

Crazy is as Crazy Does

Parshas Shelach begins on Sivan 29, 2449, by which time the Jewish people have arrived close enough to Eretz Yisroel that the focus has been shifted from travel through the desert to planning the entry and conquest of Eretz Yisroel. It is so close that you can almost taste it!

As can be seen from the events up until this point, the experience of the Jewish people in the desert has been a strange mix of natural and supernatural. Just to give two examples of many: Food falls from heaven but they have to go out to gather it, instead of just living without food as Moshe had done during the forty days in heaven. They travel at miraculous speed through the desert, but they have to walk the entire way instead of being teletransported to their destination. So, now, as they are about to enter Eretz Yisroel, although this will certainly be accompanied by many miracles, they feel the need to do some strategizing and planning. Instead of just moving ahead, they send the spies to determine the best way to proceed with the conquest.

Before going further, I must share a story which will explain much about what ensues:

The story is told that during the times of the Rebbe Maharash, the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1834- 1882), there was an individual who was known to be very unstable – the town fool. One day, he took it into his head that he should relocate to Vitebsk. Now, no Chasid would make a move like that without first receiving the Rebbe's approval and blessing, but being who he was, the Gabbai would not schedule an audience with the Rebbe for him.

The Maharash would go out every day for a ride in a carriage, and this fellow decided that this was his opportunity. He chose a strategic place along the route and when the carriage drove by he leapt on board. The Rebbe, as if nothing unusual had occurred, calmly asked him what was on his mind. He explained that he was considering moving away and wanted the Rebbe's opinion. The Maharash said that he would advise against it, explaining that every town needs its Mishuganer and Lubavitch would be that much worse off if he should leave. Having received his answer he jumped off the carriage.

People who had witnessed this quickly surrounded him, asking what had transpired. He shared with them his question and the Rebbe's answer. The people said, "But, you are a



mishuganer. How do you come to ask the Rebbe for guidance?” His reply was, “*Meshuga, meshuga, uber seichel darf men hubn.*” “I may be crazy, but I am not an idiot!”

We will return to that as the Parsha unfolds.

Inexplicably, when the spies return 40 days later on Av 9, for a single night the entire nation becomes possessed with the delusion that this plan of entering Eretz Yisroel is going to be an unmitigated disaster. They had seen how Hashem brought plague after plague upon Egypt. They had witnessed miracle after miracle in the desert. That very day they ate their meals of miraculous Manna while in the shade of the Clouds of Glory. How can they suddenly doubt Hashem’s ability? What in the world were they thinking?

The Alter Rebbe in Tanya (Ch. 29, p.131 – 133 in the English edition) explains it in an amazingly uplifting way. Rather than addressing the question as it has just been posed, he starts from the end of the story. After the death of the ten spies in a horrible way and after punishment has been proclaimed of 40 years of wandering in the desert until every last adult male has died, the Parsha tells us the following: Early the following morning (Av 10) they set off with the goal of conquering Eretz Yisroel. Moshe warns them not to, for Hashem is not with them, but they persist nonetheless. They are defeated and routed by the Amelekites and Canaanites.

What just happened? How did they go from not believing that conquest of Eretz Yisroel is possible to pressing forward at all costs? We don’t see that anything happened that should have instilled confidence and trust in Hashem once again. No great miracles, so great that even doubters were convinced, are reported to have happened. Not even small miracles are reported. Why the sudden about face?

The reason that they doubted in the first place was not based on any logical or empirical foundation which needed to be refuted. The doubt was simply insanity; there is no other way to explain it. Logic and rationality would dictate that of course Hashem can carry out his plan in the world of His making. How could it be otherwise? The doubts and denial come from that “spirit of folly” (which we “spoke” about in the Parshas Naso speech) which makes a person so crazy that the person will believe and do things which make absolutely no sense. This “spirit of folly” does this by asserting that “reality” is only tangible physical reality. So, material this-worldly pleasures are defined as “real” and G-dliness and spirituality are defined out of existence. And when this is carried to an



extreme, you have people eating Manna and crying that Hashem chas v'shalom has no power in the world. To paraphrase our friend in Lubavitch, "It is one thing to be crazy and attach too much importance to the physical reality, but don't be an idiot! Don't forget that Hashem is still the Master of the Universe!"

When Moshe rebuked the people, telling them that Hashem was angry with them, that their carcasses will fall in the desert, they "mourned greatly." The "spirit of folly" can project its make-believe version of reality as long as it has free rein. Once the bubble has burst and the good times are over, and true reality cannot be avoided or denied, it becomes obvious that Hashem can do and does whatever He wants and any thought otherwise is just plain silly. And, so, before dawn of the next morning, they set off for Eretz Yisroel, (unfortunately a day too late).

Someone once wrote to the Rebbe asking for a bracha for a woman who had health issues. The Rebbe replied, among other things the following, loosely translated: Don't be afraid or embarrassed to tell her that good health will come when she keeps a truly Kosher kitchen and the laws of family purity. Explain to her that the main thing is to actually do it, even if she doesn't understand how this can help with her health issues, just as medical treatment is effective without understanding how it works. And, although she says that she does not believe, this does not at all change the fact that in truth she does believe.

So, this is the good news in the story. No matter how badly we may have messed up, it all can be blamed on that temporary insanity. As soon as we shake that off (or have it shaken off of us) our true nature of belief and trust in Hashem and the desire to fulfill His Mitzvos reasserts itself. It may require some very serious and sobering thought to shake off the spirit of folly (that is what Chapter 29 in Tanya is really about) but rest assured that we can do it. And, even until we get there, as the Rebbe writes, what we think we know about ourselves doesn't really matter all that much because the fact is that we are believers, offspring of believers, who know Hashem and want to do His Will.

I have often wondered about these Jews who lost their lives trying to enter Eretz Yisroel after they had been told that Hashem had decreed that they are to remain in the desert for the next 38 years. Is their disobedient attempt to enter Eretz Yisroel any different from the disobedient refusal to enter Eretz Yisroel the day before? How did they not learn the cardinal lesson here to accept what Hashem says?



The Or Hachaim says that they understood their failure was due to lack of trust in Hashem's ability. Now, to do Teshuva, they wanted to show that they had absolute trust in Hashem and are ready to face the formidable enemies before them with confidence that Hashem would make them successful. And, apparently it could have succeeded despite the decree that they were to die in the desert and despite their defiance of Moshe's warning before they set off that Hashem is not with them and they should not go. They failed because their motives were not totally pure; while they were now fully trusting in Hashem and confident of His unlimited abilities, they were not doing this purely to carry out Hashem's will. They had their own interests at heart as well, to remove from themselves the awful punishment of wandering in the desert for forty years waiting to die. Had their intent been purer they could have elicited a removal of the decree and the successful entry in Eretz Yisroel at that time.

That is basically what I got from the Or Hachaim. Allow me to add a little to it. Their idea of setting off on their own and expecting Hashem to make them successful has parallels in the Torah, where it worked! One incident is at the end of Parshas Chukas (21:32). At the end of the 40 years, Moshe sent scouts to Yazer and they conquered the entire area. Rashi notes that they were sent merely as spies, not as invaders, but they were confident in the power of Moshe's prayers and instead of just looking around the conquered all the villages in the region. Similarly, back in Parshas Vayishlach (34:35) and the story of Shechem. Rashi explains that they acted as if they were not sons of Yaakov, as they did not seek his counsel before acting. Two lines later Rashi says that the two of them took on the whole town because they were confident that in the merits of Yaakov they would be successful. Neither Moshe nor Yaakov prayed or counseled for the attacks to take place, yet, in their merits, the attempts succeeded against all odds.

So, back to our Parsha, the attempt to conquer Eretz Yisroel after having been condemned to die in the desert, with the expectation that Hashem will make them successful is not as crazy as it seems. Why, then did it fail? In addition to what the Or Hachaim seems to suggest as mentioned above, the difference here is that they defied an explicit directive not to go, unlike the other two examples. Again, to paraphrase our friend from Lubavitch, "It is ok to be crazy and set off on improbable dangerous expeditions trusting that Hashem will make you successful, but don't be an idiot! Don't go against Hashem's express instructions!"



This Shabbos is a few days before Gimmel Tammuz, a day and a time of year when we reflect on the Rebbe's message for us and on his impact on our lives and our world. When we look at everything the Rebbe accomplished and continues to accomplish, we can see that one key to it all is to go all out beyond any reasonable standard and trust in Hashem to make it successful. How can a young couple go off to a place where they don't speak the language, don't know anyone there, have no money or support, and in a few short years create a revival of Yiddishkeit with Jewish schools, Mikvahs, shuls, camps? Amazingly, this model has worked, over and over and over again, in so many places around the globe. To paraphrase our friend from Lubavitch, "It is your privilege to be crazy and set off on improbable missions trusting that Hashem will make you successful. Just don't be an idiot! Stay true to the mission and you can expect Hashem's continued blessing!"

This is the Rebbe's message not just for his Shluchim, his emissaries around the globe. This is the Rebbe's guidance for every Jew: You have no idea how much Divine power you have at your disposal. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to do what a Jew should do. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to share your Yiddishkeit with which you are blessed with all the Jews with whom you are in contact. You will be amazed by the unbelievable success Hashem will grant you, if you just do it. That's success in bringing another Jew closer to Hashem and success in our own personal lives as a result. As quoted above, even physical health is related to keeping Mitzvos.

The ultimate success, of course, is bringing Moshiach. The key to that is exactly the same. Believe in it, act on it, and it will happen. If it was possible back then, to believe that Hashem could undo the decree of 40 years in the desert before even a single day had passed, how much more so now. The Jewish people have spent the past 3332 years making the world into the place of G-dliness that Hashem wants. It should not even take another night until Hashem sends us Moshiach NOW!

