

JUNE 16, 2008

## Parashat Shelach

### Accomplices of Evil

**Kulam anashim, roshei Bnei Yisrael – “All of them men, heads of the children of Israel” (Numbers 13:3)**

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Our *parashah* tells the story of the spies sent to scout the Land of Israel. The Torah describes the spies as, "Heads of the Jewish people" and indeed, Rashi states that before their appointment as spies they were men of great importance in the nation. Yet, suddenly they become corrupted. What happens to such significant people that transforms them from responsible leaders into agents of negativity and destruction? Maharal (Rabbi Judah Leow of Prague) in his Gur Aryeh commentary on Rashi explains that the real destructive motives laid first with the populations of the tribes that pushed for the spy mission. Because they were filled with doubt about the veracity of Moses' reports of the goodness of the Land of Israel these people initiate the mission with the hopes that the report would come back negative. While the men on the mission are initially righteous, their sponsors are not and therefore, when the spies agree to represent the tribes who send them, they become transformed into their sponsors and look for reasons for their mission to fail.

Maharal teaches us a critical lesson about those who work for and represent evil regimes. While at the outset they may enter the scene without prejudice, as soon as they become accomplices of evil they themselves take on not only the responsibility for their sponsors, but the attitudes and behaviors of them as well.

Today, many supporters of Israel are advocating taking action against modern accomplices of the Iranian regime that calls for the destruction of the Jewish state. In order to peacefully pressure Iran to halt her nuclear program, activists are utilizing state-level campaigns to divest public pension plans from companies investing in Iran's oil and natural gas sector. Divesting from these companies would send a strong signal to Iran that American states will not provide funds to help Iran advance its nuclear weapons pursuit and support terrorism. While U.S. companies have been barred by Executive Order from directly investing in Iran since 1996, American citizens, including state pension managers, can still buy the stocks of foreign companies invested in Iran that are not covered by the order. State divestment legislation will partially close this loophole by prohibiting public pension funds from investing in some foreign companies that do business in Iran's energy sector. Iran is already facing growing difficulties as a result of international sanctions and further divestment would increase pressure to halt its nuclear activities. For more on Iranian divestment click [here](#).

Like the spies, these foreign companies cannot claim innocence with regard to Iran's nuclear pursuit. By investing in the Iranian regime they bear a moral and ethical responsibility. ■

### Enemies in the Land

**Ve'sham Achiman Sheishai v'Talmi – “And there were Achiman, Sheishai and Talmi” (Numbers 13:22)**

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During the spies' travels through the Land of Israel on their mission, they encounter several daunting adversaries. As the Torah states, “And they went up into the South, and came unto Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the children of Anak, were there.” Many of the commentaries translate the word Anak not as a proper noun, but instead to mean “giants.” With this meaning of the word we learn that these three men were giants who presented formidable if

not unconquerable adversaries. The Talmud in Sotah (34b) explains that these giants' names relate their most fearsome qualities: "Ahiman [was so named because he was] the strongest [*meyuman*] of them; Sheshai because he made the earth like pits [*shehithoth*]; Talmai because he made the earth like furrows [*telamim*]."

Today the people of Israel face a modern-day Sheshai and Talmai that also create pits in the Land, not by the power of their gigantic foot, but rather from the powerful crash of mortars and rockets.

Since Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 more than 4,000 rockets and mortars have rained down on Israeli civilians. Faced with unremitting rocket attacks from Gaza, the government of Israel has been forced to take action to defend its citizens—the prime obligation of any nation. Yet simultaneously, and despite Hamas' deliberate targeting of Israeli civilians, Israel remains committed to talks with the Palestinian Authority (PA). To improve the prospects for successful Israeli-Palestinian talks, the Arab states must increase essential political and financial support to the PA and begin to normalize relations with Israel. Arab states need to take concrete steps to support the talks by providing PA President Mahmoud Abbas with the political support he will need to fight terrorism, isolate Hamas and make the tough compromises necessary to reach an agreement with Israel.

Support from the Arab states is crucial in providing PA President Mahmud Abbas the political cover to make peace. If they do so then children in Sderot will no longer live in fear like the spies in the face of their giant enemies. ■

## The Power of Speech

### Vayotziyu dibat ha'aretz – “And they spread an evil report about the Land...” (Numbers 13:32)

The story of the sin of the spies comes at the heels of the story of Miriam's illness found at the end of last week's Torah portion. Rashi notes the juxtaposition of that story, where Miriam is afflicted with *tzara'at* (leprosy) as a punishment for her speaking slanderously about her brother Moses, with our story about the failed mission of the spies. Rashi teaches us that the Torah connects these stories, “Because she was afflicted for the issue of slander that she spoke about her brother. And these evil men witnessed [her ordeal] but did not take heed.” (See Rashi on 13:2) The Sin of the Spies teaches us the great power of speech. In a matter of moments, ten spies transformed an eager nation primed to enter the Promised Land into a frightened group ready to flee back to Egypt. Moreover, when they see the people wavering after their initial report, they resort to spreading lies and propaganda in order to further frighten the nation. Ramban (on verse 32) teaches us that the spies, convinced of the futility of the mission to conquer Israel, resort to falsehood and slander to destroy the morale of the nation. Their willingness to highlight the negative aspects of the Land of Israel brings about not only their own destruction, but the loss of an entire generation of Jews.

While this story highlights the harmful aspects of negative speech, it also teaches us the positive power of speech. If a single night of talk caused so much misery then using that same energy for positive purposes can bring equally stunning results.

Israel is currently using the power of speech in just such a positive way. Israel has repeatedly expressed its desire to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict with all its neighbors and has voiced its willingness to make painful sacrifices in order to achieve that objective. The success of the ongoing talks with Syria will depend on Syria's willingness to match Israel's commitment to peace by curtailing its strategic ties with Iran and ending its support for Hizballah, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups, which operate freely in Damascus. In the south as well the power of speech has borne fruit as Israel's cabinet has decided to pursue a cease-fire with terrorist organizations in Gaza. This great example of using speech for a positive purpose is already having an impact; however, we must remain aware that should Hamas rocket attacks continue, like those that killed an Israeli and wounded several others recently, Israel may be forced to take more aggressive action in Gaza.

There is a powerful lesson to be learned from the tragedy of the sin of the spies. In the words of Rashi, we must “take heed” of the incredible power of speech to impact our lives on a personal, communal and even national level. ■