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Edah  
1501 Broadway,  
Suite 501  
New York, NY  
10036

212-244-7501

[www.edah.org](http://www.edah.org)

**Upcoming EVENTS:**

Torah for Elul at the JCC in NYC

Tuesdays  
Sept. 5th-19th,

7pm  
Chaviva Levin—  
“Teshuva and Apostasy in Medieval Ashkenaz”

8:30 pm Rabbi Saul Berman -  
“Teshuva: Repairing Relationship”

**Matters of Perspective:****The Approaches of Rashi and Ramban to the Spies Narratives**

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The episode of the Spies is the turning point in the Israelites' trek through the wilderness. At the brink of entering the Promised Land, their faithlessness condemned them to forty years of wandering. At first blush, sin and consequence appear sufficiently straightforward.

However, commentators are troubled by two difficulties. First, God appears to have initiated this mission (Bamidbar 13:1). How could God command an action and then punish the people for failing? Were it not for this command, it seems that the first generation of Israelites would have entered the Promised Land. Additionally, Moshe's retelling of this episode in Devarim differs from the Bamidbar account. The people, not God, initiated the mission (Devarim 1:22). Moreover, Moshe appears to cast the people as faithless already for requesting spies, since they did so immediately following God's promise of the Land (1:20-22).

Attempting to reconcile the two narratives, Rashi asserts that the people in fact initiated the mission, thereby demonstrating a lack of faith in God's promises, as related in Devarim. Moshe was supportive not because he approved, but so that the people hopefully would be impressed by his assuredness and conclude that there was no reason to doubt God's promise and to send spies (Devarim 1:23). When Moshe's efforts failed, God responded *shelah lekha* (Bamidbar 13:1)—send for your benefit, but not with My blessing. God acquiesced so that He could expose what He knew from the outset, i.e., this generation lacked faith. Thus, Israel's downfall occurred before the Bamidbar narrative even begins.

With this interpretation, Rashi eliminates the apparent contradictions between the narratives. Simultaneously, Rashi obviates the philosophical problem of God's initiating the mission and then punishing the people for failing. According to Rashi, the people had sinfully initiated the event; God simply created circumstances to expose their faithlessness so that He could punish them accordingly.

However, the Bamidbar account offers no indication that God was upset at the outset of the narrative; the plain reading suggests that the nation sinned only with their hasty acceptance of the spies' negative report. Similarly, Moshe supported the mission both in Bamidbar (when God commanded him) and in Devarim (when he approved the people's request). He hardly appears to be feigning agreement to encourage the abortion of the mission.

Consequently, Ramban rejects Rashi's approach, and proposes an alternative understanding. Bamidbar presents the “objective” story as it unfolded. There is nothing wrongful in sending spies on military missions, and Tanakh presents other occasions where spying was legitimate and not indicative of a lack of faith (see, e.g., Bemidbar 21; Yehoshua 2). God approved a fundamentally legitimate mission, but the people tragically sinned by accepting the negative account of the majority of spies. When Moshe recounted this event at the end of his life in Devarim, however, he already knew the conclusion of the episode. Therefore, he projected the people's faithlessness back to their initial request, showing that they did not trust God's assurances from the outset.

Ramban accepts Rashi's view that the people requested sending spies first (Devarim), and then God approved of their request (Bamidbar). Moshe likewise approved because the initial request was valid. With this interpretation, Ramban also addresses the problem of divine testing. The people initiated the mission, and God approved of its legitimacy. Thus, the people failed at their own mission, rather than one that God had imposed on them.

Ramban's reading appears more likely on a textual level than that of Rashi. While also addressing the factual contradictions, Ramban demonstrates how both texts may be read smoothly based on the respective contexts of each narrative. It is undesirable to impose the meaning of one account onto the other at the expense of either text's plain sense. This debate has significant ramifications in Tanakh learning—whether to shift immediately to factual reconciliations or whether to understand each text first in itself and then to weave them together into a broader framework. *(Continued on Following Page)*

Taken more symbolically, the methodologies presented here reflect approaches to religious life in general. Some attempt to create a unity by imposing one standard onto all others, even at the expense of legitimate diversity. Others prefer to appreciate the many facets of truth within tradition. Both approaches gain validity by maintaining an absolute commitment to the Torah and its truth; but one is more open to differences in perspective than the other.

## Reach Out and Touch Israel

By Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz

Loneliness is a curse. No one wants to be without a companion who worries about their welfare. We all have an existential need, to quote the old AT&T ad, "to reach out and touch someone".

I saw many examples of this lesson on a recent trip to Israel. (I was part of a delegation sent by the Montreal Jewish community). In visits to hospitals, shelters and shiva houses, I saw over and over again eloquent testimony to the power of the hug and the handshake.

One image burned into my mind is of a father hugging his two daughters. Right after our group drove into Haifa, the air raid siren went off. We ran out of the car and took cover behind a tree. A couple, along with their two young daughters, were already there. The two girls were crying and shaking from fear. I watched as their father gently took them in his arms and hugged them tightly. In the comfort of a loving embrace, the girls slowly calmed down. Remarkably, even in this moment of crisis, a simple hug had made all of the difference.

Elsewhere, we saw how handshakes and good wishes can make an impact. According to the rabbinic tradition, a visit can improve a sick person's health. At the Rambam hospital in Haifa, we visited Moshe, a 90 year old immigrant from the Ukraine. Moshe was injured after a wall in his house collapsed on him during a Katyusha attack. Moshe has no family left in Israel, and was quite delighted to have visitors from halfway across the world. As we left his room, he had twinkle in his eye, transformed by a simple visit.

Comforting mourners, another rabbinic commandment that requires the personal touch, is a dual responsibility. First, we come to offer our support to the mourners. In addition, we come to honor the dead. In one of the more difficult moments during the trip, we visited the shiva for Yaniv Bar-On, a soldier killed on the first day of the conflict, and met with Yaniv's parents, Carleen and Erol Bar-On. (Carleen is a Montrealer who made aliyah many years ago.)

We came to offer our condolences, and to show our respect for Yaniv. We read a copy of Erol's moving eulogy. It was a eulogy that he wrote through tears, about a son sensitive and sweet, a true patriot with a passion for life. Yaniv was a mensch and a good

The more receptive we are to the wealth of diverse legitimate facets of our tradition, the stronger we will become as a people.

*Rabbi Hayyim Angel is the Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York City.*

person, a military hero who gave his life for the State of Israel.

Yaniv was part of unit 7, a unit started by Holocaust survivors. The survivors who founded the unit, did so to ensure a better future for the Jewish people. Through their sacrifice, they transformed Jewish history forever. They have left us an Israel that is a true living miracle.

Unfortunately, this miracle still requires sacrifices. This time, it was Yaniv who had to make the ultimate sacrifice. That is why we came to his shiva, to show respect for a hero who gave his life for the State of Israel.

While we had come to comfort others, we were also inspired by what we saw. We met with an American immigrant living in Tiberias, who told us how the people of the city were greeting the Katyusha attacks with a mixture of determination and stubbornness. Indeed, this attitude was on display wherever we went. At a grocery in Tiberias, the owner proudly exhibited a sign that said "we are not afraid". While chatting with the owner, an avuncular elderly man, he reminded us that Israel had endured all of this before, and would continue to thrive and grow. In the center of Tiberias, we saw the mayor standing out on a street corner handing out Israeli flags, which were immediately taken by all passerby, who continued on, proudly clutching their flags. We came to Tiberias to comfort; we left Tiberias inspired.

Saturday night in Jerusalem, I stopped in a store. The saleslady told me her brother had just got an "order 8", which means he has to report immediately. She was worried about him, and asked me if I too was worried by the situation, and perhaps planning to go home early. I told her on the contrary, I had come because of the attacks, to show my support for Israel. This response stunned her momentarily, and she then repeated a few times, "I am so touched".

I realized then what Israel needs most. Yes, Israel needs our financial help and political advocacy. But most importantly, Israelis need us to "reach out and touch someone". Nothing can replace the personal connection. We need to call, to write letters, and yes, we need to visit Israel, to let Israelis know how much we really care.

*Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz is the Rabbi of Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem in Montreal, Canada. He is also a member of the board of the Quebec Israel Committee, an Israel advocacy group.*