

## Parshah Q's - Shelach

Parshat Shelach opens with the story of the spies, in which reports of Canaanite power cause B'nei Yisroel, despite the pleading of Yehoshua and Calev and the prostration of Mosheh and Aharon, to advocate returning to Mitzrayim. Hashem's reaction to this, found in 14:11-12, is both fierce and subtle: "Hashem said to Mosheh: For how long will this people anger me, and how far will they not believe in me, despite all the signs I have done in their midst?! I will smite them with plague and destroy them, and make you into a nation greater and stronger than they". The fierceness is obvious; the subtlety is in the attempt to buy Mosheh's silence while providing him with a plausible excuse for silence. After all, the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov will still inherit the Land in this scheme!

Mosheh's reply, accordingly, makes no mention of the forefathers, and engages in moral argumentation only by indirection. He first argues (13-16) that the death of the Jews all at once would lead outsiders to conclude that G-d was in fact too weak to enable the Jews to overcome the powerful Canaanites. In other words, by killing the Jews G-d would spread the opinion He was killing them for expressing.

(Note two subtleties in Mosheh's speech however; he gets the "argument from previous commitment" in by saying that G-d would be considered unable to bring the Jews to the land "which He had promised them", and he refers to killing the people en masse as "killing them as one man", suggesting (as the Midrash of course notes) that he and his at-least-for-the-short-term descendants would have little chance of surviving G-d's anger if this entire nation could not).

Mosheh's second argument (17-19) is that anger is not (k'b'yakhol) Hashem's best characteristic; He should try to recapture the attribute of forgiveness He had so frequently displayed on the journey so far. (Note: There may be a subtle point here too, namely that by destroying them now Hashem would undercut His own previous decisions to forgive them.)

Hashem's response (20-25, 26-36) begins with "I have forgiven them as per your words (solachti kidvarekha)". Immediately thereafter, He swears that none of those involved in this rebellion will see/reach the Land, although Calev will do so. (The absence of Yehoshua as an exception is of course striking - the absence of an explicit exception for Mosheh may not be significant, but see the apparent redundancy within verse 23.)

The phrase "as per your words" deserves analysis, especially as what follows does not reflect forgiveness. R. Saadia Gaon says that Hashem is simply giving Mosheh credit for the decision (S'forno says that Hashem is saying that Mosheh's argument was unnecessary - He had already forgiven them in those terms), but Rashi and Rashbam argue that the word is double-edged - I accept your pragmatic argument about killing them all at once, but that in no way constrains Me from killing them off gradually. Netziv sharpens this reading brilliantly by noting that Mosheh introduces the second part of his argument by saying "Let the power of Hashem be great now as You spoke" - Hashem accepts Mosheh's own argument (d'varekha), but not Mosheh's attempt to appeal to His previous words (dibarta).

Chizkuni, however, suggests that Hashem is saying "I have (in the past) forgiven them at your request (or: based on this type of argument), but no more!".

I suggest that the dispute as to whether G-d in fact engages in forgiveness here turns on two questions:

- 1) Does forgiveness/-selicha involve an emotional or rational release, or is it merely descriptive of the pragmatic decision not to punish?
- 2) Is Hashem reacting to this specific sin, or does His speech reflect an exasperation that has accumulated throughout the journey?

(Endnotes: Note the irony of G-d's suggesting that He make Mosheh a great and numerous nation almost immediately after (according to some; see last week's sheet) telling Mosheh to separate from his wife so as to remain ready for propheet constantly. Note also that Rashi cites a midrash which argues that the women did not follow the spies (or participate in worshipping the Golden Calf), and hence were able to reach the Land and presumably were never threatened with destruction.)

Shabbat Shalom

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