Tikun for the Sin of the Spies

The Book of D’varim contain the speeches Moshe delivered in the last month of his life to the generation who would cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

Moshe’s first discourse to the people consisted of a retrospective survey of Israeliite history. Most notably, he harkened back the traumatic episode of the sin of the spies. This transgression is arguably one of the Jewish people’s most severe failures. The tribal leaders return from their mission with their evil report and their entry to the land was postponed by divine order for 38 years.

When we contrast the original story in Bamidbar and Moshe’s account here in D’varim we note several marked differences. The first obvious difference is regarding the factor prompting the sending of the spies. In Bamidbar it was prompted by a command of the Almighty; in our parsha it is described as coming from the people.

A second difference in Moshe’s retrospective recounting of the incident is that the slander is no longer attached to the spies. Moshe speaks of the people’s error and accuses the Israelites as a whole and them alone: “Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God; and ye murmured...” (D’varim 1:26-27). No derogatory remark of the spies is related, but Moshe inordinately dwells on the murmurings of the people.

The legendary Torah teacher of Jerusalem (1905-1997), Nechama Leibowitz, argued that Moshe was not merely rehashing the facts surrounding this tragic episode. Moshe had a particular message in mind. He offered ‘mussar’, a moral lesson that he felt was critically important to be grasped. Moshe emphasized the guilt of the entire nation and the direct responsibility of their ancestors for their actions. It was their choice to send the spies. They need to own up to their own failure. Even after hearing the negative report from the majority of spies the listeners, Am Yisrael, had the choice to turn a deaf ear to the evil words or allow themselves to be misled by them. It was their duty to resist. In a word, the message he imparted is the view that charges man with responsibility for all his actions. Each individual is ultimately to be his own leader, responsible for his every action and not just a cog in a vast machine called society (Studies in D’varim p.16).

A third, and perhaps most startling example of the unique nature of Moshe’s retelling of the sin of the spies is the fact that Moshe did not recall that the spies spoke disparagingly
about the land. He merely referred to their statement that ‘the land was good’. Why did Moshe not share the second half of their statement. Apparently, he meant to convey: “Didn’t you realize that even these wicked men who spread an evil report admitted that the land was good? You should have trusted in God who promised to give it to you!”

The incident of the spies is popularly known in rabbinic literature as ‘Chet HaMeraglim’, The Sin of Spies. Moshe, it would seem, would have opted for a different title; one which would have combined the guilt of all the Israelites.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt”l believed that we must closely heed Mohes’s words and take them to heart. In order to affect a tikun, the festering flaw must be fixed. He suggested that this transgression of Israel was so severe that only the most genuine type of teshuva can be effective. Therefore, a repentance known as Teshuvat HaMishkal, a ‘Repentance of Counter-balance’ is needed. It is simply not enough to admit the fault and commit to change. In this case one must tilt themselves to the other side in order to rectify the sin (Chanan Porat, Me’at Min Ha’or p. 121)

Rav Kook taught that for generations we are feeling the repercussions of the sin of the spies. He wrote: “The fabric of the exile and the lowliness that exists in the world is a result of not giving due recognition to the Land of Israel, its value and its intelligence - and not fixing the sin of the spies who spoke disparagingly about the land…” (Igrot HaRe’iya, vol. 1 pp. 112)

We were guilty of defaming the land therefore we must do the opposite and show our unwavering love for the Land: “[We must] declare to the entire world [The Land’s] magnificence and beauty, its holiness and grandeur. If only we could even express a ten-thousandth of the desirability of the beloved Land, the splendorous light of its Torah, and the superior light of its wisdom and prophecy! The quality of wonderful holiness that Torah scholars seeking holiness may find in the Land of Israel does not exist at all outside the Land. I myself can attest to this unique quality, to a degree commensurate with my meager worth.” (Igrot HaRe’iyah, vol. 1 pp. 112-113)

In this context, it is worthy to relate a simple yet profound anecdote regarding one contemporary rabbi’s sensitivity to the sanctity of land. Rav Aharon Lichtenstien zt’l, Rosh Yeshiva of Gush Etzion, would often travel to the U.S. On each return flight to Israel, as the plane was approximately fifteen minutes away from entering Israel he would begin reciting chapters from the book of Psalms in order to prepare himself for entering the holy air space of Eretz Yisrael. (Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon reports this directly from Rav Lichtenstein’s son Meir)
When the twelve tribal leaders returned from their mission in Canaan, only Yehoshuua and Kalev spoke in defense of the Land. They both cried out. “...the land is very very good.” It is peculiar to find the Torah employing double language like “very very”. Rav Kook suggested that same language employed by the Sages, in a seemingly unrelated context; “Be very very humble in spirit” (Pirkei Avot 4:4). Rav Kook taught that in truth they share a commonality. People of humble spirit are willing to comply to the divine command and respond to the call of the Torah.

During a 1924 fundraising mission to America, Rav Kook had the opportunity to meet with a wealthy Jew regarding the possibility of moving to Eretz Yisrael. The man gave various reasons why it would be too difficult to emigrate. He concluded his meeting with Rav Kook saying, “God willing, one day I will make aliyah.” Rav Kook smiled warmly and said, “God certainly wills it... the Almighty designated this Land to be the home for every Jew. But, my dear friend, you must also be willing.” (based on RavKookTorah.org /Shlach)

Rav Kook, an eternal optimist, believed that teshuva, repentance for the tragic sin in the wilderness long ago, was indeed materializing in our own time. The spirited return of the Jews to the land, even among those who considered themselves secular, was in fact a longing to heal the maladies of an exiled nation and an endeavor to permanently be reunited with the Promised Land. Rav Kook commenting on this wonderful reawakening wrote: “An illumination of teshuva [is shining] in [the nation of] Israel. The awakening of the desire of the nation [of Israel] as a whole to return to its Land, to its nature, to its spirit and to its makeup truly contains within itself the light of t’shuva.” (Orot HaTeshuva 17:2)

Each year we read Parshat D’varim just prior to Tish’a b’Av. When the reader chants the verse which begins with the word Eicha, he chants it with a mournful melody (D’varim 1:12). This serves to remind the community of the upcoming reading of the book of Lamentations which also begins with the word Eicha. Perhaps the sorrowful tune is also meant to direct our attention to the pain of a missed opportunity. Moshe’s call for teshuva which is highlighted in the parsha serves as a reminder of our undying conviction that the Jewish people will return to her land. It is up to each of us to ensure its realization.