

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Shlach

Twice in our history we angered G-d to the point that He thought to destroy us. With a little help from a good Jewish lawyer named Moshe, we managed to escape that fate. However, these two terrible sins forever altered our national history. The first great crime was when we worshiped the Golden Calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The second appears in this week's parsha, and it is the Sin of the Spies.

The Jews sent scouts to spy out the land of Israel and its inhabitants. The majority of the scouts returned with a negative report: "We cannot go forward against those people! They are too strong for us!" The Jews were frightened: "Why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by the sword? ... Let's appoint a [new] leader and go back to Egypt".

Two of the scouts tried to inspire the people with faith: "The land through which we have passed is a very, very good land. If G-d is satisfied with us and brings us to this land, He can give it to us ... But don't rebel against G-d! Don't be afraid of the people in the land ... G-d is with us. Don't be afraid!" Instead of helping matters, their appeal for sanity just made the people angrier. The Jews threaten to stone them (Bamidbar 13:25-14:10).

At this point, G-d intervened. He informed Moshe of His intention to destroy the Jewish people with a plague and His plan to establish a new nation with Moshe as its founding father. Instead of accepting this gracious offer, Moshe used an innovative prayer to convince G-d out of it. Moshe pointed out that destroying the Jews would not do good things for G-d's reputation: "The nations who hear this news about You will say that G-d was not able to bring this nation to the land that He swore to them, so He slaughtered them in the desert" (14:15,16). Moshe's prayer was accepted and the Jews were spared. Interestingly, this is essentially the same prayer that Moshe used about a year earlier at the time of the sin of the Golden Calf. Then too, G-d wanted to punish the nation with total annihilation. And then, as now, Moshe pointed out how that would damage G-d's reputation: "Why should Egypt be able to say that you took them out with evil intentions, to kill them in the hill country and wipe them out from the face of the earth?" (Shemot 32:12).

It seems that this is the 'In Case of Emergency Break Glass' Prayer. G-d's reputation in the world is very precious to Him, for the advancement and perfection of society is dependent upon people's awareness of G-d's leadership and presence. This is the true meaning of a widely misunderstood concept called "Tikkun Olam". As we say at the end of every service in the Aleinu prayer, "... l'takken olam b'malchut shadai", i.e., "We put our hope in You ... to fix the world with the sovereignty of G-d". If people think that G-d is limited in any way, their acceptance of G-d's sovereignty will be limited. Moshe knew this and in emergency situations he leveraged it to our advantage. He reminded G-d that hurting the Jews would cause people to lose their respect for Him and that would throw G-d's plans for the world into reverse.



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continued ...

There is a fundamental concept implicit in Moshe's prayer, and it is a truth that no Jew should ever forget. G-d's status in this world is entirely dependent on the status of the Jews. This is the reality, and it is a natural result of being the Chosen Nation. The Jew has the responsibility to be a light unto the nations, for the Jew is G-d's ambassador to the world. G-d and the Jews are eternally linked.

This has serious implications. In the daily prayer service, the Amidah, one of the things that we ask of G-d is to destroy evil. We find two different versions of this prayer. Most siddurim (prayer books) follow the *nusach* of Rabbi David Avudraham (early 14th century) and read, "... and may all of *Your* enemies be quickly cut down." However, in some medieval manuscripts we find a variant wording, "... and may all the enemies of *Your nation* be quickly cut down". Well, which one is it? Are we praying for the annihilation of our enemies or G-d's enemies?

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gordon (Jerusalem, 19th century) writes in his classic Tikkun Tefillah that there is no real difference between these two versions of the prayer. The enemies of the Jews and the enemies of G-d are one and the same.

Rashi (1040-1105) introduced us to this idea in last week's parsha. He quotes the Midrash on the famous verse, "When the ark went forth, Moshe said, 'Arise, O G-d, and scatter your enemies! Let your foes flee before you!'" (Bamidbar 10:35). The Midrash asks, "Does G-d have enemies? Rather, [the verse is really referring to the enemies of the Jews, but] the Torah is informing us that a Jew-hater is also a G-d-hater." (Sifri BaHa'alotecha).

Moshe's prayers were answered even in the darkest of times, even in situations that seemed entirely hopeless. Today we live in such a time. For our brethren in Israel, hope is certainly a rare commodity. It is our duty to follow Moshe's lead and utilize his successful formula. We must pray with all our hearts and humbly remind G-d that His own reputation is at stake. As we say in the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer: "Our Father, our King, do it for your own sake, if not for ours. Our Father, our King, do it for your own sake and save us!"

Shabbat Shalom!

