



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

דברים תש"ף
Devarim 5780

Followership

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Judaism encourages followers and leaders to form a partnership of mutual respect.



PARSHAT DEVARIM IN A NUTSHELL

The book of Devarim is, in essence, Moses' renewal of the same covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. This time Moses joins the covenant to the next generation, because they will soon enter the Promised Land and create a society based on the Torah there. And because a covenant often begins with a preamble and an historical outline, this is also how parshat Devarim begins. Moses explains the background to the covenant, and then discusses the events that led to the covenant and its renewal.

First we have an introduction which describes the time and place: we are in the last weeks of Moses' life and the people are camped by the banks of the River Jordan. Moses reminds

Israel about the story of the spies and the people's lack of faith that led to forty year wandering in the desert.

Then he moves on to more recent events, retelling the stories of their battles and victories over Moab and Ammon and the settlement of their land (on the other side of the River Jordan) by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of Menashe. The parsha ends with the appointment of Joshua as his successor. He will lead the people into the Land.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think Joshua was chosen to lead after Moses?



THE CORE IDEA

In the last month of his life, Moses gathered the people and taught them the laws they were to keep and reminded them of their history since the Exodus. The book of Devarim is a record of these speeches to them. Almost immediately he retells the episode of the spies, as this is the main reason the people's parents were not allowed to enter the land. He wanted the new generation to learn the lesson of that episode and carry it with them always. They needed faith and courage. Perhaps that has always been part of what it means to be a Jew.

But the story of the spies as he tells it here is very different indeed from the version in Shelach Lecha (Bamidbar 13-14), which describes the events as they happened at the time, almost 39 years earlier. The differences between the two accounts are many and are obvious. Here I want to focus only on two differences, and the questions they raise.

First: who proposed sending the spies? In Shelach Lecha, it was God who told Moses to do so. "The Lord said to Moses,

'Send men ...' In our parsha, it was the people who requested it: "Then all of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ...' Who was it: God or the people? This makes a massive difference to how we understand the episode.

Second: what was their mission? In our parsha, the people said, "Let us send men to spy out [*veyachperu*] the land for us" (Devarim 1:22). The twelve men "made for the hill country, came to the wadi Eshcol, and spied it out [*vayeraglu*]" (Devarim 1:24). In other words, our parsha uses the two Hebrew verbs, *lachpor* and *leragel*, that mean to spy.

But as I pointed out in parshat Shelach Lecha, the account there does not mention spying. Instead, 13 times, it uses the verb *latur*, which means to tour, explore, travel, inspect.

According to Malbim, *latur* means to seek out what is good about a place. *Lachpor* and *leragel* mean to seek out what is weak, vulnerable, exposed, defenceless. Touring and spying are completely different activities, so why does the account

in our parsha present what happened as a spying mission, which the account in Shelach does not?

We then hear an extraordinary statement from Moses. Having said that the spies and the people were punished by not living to enter the Promised Land, he then says: *"Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also, and He said: you shall not enter it either. Joshua son of Nun shall enter it. Strengthen him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it."* (Devarim 1:37-38)

This is very strange indeed. Moses seems to be blaming others for what seems to be his own failing, and this appears to contradict the testimony of the Torah itself, which tells us that Moses and Aaron's punishment of being denied entrance to the land was because of what happened at Kadesh when the people complained about the lack of water. What they did wrong there is debated by the

commentators. Was it that Moses hit the rock? Or that he lost his temper? Or perhaps it was some deeper reason? Whichever it was, that is when God said: "Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them".

Which brings us to our **Third Question**: Why does Moses seem to now blame the people for the story of the spies, and for his punishment?

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why was it important for Moses to teach the people their history, including the mistakes that were made? Is it important for us to learn history for the same reason?
2. When a people sin, who is to blame, them or their leader?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

One summer at camp there was a serious problem of bullying amongst the kids. Everyone on the staff team agreed immediate action needed to be taken. So they looked to Ilana, the Rosh Machaneh (Head of the Camp), to decide what should happen. It was part of her job. But Ilana was deeply aware of the educational opportunity here and wanted to make sure it was maximised. She needed to decide how to address the bullies, how to reassure the victim of the bullying, and perhaps most importantly, how to address the issue to the entire camp.

Ilana consulted with David, her Sgan (Assistant Head of Camp) and then she decided to open this up to the team of madrichim. As a team they discussed ideas, weighing the pros and cons of each suggested approach, and thinking through which best reflected the values that were at the heart of the camp.

Ultimately Ilana would have to make the final decision, and she would be the one addressing the issue to the camp, the parents, and to the campers who needed to change their behaviour. So she involved all of her team in planning their next steps, which resulted in their backing her actions wholeheartedly. This united front allowed them to make a deep impact on everyone at camp that summer. Ilana showed true leadership, but her team were the ones that placed her in a position to do so.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Does a good leader need good followers to lead?
2. Does a leader make good followers? (Is this what happened in this story)?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Abarbanel offers a fascinating explanation for the reason Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the land. He says it was not because of the episode of water at the rock in Kadesh. That is intended to distract attention from their real sins. Aaron's real sin was the Golden Calf. Moses' real sin was the episode of the spies. The hint that this was so is in Moses' words here, "Because of you, the Lord was incensed with me also."

How though could the episode of the spies have been Moses' fault? It wasn't his idea to send them. According to the two accounts, it was either God or the people. Moses also did not go on the mission. He did not bring back a report. He did not demoralise the people. Where then was Moses at fault? Why was God angry with him?

The answer lies in the first two questions we raised: who proposed sending the spies? And why is there a difference in the verbs used here and in Shelach Lecha?

Following Rashi, the two accounts, here and in Shelach, are not two different versions of the same event. They are the same version of the same event, but split in two, half told there, half here. It was the people who requested spies (as stated here). Moses took their request to God. God acceded to the request, but as a concession, not a command: "You *may* send," not "You *must* send" (as stated in Shelach).

However, in granting permission, God made a specific provision. The people had asked for spies: "Let us send men ahead to spy out [veyachperu] the land for us." God did *not* give Moses permission to send spies. He specifically used the verb *latur*, indicating His permission for the men to tour the land,

come back and testify that it is a good and fertile land, flowing with milk and honey.

The people did not need spies. As Moses reminds them, throughout the wilderness years God has been going “ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go” (Devarim 1:33). They did however need eyewitness testimony of the beauty and fruitfulness of the land to which they had been travelling and for which they would have to fight.

Moses, however, did not make this distinction clear. He told the twelve men: “See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwallied or fortified?” This sounds dangerously like instructions for a spying mission.

When ten of the men came back with a demoralising report and the people panicked, at least part of the blame lay with Moses. The people had asked for spies. He should have made it clear that the men he was sending were not to act as spies.

How did Moses come to make such a mistake? Rashi suggests an answer. Our parsha says: “Then *all of you came to me* and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us.’” The English translation does not convey the sense of menace in the original text. They came, says Rashi, “in a crowd,” without respect, protocol or order. They were a mob, and they were potentially dangerous. This mirrors the people’s behaviour at the beginning of the story of the Golden Calf: “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they *gathered against Aaron* and said to him...”

Faced with an angry mob, a leader is not always in control of the situation. True leadership is impossible in the face of the madness of crowds. Moses’ mistake, if the analysis here is correct, was a very subtle one, the difference between a spying mission and a morale-boosting eyewitness account of the land. Even so, it must have been almost inevitable given the mood of the people.

That is what Moses meant when he said, “because of you the Lord was incensed with me too.” He meant that God was angry with me for not showing stronger leadership, but it was you – or rather, your parents – who made that leadership impossible.

This suggests a fundamental, counterintuitive truth. There is a fine TED talk about leadership by Derek Sivers called “How to start a movement”. It takes less than 3 minutes to watch, and it asks, “What makes a leader?” It answers: “The first follower.”

There is a famous saying of the Sages: “Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend (Avot 1:6).” The order of the verbs seems wrong. You don’t make a teacher, you acquire one. You don’t acquire a friend, you make one. In fact, though, the statement is precisely right. *You make a teacher by being willing to learn. You make a leader by being willing to follow.* When people are unwilling to follow, even the greatest leader cannot lead. That is what happened to Aaron at the time of the Calf, and in a far more subtle way it also happened to Moses at the time of the spies.

This, I would argue, is one reason why Joshua was chosen to be Moses’ successor. There were other distinguished candidates, including Pinchas and Caleb. But Joshua, serving Moses throughout the wilderness years, was a role-model of what it is to be a follower. That is something fundamental that the Israelites still needed to learn.

I believe that followership is the great neglected art. Followers and leaders form a partnership of mutual challenge and respect. To be a follower in Judaism is not to be submissive, uncritical, blindly accepting. Questioning and arguing is part of the relationship. Too often, though, we decry a lack of leadership when we are really suffering from a lack of followership.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does a democratic system of government base itself on this idea of followership?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

In Judaism, followership is as active and demanding as leadership. We can put this more strongly: leaders and followers do not sit on opposite sides of the table. They are on the same side, the side of justice and compassion and the common good. No one is above criticism, and no one too junior to administer it, if done with due grace and humility... all of us, simply by bearing the name Israel, are summoned to wrestle with God and our fellow humans in the name of the right and the good.

Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible, p. 160



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What was the purpose of the spies' mission originally supposed to be and what did it become?
2. Why was Joshua chosen to be Moses' successor?
3. According to Rabbi Sacks, what was Moses' real failing as a leader?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Joshua had been a loyal and long-serving deputy to Moses. He had watched and learned from Moses throughout his time as leader of the people. He had also proved himself during the episode of the spies, where he showed his loyalty to Moses, to God and to the land of Israel.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Every nation and every individual must learn their history in order to understand their identity. Sometimes learning history can be painful. The common saying is "Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them" (attributed to George Santayana, the philosopher, poet and novelist, who most likely said it in the following way: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"). The adage expresses the reason behind why Moses made sure to reiterate the painful episodes of the previous generation – for educational reasons.
2. It is harsh to blame the leadership of a wayward people, but they too cannot be considered blameless. The people here were the sinners, but Moses was also held responsible. He certainly was held responsible for the way he responded to his wayward flock, when he failed to live up to the God's expectations.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Without any followers, a leader is not a leader. Without good followers, a leader cannot be a good leader. It is in fact the followers of a leader that create the leader and determine how successful they will be.
2. In this story Ilana empowered her staff to take joint responsibility. Although she fronted the decisions, and would ultimately be judged by them, she brought her followers into the process of leadership. This is an example of when a leader can encourage her followers to be "good followers", which in turn creates good leadership.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Democratically elected leaders only find themselves in a position of leadership because their followers have placed them there. They also face continued feedback and critique in a democratic system, via polls and a free press, and any subsequent campaigns for re-election.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. The spies (who were not really spies but princes of each tribe) were sent on a fact-finding mission to inform the people of the quality of the land. But because of their approach (and lack of faith) they brought back an evaluation of the oncoming difficulties of conquering the land. This panicked the people who lost their faith quickly.
2. Joshua had served an extensive apprenticeship to Moses, and therefore witnessed his leadership in close quarters for many years. He had also proven his loyalty both to Moses and to God on many occasions (including his response as a member of the mission of the spies). But the most novel answer found here is that Joshua had modelled what a good follower looks like, and so now the people would know how to follow him and install him as a successful leader in Moses' stead.
3. Moses' real failure as a leader is most clearly evident during the sin of the spies. At this time, he did not show strong enough leadership, and the people did not follow his lead. Perhaps he should have found a way to encourage the people to be good followers, inspiring them, allowing him to lead, and this may be what he meant when he said "because of you the Lord was incensed with me too." He failed to ensure that the spies and the people understood the real nature of their mission, and then he failed to deal with the repercussions of this initial failure when the people lost faith and wished to return to Egypt.