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**Dvar Torah – Parshat Shelach – June 20, 2009**

This week, we read the account of the so-called “spies”, leaders of the nation whom Moshe sent to explore the land of Israel. This actually seems like a natural preface to the conquest, and indeed, the verb used in the pasuk, *latur*, does not mean “spy” at all, but rather “explore”. Exploring the land to get to know one’s way around and to have a general idea of the surroundings before moving in strikes me as a clear parallel to a modern pilot trip to Israel. Many families who intend to make aliyah do take a trip there before the move to sort out practical considerations. So what did these “spies” or rather “explorers” do to command God’s wrath and to deserve capital punishment?

The answer lies not in the decision to go exploring, nor really in the findings of the exploration, but rather in the explorers’ attitude toward their mission. While they confirmed that the land flowed with milk and honey, they also expressed despair at the size of its inhabitants, describing them as *anshei midot*. While most commentators interpret this phrase to mean naturally large and strong people, Rabbi Chayim Paltiel interprets *anshei midot* as *anshei melacha*, suggesting that the land does not require people of natural strength and ability, but rather people willing to work hard and become strong by putting forth significant effort. Anyone who has ever lived in Israel, even for a short time, can understand the truth of this; I have yet to encounter an Israeli or *oleh* who can afford the luxury of laziness. Yet while the report itself made sense, the explorers sinned in warping the message of “it will take hard work” into a message of “it is impossible”. God had already promised them a military conquest; they were not sent to determine if they could conquer and dwell in the land, but rather how they could do it. They ignored Moshe’s message of *hitchazaktem* and allowed themselves to be intimidated by the prospect of exertion. Only Yehoshua and Calev found the courage within themselves to accept the challenge of hard work. Sadly, the majority won out, and these two brave men did not succeed in their encouragement of Bnai Yisrael. We see from this episode how easy it is for ten men of powerful influence to sway an entire nation, even with wild, hyperbolic statements that characterized the Canaanites as giants and themselves as grasshoppers. Once the gossip had spread, God became incensed, struck down the ten explorers with a plague, and sentenced the rest of the nation to forty years of wandering in the desert, one year for every day of the exploration.

This kind of attitude arises from mislaid priorities. To the ten explorers, rest and relaxation trumped the mitzvah of settling Eretz Yisrael. Calev and Yehoshua, however, wanted to fulfill the mitzvah at any price. The message of the majority, that Bnai Yisrael would surely fall in battle against the Canaanites, merely functioned as a front, an excuse so that they would not have to change their lifestyles. They emphasized the Canaanites’ fortifications not because they really believed they could not defeat them, but simply because they did not want to

defeat them.

On my flight back to America three weeks ago, I had to pay a hefty fee for overweight bags. In fact, the amount of the fee charged for overweight bags on my flight from JFK to Baltimore exceeded the price of my ticket! Then, once I was back in Baltimore and ready to unpack, I discovered that I had somehow left my orthodontic retainers in Israel and would have to purchase new ones. While this experience caused me a lot of stress, I believe that it was God's way of telling me that I too need to rethink my priorities in life. I had a limited amount of space in my bags, and I packed unnecessary items while inadvertently leaving behind one of the most important. This combination ended up costing me a great deal of time, money, and heartache, but it also taught me a valuable lesson.

I had considered shipping home some of my possessions, but rejected that possibility because I felt it was too expensive. I couldn't reconcile myself to giving away some of my possessions, either, and therefore tried to pack everything into a small space, jumping on my bags to force them to accommodate the extra weight. This "shortcut" backfired when I realized that in my zeal to find a way to include all of the extra stuff, I had lost a necessity. I ended up creating barriers for myself and making my own life more difficult than it needed to be. If I had only discarded some items, I would have avoided the extra steps of lugging heavy bags around the airport, waiting in line to pay my fee, and going to the orthodontist to have new impressions taken.

As the explorers learned, there truly are no shortcuts to an easy life free of hard work and effort. By trying to dissuade Bnai Yisrael from fighting the Canaanites, they did, in a way, achieve what they wanted- they ended up free of hard work. Yet they never anticipated just how dearly they would pay for it. In the process of trying to improve their lives, they lost them altogether. What a sad trade that was.

Clearly, we are sometimes our own worst enemies. The Torah does not describe us as a stubborn nation for no reason; when we really want something, we do anything whatsoever to get it, even making sacrifices of greater worth than whatever we are trying to attain. Only God has the wisdom to understand what is really best for us, and so we need to make it our first priority to live a lifestyle consistent with what He wants from us, trusting that the rest will fall into place. What seems like an easy alternative to a difficult step may later prove to be even more difficult than the first option. Only by heeding Moshe's message of courageousness and exerting ourselves can we avoid these pitfalls and speedily attain our goals.