BS”D

Hashem did not command Moshe to send the spies, but He did agree to it. So what went wrong?

*Parshas Shlach:*

The Account of the Spies according to Ramban, Abarbanel, Rashi, and the Rebbe.

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

In Parshas Shlach, Hashem tells Moshe to send scouts to spy the land of Canaan. After 40 days, they return and say that the inhabitants of the land are too powerful and the Bnei Yisroel cannot conquer them. The Jewish people accept the spies’ views. Hashem punishes them by extending their stay in the desert for 40 years so that almost the entire generation of the exodus will not live to enter the land.

In Parshas Devorim, however, the Torah tells the story differently. There the *people* approach Moshe and request to send scouts to the land. Moshe agrees. The result is the same as recorded in Shlach. The Jewish people are afraid to conquer the land and forfeit the right to go there.

When we read Parshas Devorim, we get the impression that Hashem was not involved in sending the spies. The Bnei Yisroel did it with Moshe’s blessing. In Shlach, however, it appears that it is a direct command from Hashem to Moshe to send the spies.

Rashi gives the classic answer. Indeed, the Jews approached Moshe first. However, Moshe asked Hashem for permission. G-d granted him that permission. The sense of “Send men to scout” is permission to send, rather than a commandment. Although this explanation successfully reconciles the Biblical texts, further clarity is needed in understanding the nature of Hashem’s permission.

The Ramban learns that the Bnei Yisroel were perfectly correct in asking to send scouts. Even though sometimes G-d chooses to perform miracles, as a rule we are not supposed to rely on the supernatural, and so the Jews had every right to plan a military campaign, one of whose elements was to scout the enemy territory. Moshe had a right to send them, and G-d gave full permission. The scouts, by their bad choices, were responsible for the disastrous results of their mission. The Bnei Yisroel were responsible as well for choosing to accept the narrative of the ten spies rather than that of Yehoshua and Calev who maintained that they could conquer the land.

The Abarbanel takes a very different view of this episode. He maintains that the Jewish people should have put their entire trust in Hashem and not asked to send scouts. Moshe was wrong for agreeing with them. He should have told them that it was unnecessary and ill-advised. Once Moshe agreed, however, Hashem gave permission. It was as if He was saying, It’s not a good idea, but if you want, I won’t stop you.

As an aside, I would add that according to the Abarbanel, the main reason Moshe was not allowed to enter Eretz Yisroel was because he inadvertently brought about the incident of the scouts. He should have said no, and the whole thing would not have happened. The striking of the rock was only the secondary, albeit proximate, cause for Moshe’s not being able to enter Canaan. Also, I would add that almost all of the commentators disagree with this interpretation and feel we can assign little or no blame on Moshe.

Rashi’s position is in between Abarbanel’s and Ramban’s. According to Rashi, the Jews should not have asked. After all, Hashem had told them he was giving them a good land. However, once they asked, Moshe had to give them permission. If he did not, it would look like he had something to hide. Hashem, under these circumstances, agreed to send the scouts. The Jewish people had set themselves up to be tested. They were, and we know the results.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe has an insightful explanation that clarifies why G-d agreed to send the scouts. It resembles the Ramban’s in some ways but is original in others:

When the Jew were offered the Torah at Sinai, they said, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*, We will do G-d’s will, and we will understand it afterwards.” We must accept Hashem’s Mitzvos and requests unequivocally and totally: “We will do.” But afterwards we have to work on internalizing His will by understanding it to the best of our abilities.

As long as the Jewish people accepted that G-d would lead them to a successful conquest of the land of Canaan, it was acceptable to then say, Okay, how do we go about it? It was acceptable to send the scouts. That’s why Hashem did not command, but did agree. It’s not a commandment of G-d. It’s just an attempt to implement what G-d had promised by using our understanding. To this aspect, Hashem gives His full permission.

So what went wrong? Even though you may and, in fact, should exercise your own mind, your own personality, in serving G-d, your understanding must have a check on it. That check was Moshe whose connection to G-d’s will was on the highest level. The minute the spies deviated from Moshe’s instructions, the minute they explained it their way without consulting with Moshe, they made a terrible and tragic mistake. The consequences of that mistake have reverberated through our history.

The Rebbe’s interpretation is important for us in defining our Avodas Hashem (service of G-d). We should use our initiative, our understanding, our personalities to serve Hashem and to further Judaism in the world. We shouldn’t sit passively just doing our own Torah and Mitzvos and not innovate, not find original and new ways to teach Torah and to impact the Jewish world.

But we are safe to do that only if we have a Moshe Rabeinu, a Tzadik and gadol B’Torah, to guide us and lead us in our efforts.

We start with *Na’aseh*, to accept the Torah wholeheartedly, then continue with *Nishma*, to use our hearts and minds to implement Torah values. And all the while we remain connected to *Na’aseh* by following the guidance of the Tzadikim and Gedolom of our people.

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This is written in proximity to the third of Tammuz, the *yahrtzeit* of our Rebbe, *zechuso yagen aleinu* (may his merit protect us). The Rebbe taught us, and indeed he taught Klal Yisroel, how to navigate the perilous waters of our age. It is an age full of great opportunity but also of great challenge and, yes, of great danger. Through his writings and teachings, the Rebbe taught and still teaches us how to change the world, but also how to protect ourselves from the world’s dangers. Following the Rebbe’s *hashkafa* (outlook), methods, and values will help each one of us to succeed in bringing Yiddishkeit at its best to ourselves, our families, and to all Jews in this tumultuous age.

May we merit the coming of Moshiach speedily.