

THE FAULT THAT WOULD NOT GO AWAY

by Rabbi David Algaze

“G-d said, ‘I have forgiven because of your words. But as I live—and the glory of G-d shall fill the entire world—that all men who have seen My glory...and have not heeded My voice, if they will see the Land...’” (Bamidbar 14:20ff)

What was the sin of the Spies? After all, what they reported was true, that the Land was good except that the people who inhabited were fierce and their cities were greatly fortified. Since their mission had been to scout the land and bring back a report of their findings, they were not at fault. Why, then, were they so severely condemned and punished?

The verse quoted above, which contains the declaration that G-d had forgiven the people and would spare them the fatal punishment, adds a sentence that appears incomprehensible: “the glory of G-d shall fill the entire world.” What is the meaning of this phrase and what is its connection to the Spies?

Rav Kook explained this at a talk given in 1929, during Shabbat Shlach, as reported by Rabbi Yaacov Filber in his book “Hemdat Yamim.” Rav Kook prefaces his explanation by describing the effect of Adam’s sin at the beginning of history. After Adam sinned, the physical world lost its original holiness. Abraham was the first to initiate the process of regaining the spirituality that the world had lost. However, the completion of this process was to be produced when the people of Israel would return to the Land and there to integrate the holiness of the land at its natural level together with the holiness of the Torah and of the Jewish people. Only by combining all assignment elements the original plan of Creation would be fulfilled, namely to return the holiness to the Earth through the sanctity of the Torah and Israel. Through a Torah life in the land of Israel, the Jewish people would be able to return the lost holiness to the world of Nature and thus to rectify Adam’s sin.

However, the Spies did not believe that the holiness of Torah could be combined with a physical life in the Land. They did not grasp that the experience could combine the sanctity of the Torah a natural and physical existence in the Land. They believed that a Torah life could only be lived in a spiritual environment, away from the distractions of the tasks associated with Land and natural life, social institutions, government and so on. That was their mistake: they disagreed with G-d and His plan. Their lack of faith in G-d’s promise, their lamentation through that long night when they wept and whined—this is what brought the people down from their spiritual elevation and deprived them of the opportunity to accomplish the job assigned to them by

G-d. Now they were going to be condemned to a life in Exile. The night of their weeping became the night of Tish’a Be’Ab, when the Temple is destroyed and the long night of exile begins.

This is the meaning of the phrase, “the glory of G-d shall fill the entire world”: because they sinned and descended from their spiritual position, they would be unable to fulfill properly their mission in the land of Israel. They would have to undergo a period of exile, during which they would be scattered among all the nations, throughout the entire world, until they would find their correction and be able to return to the land and fulfill their original assignment. This exact process is described in Tehilim 106:24, “And they despised the beautiful Land, they did not believe in His word. They murmured in their tents and did not heed the voice of G-d. And G-d raised His hand to defeat them in the desert...and scatter them throughout other lands.” Their punishment fit their crime. Because they were unwilling to heed the word of G-d to work in the Land of Israel, they were condemned to be scattered throughout the world, to live in exile among other nations, to be strangers in other lands.

Had it not been for the sin of the Spies, Israel would have entered the Land and there would have been a complete Redemption. The Temple would have never been destroyed and this would have brought a repair not only to the land of Israel but also to the entire world. Because of their sin, the entry of Israel to the land was flawed and they would have to struggle with other nations for the possession of the land. Most tragically, however, they would have to live among strangers and suffer the consequences of the exile.

Sadly, we are still living the effects of the sin of the Spies. We are in exile, even in the land of Israel, suffering the consequences of living away from our land. But most tragically for us, we have not repaired the sin of the Spies. Our attitude to the land continues to be flawed. The sin of the Spies is not going away. The only solution to this grave sin is to create a movement of a positive attitude to the Land of Israel and, just as the Spies were united in their opposition to the Land, we need to create a union in the Jewish people that looks positively towards the Land. As Rav Teichtal says, “Through this change of heart, we could repair the sin of the Spies and the glory of Hashem will rise over us to bring us in a complete Redemption, soon in our days.” (“Em Habanim”, p.262)