

You drew near to me, all of you, and said, “Let us send men ahead of us and they shall spy out the Land for us.” (1:22)

The episode of the *meraglim*, spies, was the tragic game-changer for the nascent nation, as their reaction to the spies' reports catalyzed the decree that they would not enter the Land. That night was *Tishah B'Av*, the calendar date which was to become our national day of mourning. In as much as the reports which the *meraglim* brought back were true, injecting their own personal opinions concerning the nation's ability to overcome the challenges they would confront was their downfall. They conveniently forgot the Hashem factor. The Almighty had taken them out of Egypt, triumphed over Amalek, sustained them miraculously; conquering the Land would be one more miracle. Interestingly, this was the first time that the nation sent out spies. A second time occurred when Yehoshua, Moshe *Rabbeinu's* successor, also sent out spies (Pinchas and Calev), and their mission was a success. Wherein lay the difference between Moshe's spies and those sent by Yehoshua?

When Yehoshua sent his two spies, he instructed them to disguise themselves as potters, who would call out: “Get your kettles here! Whoever wants pots, come and buy!” Apparently, the best hiding place is out in the open. Why was their role as potters employed as the means for camouflage? Why, specifically, earthenware vessels? After all, other trades – such as carpenter, blacksmith – could have been considered.

Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl, explains that of all the vessels addressed in the Torah concerning the laws of ritual purity, earthenware vessels stand out. Metal and wooden vessels become *tamei*, ritually impure, upon contact with an impure “host.” This applies to either the inner or outer surface of the vessel; *tumah* is passed on by a touch. *Klei cheres*, earthenware vessels, do not become *tamei* if the source of *tumah* touches their outside surface. The vessel becomes *tamei* when an impure source enters into the inner airspace of the vessel. Even if this *tamei* source does not touch the sides of the vessel, the mere fact that it entered into the vessel renders the vessel *tamei*.

The *Rav* explains the difference between the two vessels. When a wooden or metal vessel breaks, its function as a container is lost, but the remaining material can still have a viable function for other practical purposes. The raw material from which these vessels are formed maintains an innate value and utility. Pottery, however, is formed from clay into a vessel, with its value and utility wholly dependent upon the vessel's integrity. If the vessel is shattered, no other useful role exists for the broken shards. A vessel of wood or metal becomes *tamei* on contact, while a vessel made of clay has value only as long as it has form. Thus, its *tumah* occurs only when the *tamei* source enters its defining airspace.

Calev and Pinchas disguised themselves as potters because this is how they viewed themselves. Their mission was their sole purpose. Thus, they carried it out with total objectivity. They set aside any personal considerations they might have had, focusing on the big picture: their mission. Their

significance stemmed only from the mission they were sent to achieve. It is for this reason that they succeeded. They followed their orders with total equanimity and returned with a positive report concerning the Land.

Conversely, the *meraglim* sent by Moshe viewed themselves, not as *klei cheres*, but as *klei matchas* or *klei eitz*, having their own intrinsic value which exceeded above and beyond their mission. Their perception of all that they observed was colored and stigmatized, because, as leaders of the nation, they felt that it behooved them to make their own decisions and not follow Moshe *Rabbeinu's* mandate. They did not merely report the facts and leave the rest to Moshe. They expressed their jaundiced opinions concerning the advisability of going to war to conquer the Land. As a result, we have a national day of mourning to commemorate (among other tragedies) that fateful night. Their downfall resulted from their arrogance. When one inappropriately elevates himself, he can expect a climactic downfall.