

Send forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the land of Canaan. (13:2)

The *chet ha'meraglim*, sin of the spies, is one of the most difficult passages in the Torah to grasp. These were men of distinction, princes of their individual tribes who had earned their eminence. It was not just arbitrarily accorded to them. How did such great leaders fail? As an aside, I think that one powerful lesson may be derived: no one is immune to failure; no one is perfect, with no sign of weakness. People have flaws which they gloss over or address and overcome. Those who are unable to ferret out their individual issues are, for the most part, destined to confront those issues again, either privately or in the public domain. One of the most destructive traits which affects those in a leadership position is that of pride and the ensuing overconfidence which accompanies it. Therefore, one who has climbed the ladder and reached the pinnacle of success in spiritual leadership might assume that he can now relax and let his guard down, perhaps wrap himself in a little pride for all that he has achieved. This is the moment of gravest error. It is specifically at the point at which we reach the summit that we are most vulnerable. A fall from the zenith inflicts more damage, not only on the fallen leader, but also on those who have followed and trusted him.

I read a story a while ago that has bearing on this idea. A Jew who had meticulously prepared for *Pesach*, cleaning every nook and cranny in his house until he was certain that there could absolutely not be any *chametz* left, sat down to his *seder* filled with confidence and joy, secure in the notion that he had fulfilled Hashem's commandment to absolute perfection. One can only begin to imagine his shock and dismay when he noticed a grain of wheat ensconced smack in the middle of his soup. His immediate reaction was to faint. While he was out, he had a dream. In the dream, he asks Hashem two questions: How and why? How could this have happened? I was so vigilant and conscientious to search and clean my house. Why did it happen? A sin does not happen in a vacuum. What did I do or not do that warranted this Heavenly reaction?

The reply gave him food for thought. Indeed, his house had been meticulously cleaned. Not a drop of *chametz* was in his house. His pot, however, was cooking in the fireplace beneath the chimney. A bird flying over his house dropped the kernel of grain through the chimney which fell into the pot, rendering everything *chametz*.

Certainly, one should not have to worry about such an unrealistic possibility. This led up to the next question: Why? He had prayed for *siyata d'Shmaya*, Divine assistance, that everything he had done would find favor, and his *Pesach* would not be marred by sin. He thought that it was all up to him. He was the "man," and, thus, in complete control. Due to his overconfidence, he forgot to factor in that Hashem "also" has a say in the matter. Overconfidence and pride can – and has – taken down the most successful leader.

Returning to our original question: What happened to the *meraglim*? Where did they err? *Horav Chaim Kamil, zl*, offers a novel explanation to illuminate this tragic incident. In *Sefer Devarim*

(1:27), when the Torah reiterates the incident of the *meraglim*, it notes that the nation claimed, “Because of Hashem’s hatred for us did He take us out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Emori to destroy us.” *Sforno* explains that Hashem hated them (so they intimidated) because they had been idol worshippers in Egypt. Thus, He was seeking to avenge His honor by destroying them. This, sadly, was the deluded mindset of the *meraglim*. Without Hashem’s miraculous intervention, they would never triumph over the Emori. They did not think that Hashem was really interested in helping them. Consequently, would He liberate them from Egypt just to have them destroyed by the Emori.

How insecure can one be? To think that all ten *makos*, accompanied by all the miracles that were intrinsic to the Exodus, were all a show in order to bring *Klal Yisrael* to the wilderness where He fed them *manna*, Heavenly bread and protected them with the Pillar of Fire and Pillar of Cloud – for what? Just to kill them when they entered *Eretz Yisrael*? They forgot one thing, the most important ingredient toward absolution of sin: *teshuvah*, repentance. While they certainly warranted serious Heavenly repercussion, with *teshuvah*, they had hope for reprieve and forgiveness.

Having said this, we see that the sin of the *meraglim* was not the result of a spiritual deficiency on their part, but rather, their misconception of Hashem’s ways. The Almighty does not punish until all avenues of return have been exhausted or ignored. Hashem welcomes home into His embrace anyone who repents. They thought that *teshuvah* was an option only for “standard” sins. Idol worship, however, is in an infamous league of its own. They were wrong. We may add that this is the meaning behind the *bechayah shel chinam*, unwarranted weeping, on the part of the nation. Hashem’s response was, “I will give you a reason to weep for generations. *Tishah B’Av*, our national day of mourning, which occurred on that fateful night, was the precursor for bitter weeping throughout the generations. The nation’s error was in thinking that it was all over. They had no chance for reconciliation with Hashem. They were wrong. *Teshuvah* is always possible.