

Shlach-Lecha: In Search of the Essence

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Summer is almost here, and with it many of us will become tourists. The main theme of Parashat Shlach-Lecha is tourism, or, to be more precise, the art of tourism. The English word is identical to the Hebrew in this case – "tour", "תור". Here is the story as it appears in the Torah. Notice how many times "tour" appears in its various forms.

"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to tour the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them." So Moses, by the LORD's command, sent them out from the wilderness of Paran, all the men being leaders of the Israelites...When Moses sent them to tour the land of Canaan, he said to them, "Go up and tour into the Negev and on into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is... They went up and toured the land...At the end of forty days they returned from touring the land.'

"They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land... Caleb ... said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we." Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had toured, saying, "The country that we traversed and toured is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size;" (Bamidbar 13: 1-33)

Did you notice that no mention is made of spies? These were tourists, not spies. This is not just a matter of translation. This is not a story about spying.

Several verses after the scouting story, seemingly unconnected, the mitzvah of tzitzit appears. And lo and behold, the word "latour" (to tour) appears again: It is the reason we wear tzitzit to this day.

"The LORD said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the LORD and observe them, so that you do

not tour with your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I the LORD am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the LORD your God." (38: 37-41)

The parasha is accusing us of something very serious: we have the tendency to follow our lustful hearts and eyes. When we do so, we betray the covenant with the God of freedom, and renege on our promise not to have any other gods before Him.

What is the difference between "latour" in the first story, in which the men are commanded to tour, and the same word when it is used in the second story, where it is forbidden?

But that's not all... is there a connection between the words "tour" and Torah? Do they just look and sound the same (in Hebrew more than in English), or is there more to it?

Back to the first story: The task God gave to Moshe and to the People was simply to tour the Land. Nothing more! Moshe, as he relayed the message, turned the mission from one of touring into one of spying.

By comparing the mitzvah of touring to the mitzvah of tzitzit, we can understand what God was really asking Moshe and Bnei Yisrael to do: He was asking them (and us) to be very precise. When a person observes something superficially, he or she will gain a very limited understanding of it, a mere awareness of the outer wrapping. They will get an initial impression if it is favorable or not. But God asks the leaders of the people – those twelve chosen to tour the Land – to look deeper, to see the essence of the land, its interior, its agenda. And that is a very difficult task!

It is difficult because we are not taught to see the essence. Our education - both at home and at school – focuses on that which can be observed immediately, on the surface, that which is easily revealed to us.

Moshe took the very brief Divine instruction and added his understanding of it. He tried to steer the leaders as to what to look for and what to see. And they followed his instructions to the letter! They indeed saw the essence of the land. When they returned from their journey they said **"It is a land of milk and honey."**

But then they stray! In the very same verse, they move from an honest and accurate report to gossip. They pass judgment on what they saw, thus they spread great fear.

The inhabitants of the land and their fortifications may be interesting, but they are not the **essence** of the Land, and were not the point of the journey. They were not sent to spy on the people; they were sent to tour and see the essence of the land!

Calev Ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua Bin-Nun were no stronger than any of the other leaders. They were not better than them. They simply persisted in pursuit of the essence, and did not engage in superficial gossip.

Often, we too are more similar to the ten frightened leaders than to the other two. Most of us look at reality and confuse what we see: it is scary, it is beautiful, it is ugly, it is wonderful... because we were never taught to really SEE.

The mitzvah of tzitzit is there to remind us of God's commandments.

What are those commandments?

To look carefully; to search for the essence; not to be tempted to follow our judgmental hearts and eyes, which are continually drawn to the superficial, the narrow, that which is easily revealed and accessible.

The word of "narrow" and "superficial" in the Torah is "Mitzrayim" (also: Egypt). Mitzrayim is a narrow place. That which is narrow, which does not allow for depth of vision, will also not allow the possibility of freedom, freedom of thought, or freedom of vision.

This, then, is also the connection between touring and Torah. The Torah is not a history book of the Jewish People. It is the deep art of essence! People who read the Torah without the "glasses of essence" may find nothing of interest in it; they may perhaps even be deterred. When we begin to see it as a guide to the essence, everything looks different.

How can this be done? There is no one formula, because a formula brings us back to superficial banality. But what God is asking Moshe to instruct the leaders of Israel, is to scout for the essence. To see that God's creation is flowing with milk and honey - just as promised.

How so? By looking deeper, always deeper, until one can see the essence – the Divine, the Infinite - in everything.

When we can do that, we will know that we have reached the Promised Land, as did Yehoshua Bin Nun and Calev Ben Yefuneh.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha