

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

פרשת שלח תשכ"ה ד"ה להבין ענין טענת המרגלים בלתי מוגה

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THE FEARS OF THE SPIES

WHY WERE THE SPIES FRIGHTENED ABOUT TRYING TO ENTER THE LAND OF CANAAN? They called it ‘a land which devours its inhabitants’ (Num.13:32), which links to a phrase in the Zohar – “the abnegation of the Land”². Both ideas suggest that the land is not a firm basis for daily life as one would expect.

There are two ways of explaining the Zohar’s ‘abnegation of the land’. One is that in the process of the kabbalistic ‘breaking of the vessels’, which took place on account of their sense of self, hubris, Malchut the feminine Sefirah went through a stage of ‘abnegation’ but did not break. This is because Malchut, while it has a certain level of Self, is also in a state of bitul, abnegation beyond self.

[This can be understood as the inner humility of womanhood, a receptive quality which neutralizes any possible strident presence.] Consequently, the intense radiance of Chaos which led to the shattering of the other Sefirot was absorbed by Malchut. Malchut only went through a stage of abnegation in which its light was temporarily hidden.

The second meaning of ‘abnegation of the land’ is like self-abandon in prayer, like a flame seeking to join with its source and lose itself³. In this sense of longing and reaching for the Infinite, Malchut dissolves away.

¹ Maamar Lehavin Inyan Taanat Hameraglim 5725 (1965). It was printed in Dvar Malchut Shelach 5776. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² Zohar II 176b.

³ See Likkutei Torah Behar 40a.

These two kabbalistic-Chassidic explanations of the phrase from the Zohar link with two different explanations of the claim by the Spies that the Land devours its inhabitants. One is the fear that if the radiance of the Infinite would be revealed through the carrying out of Mitzvot (most of which pertain to the Land of Israel), there would be such a burst of spiritual energy that the inhabitants, the Jewish people, would be ‘devoured’⁴. They would be harmed in some way because of the intense spirituality. This is like the second explanation of the phrase from the Zohar: dissolving away in intense spiritual radiance.

The other explanation of “the land which devours its inhabitants” is the opposite: the spies were afraid that by going into the physical Land of Israel and being involved with the material aspects of ploughing and sowing and reaping, they would become so coarsened that they would no longer be sensitive to the holy⁵.

They would be coarsened, not destroyed. Their attempt to grapple with the material – which is rooted in the intense radiance of the Realm of Chaos – would make them feel abnegated with their light hidden, ‘blacked out’, as was described about the Sefirah Malchut in the first explanation above of the ‘abnegation of the land’.

These were the fears of the Spies. In effect they were arguing with the concept of the process of Tikun. Indeed, the material world around us is powered by the intense radiance of the World of Chaos. Our task is to engage with the material world, both in daily life and in the observance of practical Mitzvot, and to ‘sift’ the intense radiance and elevate it in the process of Tikkun, Repair. The Spies thought this would not be possible. The radiance of Chaos was too powerful, they felt. It would either over-radiate them or coarsen them. Either way the process of Tikkun would not happen.

When the Spies said ‘they - the inhabitants of the land - are stronger than us’⁶, the Hebrew words can be read as meaning ‘stronger than Him’. The Sages say, accusingly, they meant the inhabitants of the land are stronger than G-d. The discourse explains they meant that the intense radiance of Chaos would be too powerful for the comparatively gentle process of Tikkun.

Caleb responded by ‘silencing the people to Moses’⁷. This was the response to deal with the fears of the Spies. Through humility, one is able to cope with the intense radiance of Chaos and elevate it so that it becomes part of the World of Tikkun. ‘Silence’ is an expression of humility and selflessness. Being bonded

⁴ See Likkutei Torah Shelach 37a.

⁵ See the Tzemah Tzedek’s Or HaTorah, Shelach, p.527.

⁶ Num.13:31, Sedra Shelach.

⁷ Num.13:30.

with Moses engenders a sense of humility in a person, for Moses expresses utter humility⁸.

In the Sedra, when Moses told them of G-d's anger, they suddenly forgot their fears⁹. The shell hiding their inner sacred selves was broken. Moses expresses absolute humility, and by being bonded with him one loses one's own hubris, and then one is able to transform the powerful radiance of Chaos, through daily life and Mitzvot, and rebuild a world of Repair, of Tikkun, in which G-dliness is revealed in an unthreatening and wholly positive way, in a world of good for all.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care

⁸ As expressed in Numbers 12:3, Sedra Behaalotecha 'Moses was more humble than anyone else on earth'.

⁹ See Num.14:40 in Shelach, and the way it is explained in Tanya ch.29 (37b).