



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 18 | Shelach | Sichah 1

Learn the Lesson

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1.

A QUESTION OF PLACEMENT

Quoting the words from the beginning of this parsha, “Send forth for yourself men,” Rashi comments, “Why is the passage dealing with the spies placed next to the passage dealing with Miriam? Because she was punished for gossiping (דיבה), for speaking against her brother, and these evildoers saw, but did not take the lesson.”

Rashi’s interpretation needs clarification. As mentioned many times, since Rashi does not ordinarily explain why Torah passages are juxtaposed, this proves that from the point of view of understanding the plain sense of Scripture, the juxtaposition of passages poses no difficulty. This is certainly true when passages follow in chronological order.

If so, why does Rashi question the placement of our passage? After all, the episode about the spies occurred immediately after the episode about Miriam (the morning after she completed her seven days of banishment)?

2.

NUANCES IN RASHI’S WORDING

In addition, several of Rashi’s phrases need clarification.

- a) “Because she was punished for gossiping” — Rashi should have used the [more common] term — slander. Elsewhere, Rashi in fact says, “Just as Miriam was stricken for slander.” The problem is compounded when we consider Rashi’s own definition of the word gossip (דיבה): “The expression הוֹצֵאֶת דְּבַר הַדָּבָר connotes training in speech.... It may be for either good or bad.” Therefore, why does Rashi comment here, “she was punished for gossiping,” since gossiping does not necessarily imply sinful talk? On the contrary, gossip might be something positive.

- b) Why does Rashi add the phrase, “for speaking against her brother”? The point is that she was punished for gossiping. What difference does it make about whom Miriam was gossiping?
- c) Why does Rashi elaborate, “and these evildoers saw”? Since we already know that Rashi is speaking about the spies, he should have just written succinctly, “and they saw, but did not take the lesson”?
- d) Why does Rashi write, “[these evildoers] saw, but did not take the lesson,” and not, “[these evildoers] saw the lesson, but were not mindful,” wording that is used elsewhere in Torah?
- e) In his header, why does Rashi need to also quote the words, “for yourself men”? Wouldn’t it have been sufficient just to quote a single word “Send”—just as in the beginning of parshat Beha’alotcha, where Rashi also explains the side-by-side placement of two Torah passages and he quotes in his header only a single word beha’alotcha [when you light] (and not “when you light the lamps”)?

3.

THE SPIES TOLD THE TRUTH

To answer the above mentioned questions, first we must address another difficulty. Why was the transgression of the spies considered so terrible? After all, the spies were sent on a fact-finding mission — to discover the characteristics of the land, of the people populating the land, and the defensive strength of the cities in which the people lived. Why then are the spies convicted and condemned for telling the truth about what they saw, by reporting, “The people...are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified”?

We cannot answer that they sinned by also alleging, “The land consumes its inhabitants,” (or for volunteering their own conclusion, “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than us”) — because (as the Ramban

points out) even before the spies made these particular statements, Caleb had already attempted to silence them. Accordingly, we can infer that even the first report of the spies — about the might of the people and their huge fortified cities — was improper.

Moreover, even what they added afterwards — and also their conclusion, “We are unable to go” — can be rationalized (and therefore, should not be considered sinful): The spies never opposed Hashem’s will by saying, “We won’t go.” They had just said, “We are unable to go.” Based on their appraisal of the military strength of land’s inhabitants, and knowing the military power of the Jewish people, the Jewish people could not possibly conquer (in a natural manner) the land of Israel.

[Even their remark, “for they are stronger than us,” which “they said in reference to the most High,” was not (in the plain sense of the verse) a denial of Hashem. They only meant to say that the indigenous nations were so much stronger (than the Jews), that even with miracles, they could not imagine vanquishing them.

CLIMBING TO HEAVEN

That is why when Caleb answered them (he didn’t claim that the Jews could in fact conquer Israel in a natural way, or that Hashem would overcome the nations with miracles, but) that “We can surely go up — even to heaven; if he tells us, ‘Make ladders and go up there,’ we will succeed in whatever he says.” Although conquering Israel (even with a miracle) seems comparable to doing the impossible, “We can surely go up...to heaven” — we must obey Hashem without calculations.]

And given that the objective of the spies’ mission was to determine the strength of the inhabitants so that the Jewish people could prepare for a natural war, and given that the assessment of the spies (“We are unable to go”) was true according to natural law — what then was all the clamor over their crime of reporting the results of their appraisal?

This is precisely the difficulty that Rashi resolves with his commentary, “Why is the passage...juxtaposed...? Because she was punished” — the

juxtaposition of the passages is what gives us the insight into what constituted the sin of the spies.

4.

MORAL EQUIVALENCE

The explanation is as follows:

Although the story of the spies took place immediately after the story concerning Miriam, Rashi asks about the side-by-side placement of the passages because {we might have reached an erroneous conclusion as to why the Torah did not separate them.} Occasionally the Torah separates two passages, despite the fact that one passage follows the other chronologically. Rashi already introduced us to this principle in his commentary on the passage describing the movement of the Ark. He explains that the passages were interposed “to make a break between one punishment and the next.”

So, too, here. Learning the two passages — the first about Miriam, the second about the spies — one after the other, both speaking on the theme of slander, a person might make a horrible mistake and think that Miriam and the spies were all on the same spiritual rung (G-d forbid) or at least similar and close to each other in makeup.

True, the radical difference in the consequences of their respective sins was blatant: Miriam was temporarily banished, and the nation did not continue traveling until she returned. In contrast, (a) the spies were killed by a plague; (b) the whole generation was doomed to die in the desert; (c) finally, the children of that generation would have to wander in the desert for forty year.

But we might think that the horrendous outcome does not prove that the spies were wicked. Just that since they spoke carelessly, the Jews all stumbled (rebellious against Hashem) and were unwilling to enter the land of Israel.

Miriam's slander, however, was only a private matter {and led to no negative, national repercussions}.

[Therefore, in his heading, Rashi also quotes the words, "for yourself men," as these words increase the risk of mistakenly thinking that the spies were comparable to (or at least similar to) Miriam:

Since it was at Moshe's discretion that the spies were sent on their critical mission, this indicates that the spies possessed tremendous virtues (and not just generic ones, but those specific virtues that would be needed to successfully fulfill their mission). So much so, the Torah refers to them as "men" (אנשים), which connotes men of high standing — men fit for the job.]

THE PASSAGES SHOULD HAVE BEEN SEPARATED?

To preclude the possibility of making this mistake, and to clarify that the spies were not (G-d forbid!) on a similar spiritual rung, the Torah should have separated these two passages by interposing between them some other matter. Therefore, Rashi asks, "Why is the passage dealing with the spies placed next to the passage dealing with Miriam?"

5.

THE JUXTAPOSITION EXPLAINS THE SIN

Rashi answers that the Torah juxtaposed the two passages to tell us (another reason) why the sin of the spies was so terrible — "these evildoers saw, but did not take the lesson." This explains in simple terms why their punishment was so severe: They had a recent opportunity to learn a lesson, yet they failed to do so.

To learn the lesson, they didn't have to reflect deeply on what they had seen transpire with Miriam — they simply had to take, {to apply} the moral to themselves. Since the spies should have applied the lesson from what happened with Miriam, this proves that their sin and the sin of Miriam were the same kind.

That's why the lesson and negative nature of the spies' sin could be taken from the negative nature of Miriam's sin.

SAME SIN BUT DISSIMILAR SINNERS

Now we can appreciate why Rashi adds and emphasizes, “These evildoers...” With these words, Rashi ensures that we understand that the comparison between these two events is only in terms of the nature of the sin committed by Miriam and the spies. The comparison does not imply an equivalency between the perpetrators of the sins. As far as the perpetrators are concerned, the spies were (not ordinary sinners, but) evildoers. They were the very opposite of Miriam, about whom we (just) learnt, “This honor was accorded her by the Omnipresent.”

6.

MIRIAM'S MISDEED

Yet we still need to understand — what exactly was Miriam's sin? The gist of what she had said, “about the Cushite wife Moshe had married, and now divorced,” was true. Moshe had divorced her, and had caused her pain. Moreover, Miriam didn't intend to besmirch Moshe. Miriam simply erred in her evaluation of Moshe's virtues (which surpassed Hashem speaking to him), thinking Moshe had no grounds to separate from his wife. Did she deserve such a punishment for not fully fathoming Moshe's greatness?

PROTRACTED TALK

Explains Rashi — her sin was not that she had engaged in malicious gossip, but that she had engaged in gossip, that she had talked at length about Moshe, etc. When Miriam noticed Moshe's puzzling behavior, she shouldn't have spoken about it, and spoken about it at length (even though she spoke the truth and intended no harm). Protracted talk about Moshe would never lead to favorable talk; it could only lead to disparaging remarks. (If Miriam felt she needed to

understand Moshe's behavior — Miriam should have inquired from Moshe directly, and in private.)

A similar offense was committed by the spies. The spies had told no lies about the land of Israel. But they became preoccupied with their talk. They spoke excessively about the strength of the land's inhabitants, dwelling on it to the extent that they scared the Jewish people out of wanting to enter into Israel.

INTENTIONAL INNUENDO

If the spies wondered how Hashem could instruct them to conquer the land given the military might of the inhabitants — they should have spoken briefly or simply have asked Moshe. Their obsessiveness, their relentless talk about it, about the power of the indigenous people to the extent of expressing their unabashed opinion that “we cannot go” could have but one result — to incite the Jews to rebel, to declare that they want to appoint a leader with whom they would return to Egypt.

7.

WORLDS APART

How did Miriam come to gossip about Moshe? From her complaint, “Has Hashem spoken only to Moshe? Hasn't He spoken to us too?” we can understand how it came about. Knowing that Hashem also spoke with her and Aharon, Miriam didn't realize that the difference between their stature and that of Moshe was so vast as to justify Moshe distressing his Cushite wife, or to free him from the Divine command not to diminish her conjugal rights — to the point that he separated himself from his wife altogether.

The spies committed a similar mistake in logic. They reasoned that since Moshe chose them, “by the word of Hashem,” for their mission — it was impossible that anyone else could be superior to them in this respect, or that anyone else could grasp the situation better. And since they, the emissaries of

Hashem, saw themselves as grasshoppers compared with the giant inhabitants of the land, they were convinced that their opinion was true and Divinely sanctioned. As such, their appraisal was valid for all Jews. Consequently, they reached the conclusion (for themselves and for all the Jews) “we cannot go up.”

Since in their minds an incursion into Israel was not viable, they got involved in explicating their position, droning on about the land of Israel.

In light of the above we can understand why Rashi adds the clause, “for speaking against her brother.” It further clarifies how the spies failed to learn a lesson from Miriam about judging another person superior to oneself: An aspect of Miriam’s sin was that she spoke against her brother. Since a brother is a person’s own flesh and blood, it is naturally difficult to perceive him as both one’s flesh and blood, and at the same time, of incomparably higher stature than oneself. Nevertheless, Miriam was duly punished for this {failure to recognize Moshe’s incomparably higher stature despite him being part of the same family}. Certainly, the spies should not have presumed more than this — that all the Jews, Moshe and Aharon included, must follow them, acquiescing to their decision.

8.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Another precisely chosen word in Rashi needs clarification. Rashi says, “These evildoers saw, but did not take the lesson.” At first glance, the word saw seems superfluous. Could Rashi not have just written, “These evildoers did not take the lesson”?

The answer to this question will be understood by first resolving a perplexing problem in the general narrative of the spies: What novel insight did the spies gain through their reconnaissance of the land of Israel — an insight that frightened them so much that they protested “we cannot go up”? After all,

everything they saw {and reported}, e.g., “the people who inhabit the land are mighty,” they had already known about beforehand.

[Because (a) while in Egypt, the situation in Canaan was already known. (b) During the singing after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, the Jewish people sang, “all the inhabitants of Canaan melted.” Obviously, they were informed about, “all the inhabitants of Canaan,” and their might (otherwise – it would be no wonder that they “melted.”) For other reasons as well.]

Nonetheless, the Jewish people were ready for their advance into the land of Israel.

The explanation can be understood in light of the dictum of our sages that hearing about something is not the same as seeing it. As long as the Jewish people only heard about the military strength of the inhabitants, they were not intimidated by the foreseeable difficulties, and were ready to go forward into the land of Israel. But once they saw with their own eyes the might of the inhabitants, etc., it affected a change of heart, causing them to regret their earlier resolve.

[Therefore the spies emphasized several times, “we saw,” underscoring that they were reporting what they themselves saw. That’s why the spies showed the people the fruit of the land – so that the people would see as well.]

Accordingly, Rashi emphasizes that “these evildoers saw” – they also had seen the penalty paid by Miriam, and this visual lesson should have made the same strong impact on them, allowing them to overcome their test when they later saw the situation in the land of Canaan.

Had they only heard about Miriam’s punishment, they could not be reproached for not having learnt a lesson. Because then the cause that brought them to sin would have been a visible one and the counterbalancing impetus to resist sinning would have been only something audible – something they had heard. Thus Rashi emphasizes – they saw. The strength to resist sinning was

also based on something visual — on something they had seen. Even so, they failed to take the lesson.

9.

WONDROUS MATTERS

{Aside from clarifying the simple meaning of Torah, Rashi's commentary also contains allusions to “wondrous matters,” to matters in the other dimensions of Torah.} To understand the “wondrous matters” in the Halachic realm of Torah that Rashi alludes to here (at least to keep us sharp), we must first present a question.

After everything is said and done, how can the Torah place (the narrative of) Miriam next to (the narrative of) the spies? Might this not create a suspicion that Miriam was somehow similar to the spies? Don't we learn from the verse, “and you shall be freed [of your obligation] from Hashem and from Israel” to steer clear of the possibility of creating such suspicion?

ONE SCROLL AT A TIME

Seemingly, we can answer this question based on Rashi's opinion (as expressed in his commentary on Scripture) that the Torah was given one scroll at a time. (Moshe would (immediately) commit to writing each section as it occurred.) Accordingly, it makes sense to say that Moshe, who was zealous, immediately wrote down everything that happened in the beginning of parshat Shelach — everything that happened on that same day (the 29th of Sivan), concluding that scroll with Hashem's command to send the spies (only their dispatch and Moshe's involvement in their mission). He would have recorded the events immediately in order not to delay the augmentation of the Written Torah with another section.

Now obviously every day in the desert (including that 28th and 29th of Sivan) a multitude of events took place among the 600,000 men — and the

many more women, etc. Especially, there was the journeying of the Jewish people, the disassembling and reassembling of the Tabernacle, and so on and so forth. Thus, a tremendous number of events occurred between Miriam's return to the camp, on the 28th of Sivan, before the Tabernacle moved, and the moment when Hashem instructed Moshe to send forth the spies. (This directive took place only after only all the tribes were once again encamped, the tabernacle reassembled, and after the people had approached Moshe asking for spies to be sent.) So thousands upon thousands of events actually interposed between Miriam's return to the camp and the actual sending of the spies. (Including events entailed by the fulfillment of mitzvot, and the like — traveling and encamping by the word of Hashem, bringing sacrificial offerings in the Tabernacle, etc.)

The juxtaposition, however, was a result of Moshe recording the passage of the spies next to the passage of Miriam. He did so in order to enable the spies to take the lesson {gleaned from Miriam's sin and punishment to their own situation}.

Therefore, Moshe overlooked any undue suspicion that such juxtaposition might cast on Miriam — in order to forewarn and protect the spies from sinning.

But one difficulty still remains. There is a Torah principle that states — “We don't tell a person: For your friend's welfare, commit a sin.”

{If so, how could these passages be juxtaposed if it might be detrimental to Miriam? For the spiritual benefit of the spies? But this runs contrary to above mentioned principle!}

Rashi forestalls this question with his carefully chosen wording, “They did not take the lesson (not — “These evildoers sinned” or something similar), as explained below.

10.

SOMETIMES A SMALL SIN IS OK

On the abovementioned dictum, “For your friend’s welfare,” Rashi comments, “So that your friend does not become culpable and receive a severe punishment.” Shouldn’t Rashi have rather said that “For your friend’s welfare” means, “that your friend not commit a severe sin”? Why does Rashi say, “so that your friend does not become culpable and receive a severe punishment”?

To answer, we posit that Rashi agrees with the position of Tosfos, which states that we don’t tell a person to sin for his fellow’s benefit only when the forbidden deed was already committed. But in a situation where a person can at the outset prevent his fellow from committing a serious transgression, we do tell the person to commit a (minor) sin — to prevent his friend from committing a serious one.

Therefore Rashi chooses the wording, “not become culpable... a severe punishment” — to emphasize that the above principle applies only after the sin was already committed, and we are concerned only with eliminating his punishment.

On this basis we can now understand why the Torah juxtaposed the two passages, even though it might cast suspicion on Miriam. It was so that the spies would learn from her mistake, and thus not commit a terrible transgression.

And Rashi alludes to this with his words, “(but did not take) the lesson,” because the purpose of seeing rebuke is to admonish a person not to transgress, and to guide him to virtuous conduct.

-Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Shelach*, 5725 (1965)