

PARASHAS SHELACH

Reverse Spin

Spies never had it so good. Ordinarily, spies devote at least as much time and effort to avoiding detection as they do to the collection of vital information. But the spies Moses sent to reconnoiter the Holy Land did not need to worry at all about detection. They were traveled the length and breadth of the land and gathered all the information they needed, and yet, no one paid them the slightest attention. Wherever they went, they encountered one funeral procession after another. It seemed that just about every Canaanite in the land was in mourning.

This was not, of course, some happy coincidence. God had deliberately arranged that these Canaanites deaths, which would ordinarily have been spread over a longer period of time, should all occur in rapid sequence at this particular time, while the spies were in their midst. It was a kindness God had shown them, a divine dispensation to facilitate their mission.

That, however, was not how the spies interpreted the situation. They were among the most prominent and distinguished leaders of their respective tribes, and they understood full well that the rash of funerals could not be mere coincidence. Instead, they saw them as a negative reflection on the land. "Why are so many people dying all around us?" they said to each other. "Why do we see only funeral processions wherever we go? This must be a very harsh land, a land that devours its inhabitants."

When they returned from their mission and reported on what they had seen, they put their reverse spin on everything. They slandered the land and caused a panic-stricken near-uprising among the people. The Torah considers the report of the spies a very big sin, and the results were disastrous. Instead of entering the Holy Land right away, the people were forced to stay in the desert for another thirty-eight years, until the entire generation passed on and another arose to take their place.

But what had the spies done wrong? Did they lie? Did they invent any stories that were not true? All they said was that they encountered funerals wherever they went, and they offered their interpretation.

The commentators explain that people often have a tendency to see what they want to see. The spies were concerned they would lose their positions of importance when the journey through the desert came to an end. They preferred that the people remain where they were, and

this colored their judgment. Instead of recognizing the funerals as a divine kindness, they chose to believe the rather far-fetched interpretation that ubiquitous daily funerals formed the pattern of life in the Holy Land, that it was a land forever in mourning. They were so absorbed with themselves that they could not hear the absurdity of their own words.

A husband was pacing nervously back and forth in the waiting room of the hospital while his wife was delivering their first child. Every time the door opened, he would jump from his seat, fully expecting to see the doctor bringing news of the new, anxiously awaited arrival. Time and again, however, he was disappointed.

His nervousness increased with every passing moment. He tried to drink some water, but he could not bring himself to swallow. The thought of food did not even enter his head. Beads of sweat collected on his brow, and he felt his ears flushed with a slight fever. He could not believe the ordeal he was experiencing.

Finally, after many false alarms, the door opened, and the doctor appeared.

“Congratulations, my friend,” he declared. “You are the father of a very lovely and healthy little girl.”

“Thank Heaven,” the young man cried out. “Thank you so much. Oh, if my wife only knew what I’ve been through these last three hours, she would be shocked!”

In our own lives, we are sometimes so intensely focused on ourselves that it does not even occur to us that others may be equally or even more affected than we are. As a result, we may perceive slights and insults where they were never intended, and we may develop insensitivity to our friends, family and associates and damage our relationships with them. Only when we rise above our own selfish needs can we see the world around us as it really is. Only then can we truly prosper and flourish.