

Must we follow what people do,
or what God says?

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Weekly Parsha

Shelach

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Yehoshua's Initial Silence in Response to the Report of the Spies

*And Kalev silenced the nation's
protest against Moshe. And he said:
We will surely ascend and possess it.
For we certainly have the ability.*

(continued on next page)



Dueling Rhetoric

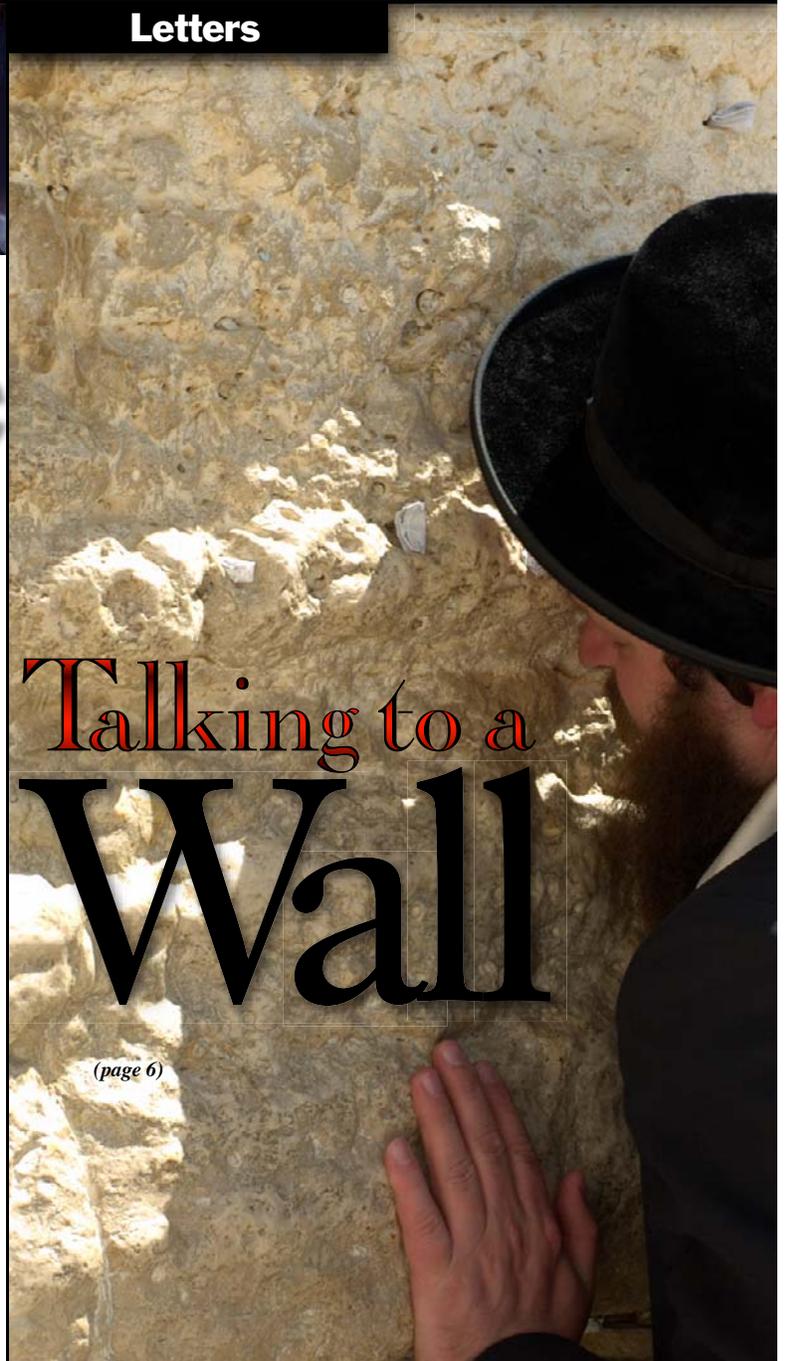
RABBI STEVEN PRUZANSKY

One way to evaluate PM Netanyahu's much-anticipated speech at Bar-Ilan University this past Sunday night is to conclude wistfully that it didn't take long for him to cave. Running on a platform of no concessions to the Palestinians, and implicitly rejecting a future Palestinian state (even, at times, explicitly), at the first hint of pressure Netanyahu sacrificed bargaining power, the credibility of Israel's right-wing political parties, and good judgment by succumbing to American pressure moments after the first nudge was felt.

Surely we can expect more from our putative leaders – or perhaps not. After all, the operative principle of Israeli politics for the last thirty years has been "Labor proposes and Likud disposes." It was Likud that surrendered Sinai, dismantled settlements there and recognized

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Letters



Talking to a Wall

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Weekly Parsha

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(BeMidbar 13:30)

Our parasha relates the incident of the spies –the meraglim. Bnai Yisrael requests that spies precede them into the land. Moshe acquiesces. The spies are charged with the responsibility of scouting the land and bringing back a sample of its fruit. Moshe hopes that the report of the spies will encourage the nation and facilitate their conquest of the land. The meraglim scout the land. However, they are intimidated by the challenge of possessing the land. The spies report that the land is indeed fertile. However, it is occupied by mighty nations and its cities are fortified. They imply that Bnai Yisrael will not be capable of taking possession of the land.

Two of the spies do not participate in this pessimistic report. Yehoshua and Kaleb do not agree with the other spies. When the other spies deliver their report, Kaleb immediately protests that the spies have come to an unwarranted decision. In fact, the nation can conquer the land.

It is interesting that during this debate between Kaleb and the other spies Yehoshua remained silent. He did not take Kaleb's side. Instead, he allowed Kaleb to act alone in his opposition to other spies. Only after Kaleb failed to influence the nation and the people succumbed to the undermining pessimism of the other spies did Yehoshua join Kaleb and speak out in favor of proceeding with the conquest. Why did Yehoshua not immediately express his support for Kaleb's position?

Rabbaynu Yitzchak Karo suggests that Yehoshua was following a carefully-designed plan. He knew that the other scouts would contest Kaleb's assertion that Bnai Yisrael could conquer the land. This would initiate a debate between Kaleb and the other spies. Yehoshua felt that by immediately siding with Kaleb, little would be gained. He and Kaleb would be in the minority opposing the shared view of the other ten spies. However, Yehoshua hoped that Kaleb's opponents would interpret his silence as tacit approval of their position. This assumption would encourage them to appeal to Yehoshua to present his position to the nation and serve as the arbitrator. This appeal would enhance his credibility with the nation. Yehoshua planned to surprise the ten spies by using the credibility they bestowed upon him to undermine their position and state his support for Kaleb's opinion. This would be devastating for

the ten spies. The very person whom they called upon to serve as arbitrator of the truth would side with their opponent. He hoped this strategy would provide him the opportunity to truly impact the outcome of the debate.[1]

Unfortunately, Yehoshua's plan did not work. The ten spies never called upon him to express his opinion. He was forced to simply side with Yehoshua. As he expected, his support of Kaleb did not impact the outcome of the debate.

The Consequences of the Sin of the Spies and Bnai Yisrael

Say to them: As I live, so says Hashem, shall it not be as you have spoken in my ears? So I will do to you. (BeMidbar 14:28)

The spies returned. They reported that the land could not be captured. They also criticized the quality of the Land of Israel. The people accepted the report. They became despondent. They believed would never capture the fertile land, promised by Hashem. They concluded that rather than die in the wilderness, they should consider returning to Egypt. Hashem punished Bnai Yisrael for this rebellion. This generation would not enter the Land of Israel. Instead, the children, whom they had predicted would die in the wilderness, would conquer the land.

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno explains that this episode altered the future of Bnai Yisrael. Hashem had planned for Moshe to lead the people into the land. The Land of Israel would be easily captured. The conquest would be permanent and there would be no subsequent exile. He further explains that the consequence of the sin of the spies and their generation was not limited to the death of these individuals in the wilderness. Instead, the destiny of Bnai Yisrael was altered. Moshe did not lead the nation into the land. He was replaced by Yehoshua. Without Moshe, the conquest was far less miraculous than the conquest Hashem had planned to execute through Moshe. An even more important consequence of their sin was that the possession of the land would not be permanent. Instead, it would be followed by exile. Only in the Messianic Era will Bnai Yisrael establish permanent possession of the land.[2]

(continued on next page)

Our Sages explain that this rebellion occurred on the ninth day of the month of Av. This has been a day of tragedy for Bnai Yisrael. Among the catastrophes occurring on this date is the destruction of both Temples.[3] The tradition that the rebellion occurred on the ninth of Av has a special meaning, according to Sforno. The destruction of the Temples was an outcome of this rebellion. It is, therefore, fitting to identify the date of the rebellion to the ninth of Av.

The Inadequacy of Bnai Yisrael's Repentance

And they arose in the morning. And they ascended to the top of the mountain. And they said: We will ascend to the place of which Hashem spoke for we have sinned. (BeMidbar 14:40)

Bnai Yisrael refuses to proceed to the land. Hashem tells the nation of its punishment. The people realize that they have sinned. They want to correct their error. They are prepared to face their fears. They declare they will travel into Canaan and do battle with the nations. Moshe advises Bnai Yisrael not to proceed with its plan. He tells the people that Hashem will not be with them. If they attempted to conquer the Land of Israel, they will be defeated. The people do not listen. They continue their journey towards Canaan. They are attacked by Amalake and are driven back.

This incident is very difficult to understand. The response of Moshe to Bnai Yisrael's declaration of willingness to proceed and Hashem's abandonment of His nation to Amalake seem almost arbitrary. Bnai Yisrael acknowledged that it had sinned. The people accepted responsibility for their doubts and lack of faith. They eagerly undertook dramatic action to overcome their unfounded fears. This seems to be the model of repentance. Why was the repentance of Bnai Yisrael not accepted?

In order to answer this question, we must analyze the process of atonement. Most sacrifices are brought to atone for a sin. The sacrifice is accompanied by a confession. Maimonides discusses this confession in his Mishne Torah. He explains that the confession contains three elements. First, the person must acknowledge the transgression. Second, the person must indicate he has repented. Last, the person must verbally recognize that the sacrifice is required for atonement.[4] Why is this last step necessary? It is easy to understand that atonement for a sin requires acknowledgement of the transgression

and repentance, but why is verbal affirmation of the requirement of the sacrifice essential to the process?

It seems that atonement is not secured until the sinner accepts that his transgression has consequences. In this case, the consequence is the sacrifice. Maimonides further discusses this concept in his description of the death penalty. He explains that one receiving this penalty must confess. Maimonides defines the minimum standard for this confession: the person to be executed must ask Hashem to accept his or her death as atonement for the transgression.[5] In other words, his atonement requires he accept that his death is the consequence of his sin.

We can now respond to our original question. Why was the repentance of Bnai Yisrael inadequate? The nation was truly prepared to proceed with the conquest of the land. The people were willing to confront their anxieties. However, this was not sufficient to secure atonement. Hashem had decreed that this generation would perish in the wilderness. Repentance required that the nation acknowledge that their transgression had a consequence. They were required to accept the justice of Hashem's judgment. In other words, Bnai Yisrael certainly had the option of praying to Hashem to reconsider His judgment and the punishment He had decreed upon His nation. However, they must first accept the justice of the decree. Instead, they attempted to defy the decree and to proceed with the conquest of the land.

Bnai Yisrael's Ethical Dilemma

And they placed him under guard, for it had not been explained what should be done with him. (BeMidbar 15:34)

The Chumash recounts the first violation of the Shabbat. Rashi explains that the people knew that the punishment for violation of the Shabbat was death. However, there are four forms of this punishment in the Torah. They did not know which form of the penalty to apply. The violator was placed under guard until Hashem revealed to Moshe the proper punishment.[6]

Hashem certainly knew that the Shabbat would ultimately be violated. Why did He not reveal the specific punishment until the crisis arose? This problem is even more troublesome according to one opinion in the Talmud. In order for a sinner to be punished for the violation of a commandment, he must first be warned by witnesses. The witnesses must notify the sinner that he is violating the mitzvah. They must also indicate the punishment. According to Rebbe Yehudah, the

notification must include the specific form of punishment. According to this opinion, adequate warning could not be provided for this first violation of the Shabbat.[7] The specific punishment was not known at the time of the violation! The Talmud addresses this problem. It explains that the legal requirements for execution were, in fact, not met. According to normative practice, this first violator of the Shabbat could not be punished. However, the Torah empowers the courts and a prophet to punish an individual, in extreme cases, without meeting these normative requirements. Moshe and his court used this authority to execute this violator.[8] In other words, this first violation of the Shabbat created a crisis that could not be solved in accordance with normative law. Only through using the extraordinary power of Moshe and the court was the dilemma solved. What were Hashem's reasons for allowing this preventable crisis to occur?

Hashem has commanded Bnai Yisrael to observe the laws. The responsibility for enforcement rests upon the nation. At times, this requires that the people harshly punish one of their own. This is a difficult task. It is easy to be callous in dealing with an outsider. However, we all feel less comfortable rebuking a friend or peer. It is even more challenging to precipitate the punishment of a friend. An even more excruciating ethical dilemma emerges when the crime committed by our friend is a victimless religious violation. However, the Torah does decree that some religious transgressions – like violation of the Shabbat – are so severe that they are punished with death. This decree of the Torah is only meaningful if we as a nation are willing to support it. We must be willing to confront this challenge and moral dilemma and take this most severe action against a peer or friend.

Hashem created a situation in which the people would be required to demonstrate this devotion to and support for the standards of the Torah. According to Rebbe Yehudah, in order to construct an even more meaningful challenge, they were even provided with a rationalization for overlooking the violation. The people did not yet know the specific form of execution that applied to a person guilty of violating the Shabbat. Without this information they could not adequately warn the violator of the consequences of his actions. They knew that because they did not provide an adequate warning, the violator was exempt from the death penalty. However, despite the tempting opportunity to overlook the violation and the accompanying rationalization for this course of action, the nation realized that this initial rebellion against the Shabbat could not be overlooked. They brought the violator to Moshe and the court and entrusted them with deciding

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the proper course of action, fully realizing that their friend might be executed. They knew that Moshe and the court might resort to their extraordinary power to execute the violator despite the deficiency in the warning he had received. Through following this path, the people demonstrated their commitment to and support of the Torah.

The Differences between the Missions of Yehoshua's Spies and Moshe's Spies

Any Yehoshua bin Nun sent from Shittim two men – secret spies – saying: Go and see the land and Yericho. And they went and they came to the home of a harlot. And her name was Rachav. And they laid down there. (Yehoshua 2:1)

This passage is from the haftara of Parshat Shelach and is directly related to its content. The Torah portion discusses the incident of the spies. Moshe sends a group of spies into the Land of Israel. The spies return and report that the land is well-defended. They also question the vitality and health of the land's environment. Only two of the spies – Yehoshua and Kalev – demur. They insist that the land is remarkably fertile and that they would succeed in its conquest. The nation is persuaded by the report provided by the majority of the spies and concludes that it is doomed. They will not succeed in the conquest. The nation decides that it must return to Egypt. Hashem punishes Bnai Yisrael. The people are condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years – until the members of the generation die. Then, their children will possess the Land of Israel.

The haftara is taken from Sefer Yehoshua. Forty years have passed and now Yehoshua leads the nation. Bnai Yisrael has arrived at the border of the land of Israel and is prepared to follow Yehoshua into the land. They will vanquish the nations that now occupy it and take possession of the Land of Israel. But Yehoshua makes an amazing decision. He decides that before initiating his campaign, he will send spies into the land. This seems to be a very strange decision. Moshe had sent spies and this led to disaster. Yehoshua was one of these spies. No one was more familiar with the incident. Why would Yehoshua risk bringing about a repetition of the same catastrophe that Moshe's spies instigated?

And it was told to the king of Yericho saying: Men from Bnai Yisrael have come here tonight to spy out the land. (Yehoshua 2:2)

Yehoshua's spies are immediately recognized. The king of Yericho is notified of their presence. He launches a search to find them. Rachav decides to hide them. She bravely protects them from detection. She helps them escape from

Yericho and return to Bnai Yisrael. In exchange, she asks that Bnai Yisrael spare her and her family.

It seems that Yehoshua's decision was ill-advised. The spies were easily detected. They were saved only through the efforts of Rachav. Without her intervention, Yehoshua's decision would have been disastrous. At best, the spies would have returned with a report of their harrowing experiences and near-deaths. This account would not have been very reassuring.

Send for yourself men and they should spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to Bnai Yisrael. You should send one man from each tribe of their fathers. Each of them should be a leader. (BeMidbar 13:2)

Before we can understand Yehoshua's decision, we must review elements of the incident in the Torah portion. Hashem authorizes Moshe to create a group of twelve spies. Each shevet – tribe – of Bnai Yisrael must be represented with the exception of Shevet Leyve. This group of spies will be sent together into the land and it will bring back a report.

Why were twelve spies needed? This seems to be an unnecessarily large group. The larger the group the more likely it will be detected. Yehoshua's two spies were immediately observed. Certainly, only a miracle could protect this large delegation from detection. Why did Hashem authorize a plan that needlessly relied on a miraculous intervention?

It must, however, be noted that this large group did miraculously avoid detection. Whereas Yehoshua's more covert strategy was a failure and his two spies were immediately recognized, it seems that Hashem was willing to protect the secrecy of the large group sent by Moshe. But Hashem was not willing to afford the same protection to Yehoshua's spies.

And look upon the land – what is it? And regarding the nation that dwells upon it – is it strong or weak? Is it many or few? (BeMidbar 13:18)

Yehoshua's directions to his spies are not outlined in detail. However, the Torah provides a detailed description of Moshe's instructions. It is difficult to determine the overarching mission of Moshe's spies. Nachmanides argues, that the spies were sent to provide information that would be used in developing a strategy for conquest. He explains that it is inappropriate to rely upon miraculous intervention. Instead, we must make every effort to act responsibly. We cannot conduct ourselves impulsively or recklessly and then rely on Hashem to intervene and save us from our own carelessness.[9]

However, this is not the most obvious interpretation of Moshe's directions. He instructs the spies to bring back a sample of the fruit of the land. He tells them that they should report on the fertility of the land. Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra suggests that the spies had a dual mission. They were not only to provide information to be used in developing a strategy for conquest, but were also to provide information to be used to assess the quality of the land.[10]

We can understand the reason for gathering information relevant to conquest. Nachmanides' comments deal thoroughly with this issue. However, it is more difficult to understand the reason for gathering information relevant to the land's fertility. Moshe had already communicated to the nation Hashem's promise that they would be

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(Shelach cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

taken to a land flowing with milk and honey. Why was a confirmation of the land's fertility required?

The composition of Moshe's spies and their strange mission can be explained by a single consideration. In his recounting of this event in Sefer Devarim, Moshe explains that the original impetus to send these spies came from the nation. The nation came to Moshe and requested that he send spies.[11] In Parshat Shelach, the account begins with Hashem's response to this request. He authorizes Moshe to send the spies.[12]

The origin of the suggestion to send the spies explains the composition of the group and its assigned mission. The nation's suggestion apparently reflected uncertainty and fear. They were not confident in their ability to confront and defeat the inhabitants of the land. Neither were they convinced that the land's fertility and richness merited the danger they perceived in its conquest. The spies' mission was designed to address both of these doubts. The composition of the group reflected that these spies were selected in order to address the concerns of the entire nation. Their success in addressing the fears and doubts of the nation would depend upon their credibility. The representative composition of the group would assure its credibility.

This explains an interesting nuance in the behavior of the spies. Upon their return, they presented their report. We would have expected them to report to Moshe. Moshe would then decide how to best use the information the spies gleaned. But instead, after reporting to Moshe

and Aharon, the spies immediately presented their report to the people.[13] This is understandable given the origin of the suggestion to send the spies. The spies were sent in response to the urgings and anxieties of the nation. They were sent as the nation's representatives. Therefore, when they returned, they reported to the entire nation.

We can now better understand Yehoshua's behavior. He did not send spies in response to a popular request. The spies he sent were not a national delegation. Two individuals were sent. They were sent in secrecy. Rabbaynu David Kimchi – Radak – explains that the nation was unaware of the mission.[14] The spies were selected by Yehoshua; he sent them, and they reported only to him.

But what was Yehoshua's objective in sending these spies? As noted above, the narrative does provide an account of exact instructions provided by Yehoshua. Perhaps, the objective of the mission can be deduced by its outcome. As explained above, Rachav hid the spies and then assisted them in their escape. She did this in exchange for a promise that she and her family would be spared during the conquest. But she also explained that she and all of the inhabitants of the land had heard of the destruction of the Egyptians and the other nations that had opposed Bnai Yisrael in its march towards the Land of Israel. The nations of the land were terrified. She was eager to win the favor of the spies because she was fully confident that Bnai Yisrael would conquer the land. The spies brought back to Yehoshua this message that nations of the land were demoralized and disheartened.

This suggests a new perspective from which we must consider the detection of the spies. This detection was an essential step in their success in gathering the intelligence that they reported. Once they were detected, Rachav was forced to choose between her allegiance to her own king and the opportunity to forge an agreement with these representatives of Bnai Yisrael. She chose to create an agreement. In the process, she explained her reasoning and the fear and desperation of the nations of the land. This was the very intelligence that the spies were sent to gather. In other words, the detection of the spies was not the result of an absence of providence. It was an expression of providence.

Now, we can easily understand why Yehoshua was not concerned with a repeat of the disaster brought about by the first spies. These spies were sent by Yehoshua and reported only to him. They were not a delegation. They were two people. Their absence would not be immediately noticed. But most important, these spies were not sent to perform an evaluation of the land or to gather strategic information. Their sole purpose was to report back on the morale of the nations of the land. Yehoshua could not predict the details of the report but he was confident of its general tone. Radak explains that he knew that the spies would bring back a report that he could share with the people and that this report would build their confidence.[15] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Yitzchak Karo, Toldot Yitzchak, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 13.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 14:28

[3] Mesechet Sanhedrin 104b

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Ma'aseh Karbanot 3:15.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 13:1.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 15:34.

[7] Mesechet Sanhedrin 80b.

[8] Mesechet Sanhedrin 80b.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 13:3.

[10] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, 13:18-20.

[11] Sefer Devarim 1:22.

[12] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 122.

[13] Sefer BeMidbar 13:26.

[14] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Yehoshua 2:1.

[15] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Yehoshua 2:1.

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Letters



Letters

from the

INTERNET



The following is an actual dialogue between three women and myself that circulated on the Internet this week. "Woman 1" spreads a popular lie, guarantying a positive response to our prayers. I comment at the end.

—**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim**

Talking to the Wall

Woman 1: I would like to share with you an inspiring story, which I feel the need to spread. A friend of mine confided in me the story of how she met her spouse, or should I say how her spouse met her. He had dated for a while, around 50 different girls, and was beginning to feel that the situation was hopeless. After some time he decided to try the well-known concept of 40 days of prayer at the Kotel. Shortly after the allotted time was complete he was set up with his wife, my friend. I, being a bit skeptical of these mystical things decided to research the 40 days of prayer. I came across a site westernwallprayers.org and after reading what they were about and reviewing all of their success stories, I am now convinced. Of course I have my own success stories but that is a personal matter. Check it out www.westernwallprayers.org

Woman 2: I paid for two rounds of prayers more than two years ago. I am still single.

Woman 3: A friend of mine also paid several years ago and she's still single too.

Woman 1: I am sorry to hear that they are still single. I am sure we all know that our prayers never go unanswered...sometimes we need to learn to accept "No" for an answer.

Woman 3: Thanks for the "encouragement". I'm glad your friend's prayers were answered to his satisfaction, while I'm apparently doomed to remain single.

Woman 1: I am sorry to hear that you feel that way. Please do not lose hope that God has someone special intended just for you.

Mesora: Dear All,

No where in Torah do we find the notion that praying at the Wall – or anywhere – guarantees a positive response. Such lies baselessly raise peoples' hopes, only to let them down. It is outright thievery to manufacture such claims, take money, and make promises in the name of Torah. It is an alarming arrogance to say "Sometimes the answer is no", as if you

know what God has responded. Moreover, this is a Chillul Hashem, a disgrace of God's name. For one parades as if these acts represent Torah.

Exodus 20:21 says, "Any place you mention My name, I will come to you and bless you" (End of parshat Yisro) "ANY" place. We don't need a Wall for God hear us. This is foolishness.

This crooked thievery destroys the Torah Fundamental of "Reward and Punishment". For God teaches that we receive His good providence based on our internal perfection. In his Laws of Repentance (2:3) Maimonides equates one who repents in his mouth but not his heart, with one who ritually immerses but cleaves onto a creeping insect in his hand. Just as one is not cleansed as long as he holds onto the insect, one is not forgiven until he/she repents: an internal, true repentance. Therefore, paying to have prayers recited on our behalf, while we cleave to our flaws, cannot be effective.

Who makes more sense: Maimonides, or this deceptive, WesternWallPrayers website?

Certainly, one who steals the money of fellow Jews in the name of prayer, is sinning and will not be effective in his prayer for three reasons: 1) he sins by stealing so his prayers are those of a sinner; 2) he does so in the name of Torah and disgraces God's name; 3) the person in need has not changed so as to merit God's intervention; and 4) the primary reason such prayers are ineffective, is because he prays not to God, but to a false notion of God he has manufactured. The true God is not one who would endorse a prayer if the one praying is deluded that "location" trumps inner perfection.

God heard the prayers of the matriarchs even when they prayed in various locations. Their husbands the Avot, did not tell them to pray at the Wall's location.

Did God not answer Esther in Persia?

Moses on Horeb?

Daniel in the den of lions?

Joshua in Gilgal?

Joseph imprisoned in Egypt?

Elijah on Mt. Carmel?

Elisha in Jericho?

Jonah in the fish?

Chana?

The matriarchs?

Do you not recite Selichos, which ends with all of the the above cited cases when God responded...without the Wall?

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Letters

Does the Torah not tell us that what God desires is a perfect heart, and not a location? Read Haftoras Tzav. God says He does not want our sacrifices, but rather, that we listen to His word.

Where has Torah study gone?

Why do so many of you accept and proliferate such nonsense?

Read the Torah. Don't ignore God's words, for then He will certainly ignore your words. What does Rabbi Gamliel say in Pirkei Avos 2:4? "Do His will as your own, in order that He will do your will as His." We have a formula for success. Why do you continue to believe you are more correct than God?

But you will ask: "Why do some people actually marry after such Western Wall prayers?"

It is simple: they are duped into believing the prayer was effective, so they are psychologically much more accepting and wishful about their next match: they feel "this is the one"...even before they meet him/her.

They're psyched about it, since they believe their prayers are 100% guaranteed. I would even bet that many who buy into this lie CANNOT refuse the first date after such false prayers, since their religious emotion cripples their ability to discern intelligently. They blindly attach themselves to the guarantee this website offers. When in such a frame of mind, any date will be more likely accepted for marriage. Hypnotism works the same way.

However, the fact that we see so many people pay for the WestrenWallPrayers.org service and remain single, reveals the lie. Even if ONE person doesn't get married after paying for this practice, the practice is unveiled as a lie. Certainly when so many don't get married.

If this organization's members and leaders would study God's Torah, if we all would...all Jews would realize such practices violate the most fundamental Torah concepts, and reason...and none of us would be fooled.

We would realize the futility in "talking to a wall".

Woman 2: Thank you Rabbi for posting this. I feel validated. I was an idiot to believe that paying for some stranger praying in my name at the Wall could influence my destiny. ■

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(Rhetoric continued from page 1)

Israel



the “legitimate rights of the Palestinian people,” and Likud that expelled Jews from Gaza and North Shomron – all over the vociferous objections of its ideological stalwarts, who are disappointed time and again.

Netanyahu’s de facto acceptance of even a “demilitarized” Palestinian state, from that perspective, moves the goalposts of Israeli politics even further away from where mainstream opinion was even fifteen years ago, leaving Israel without a major political party that asserts that the Jewish people have exclusive rights and claims to the land of Israel provided to us by God in the Torah (a point also ignored by Netanyahu in his otherwise excellent historical narrative). And, of course, anyone who believes that a Palestinian state, should it ever (never) come into being, would ever be demilitarized should seek immediate professional help, and then read a little history.

Germany was to be completely and permanently demilitarized under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. And it was – until Hitler came to power, perceived that clause as demeaning to Germans, and swiftly and publicly proceeded to militarize Germany, until the quantity of its weaponry – in a very short time – exceeded that of the other European nations. What was the response of Europe to this blatant violation of Versailles? Nothing at all, and the results are well known.

The Oslo Agreements, as well, promised a demilitarized Palestinian entity – with several thousand police officers who could bear only pistols, just for law enforcement purposes. Within several months, an army of 25,000 Arabs armed with machine guns and advanced weapons had been formed, and soon 1500 Jewish lives were lost. In fact, the Hebron Agreement that Netanyahu signed on his first go-round as prime minister permitted only pistols to the Hebron police force. But they were so jubilant at Israel’s withdrawal from Hebron that they immediately began firing their machine guns in the air. So much for agreements.

And does anyone actually believe that when the Palestinians breach such an agreement, and begin militarizing and attacking, that the world will have the slightest sympathy for Israel’s plight, or that Israel will have the fortitude to defend itself? Words on paper never matter, and the most recent example is telling: Israel’s surrender of Gaza was accompanied by Sharon’s stern warnings that any rockets from Gaza would be met immediately with overwhelming force. Otherwise astute columnists like Charles Krauthammer averred that if Israel were attacked from Gaza after leaving Gaza, they would have the unassailable right to bomb Gaza to smithereens, “thirty Israeli rockets for every Palestinian rocket fired.” Of course, that did not happen, and thousands of rockets and ruined lives later, even Israel’s reluctant and brief invasion of Gaza was met with international condemnation and cries of “disproportionate use of force, killing of civilians,” etc., eventually forcing a withdrawal and a gradual return of the rockets falling on Israeli’s heads. Now why would one think the same thing would not happen here, only worse because these attacks from the “demilitarized” Palestinian state would aim at Israel’s heartland – its major cities and international airport? Of course it makes no sense, anymore than we can expect the Palestinians to adhere to their tenth written promise to stop all anti-Jewish incitement in their media and schools.

So here’s another approach to Netanyahu’s speech – a brighter spin, if you will – that renders it a brilliant piece of political theater. This address had only two audiences: the domestic Israeli scene, and Barack Obama. One audience it did not address was the Arab world, despite the mandatory rhetorical nods to that population of incessant Jew-haters. Netanyahu might have correctly assumed that the Arabs will never agree even to negotiate over a “demilitarized” state at all, much less accept one; indeed, his speech and proposals were already rejected by Arab spokesmen as non-starters. Therefore, the ball is thrown into their court, in a way in which public opinion – in the short-term, and only in the short term – can accept, to wit: “If the Palestinians want a state, and Israel wants security, then the Palestinians can have a state and give Israel security by renouncing an army,” which in any event is superfluous. And Netanyahu studiously avoided the trap that he and all his predecessors have fallen into – making tangible concessions (prisoner releases, checkpoint removals, provision of money to the terrorist government, and surrenders of land) as “goodwill” gestures. That does not mean he won’t eventually do it, only that he did not append those to this speech.

As a result the domestic Israeli audience, desperate always to nurture the illusion that peace is at hand and to avoid an open rupture in the US-Israel alliance, overwhelmingly supported Netanyahu’s approach in the address (71% in the Haaretz poll) – even though 55% felt that he merely succumbed to American pressure. In that sense, he was able to stabilize his domestic standing merely by saying a word – “state” – and that is politically shrewd.

But his main audience was Obama, and in that regard he succeeded, and on Obama’s turf. After all, why did Netanyahu have to speak at all? Why didn’t he just continue his negotiations and policy implementation through normal diplomatic channels? After all, no Arab leader felt compelled to address the world after Obama’s Cairo speech, so why did Netanyahu run to Bar-Ilan?

(continued on next page)

(Rhetoric continued from page 8)

Israel

The answer is that Netanyahu realized that Obama is, literally, all talk. Obama thinks words are deeds, or at least matter more than deeds (hence, his verbal thrusts at Iran or North Korea, which he confuses for real policies). If talk is the coin of the realm, then talk, offer words – and nothing else. Even be so magnanimous – “moderate” – as to say the word “state.” Indeed, the media so obsessed on the question of whether or not Netanyahu would say “state” that had he spoken of the “Palestinian state of mind” or the “Palestinian state of the art weaponry”, the media have exulted in the juxtaposition of the words “Palestinian” and “state,” and that would have sufficed. In the chess match of dueling rhetoric, Netanyahu checked Obama – and when Obama speaks again in another forum on these same issues, as he assuredly will, Netanyahu should speak again – maybe in the United States, and match him speech for speech, cliché for cliché.

That is why I am supportive of Netanyahu and his approach.

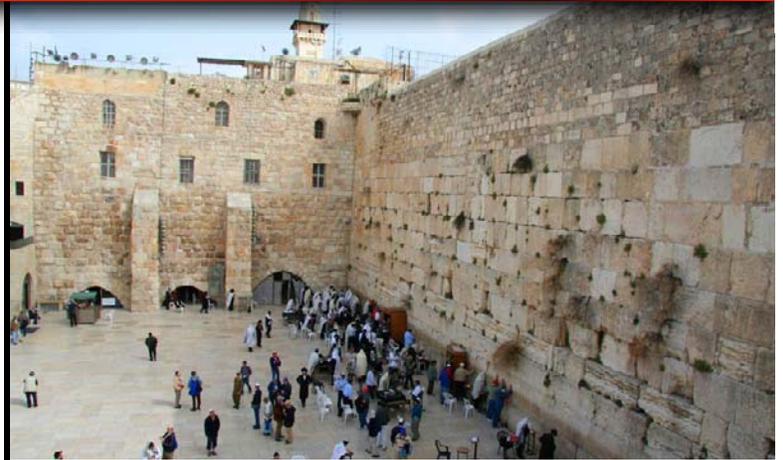
The only downside is that words eventually catch up to the word-smith, and eventually Israel will be held accountable. Once accepting a “state,” then the details of that state become subject to negotiation – unless Israel develops a backbone and stands firm against Obama, saying “no” to him as has every single country that he has asked for a favor in the last five months (the G-8 and the Arab world, not mention the rogue states). Israel can say “no” as well – as it is doing on the “natural growth in settlements” issue – and the world as we know it will not end.

And even in that instance, the notion that Israel has, to an extent, repudiated – again – the Zionist vision, and scorned the divine gift of the land of Israel, is unsettling, even if the existence of such a “state” has attached conditions that make its realization extremely unlikely. It is analogous to a Rabbi permitting a Jew to eat a ham sandwich, but only if the ham sandwich is located in a vault to which only one person has the key, and that person is unavailable. Principles do matter.

It is not the speech I would have given, but I am not the Prime Minister of Israel. For a prime minister of Israel – especially compared to his predecessors – it was clever, ingenious, and even devious – matching Obama’s rhetoric with his own.

As always, though, Netanyahu – like the rest of us – will be judged in the future by deeds and not only his words. We should maintain our principles, and support him from his right flank and not at his side, challenging him and strengthening him as is warranted by events. ■

Rabbi Pruzansky is the spiritual leader of Congregation Bnai Yeshurun of Teaneck, New Jersey, and the author most recently of “Judges for Our Time: Contemporary Lessons from the Book of Shoftim” (Geffen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2009). His writings and lectures can be found at Rabbipruzansky.com



God: Vindictive?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Rashi (Num. 13:2) “God said, ‘by their lives, I will give them an opportunity to err with the words of the spies so they don’t inherit the land of Israel.’”

This appears vindictive. But as God is devoid of human emotion, how do we understand this?

I believe the meaning is that had God not permitted the Jews to spy out Israel, they would have been harboring an incorrect notion in relation to God. That is, their desire to send spies displayed their disbelief in God's promise that they will successfully conquer Israel. If this disbelief was not brought out into the open, they would remain with this false notion, and this is not tolerable by God. What does it mean that “God gave them an opportunity to err”? It means that God gave them an opportunity to act out this notion in reality so it can be dealt with. God’s goal was not the loss of Israel. Giving them a chance not to inherit Israel means “giving them a chance to realize their conflict in inheriting Israel”. In this manner, the Jews are enabled by God to face their mistake, and correct it.

This teaches us that Israel per se is not the goal for man, but rather, man’s perfection outweighs the act of living in the land. Since man’s perfection was at stake, God opted for his perfection, rather than having him live in Israel. ■

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