the *ma'pilim* to consider the middle ground before turning to extremes.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Maimonides says that moderation is not acceptable when it comes to anger; that anger should not be displayed at all. Why do you think he violates his own rule of “moderation in everything” when it comes to anger?
- If you had been in the *midbar* (wilderness) when the spies came back, what might you have thought? What might you have done in response to their report?
- Do you think the *ma'pilim* at the beginning of the formation of the State of Israel were brave? Why or why not? Do you think the Biblical *ma'pilim* were brave? Why or why not?