

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Moshe Chai *ben Chanina a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

What Goes Up Must Come Do

PARSHAS SHELACH 5777

A climactic moment in this week’s *parshah* comes on the heels of the report issued by the *meraglim* (spies). The majority of these messengers, unfortunately, slandered the Land with claims that it would be too difficult to conquer. Yeshoshua and Calev remained loyal, attempting to quell the rising storm. But the *meraglim*’s tale had riled the people so, to the point that they agitated for violence. As the *passuk* states: וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְרִגּוֹם אֹתָם בְּאֲבָנִים – “And the entire congregation said to pelt them with stones; and the glory of Hashem appeared in the Meeting Tent before all of B’nei Yisroel” (*Bamidbar 14:10*).

What Were They Thinking?

The question that arises is whom exactly the people were looking to stone. The simple meaning would suggest that it was against Yehoshua and Calev that they were agitating, as it was they who had just been speaking to the people in an attempt to calm the situation.

But in somewhat of an unlikely twist, Chazal interpret that the real target was that which is stated in the end of the verse – that is, the very Presence of Hashem. As the Gemara states: שָׁנְטְלוּ אֲבָנִים וְזָרְקוּם כָּלְפֵי מַעְלָה – “They picked up stones and hurled them Heavenward” (*Sotah 35a*).

Now, this teaching touches on a host of issues, not the least of which is the spiritual stature of the Dor Ha’midbar, the Generation (who wandered) in the Desert. They were indeed held accountable for this episode, for which they were denied entry into the Land and instead forced to reside in the wilderness for forty years. And their ultimate fate is a subject of discussion in the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin 10:3*), which states:

דוֹר הַמִּדְבָּר אֵינוֹ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא... דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא. רַבִּי אֶלְיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, עָלֵיהֶם הוּא אוֹמֵר אֶסְפוּ לִי חֲסִידֵי...
... חֲסִידֵי...

“The Generation of the Desert does not have a share in the World to Come... These are the words of R’ Akiva. R’ Eliezer (disagrees, and instead) says: The following (laudatory) verse applies to them (*Tehillim 50:5*): ‘Gather My pious ones to Me...’”

But the question arises as to how it was possible for them to stoop this low; even in the opinion of R’ Akiva (who considers them as having forfeited their share in the World to Come), could it really be that they went to this extent – trying, as it were, to stone Hashem Himself? Perhaps even more puzzling, from a technical standpoint, is the matter of planning. What, indeed, were they thinking? Had they been aiming for a person – while obviously a nefarious act – at the very least, there exists a physical target for the rock to strike. But what exactly did they think would happen when the stones that they hurled would complete their trajectory? Did they not realize that what goes up... would come down on their very heads? Did they think that after heaving their projectiles Heavenward – they would remain there?

Taking somewhat of a philosophical approach to the issue, the Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggados*) explains that, indeed, no actual stones were hurled; for of course, no physical action can be applied toward Hashem, a completely non-physical entity. Rather, they stated their intent and desire to do so; and as it relates to Heaven, the mere *mention* of such a design is tantamount to a completed deed. Moreover, asserts the Maharal, even when speaking of the act of stoning, the actual target would have been Moshe Rabbeinu. The reason their design is described by Chazal as directed against Hashem is because He was the real target of their recalcitrance. In other words, they aimed to stone Moshe in his capacity as Hashem's messenger; knowing that they couldn't hurl stones at Hashem Himself, they chose instead to target His representative.

... The Harder They Fall

Taking a somewhat different tack, the Ben Ish Chai (*Ben Yehoyadah, Sotah*) understands that actual stones were employed in this endeavor. However, he explains that, while certainly an undesirable act, their intent was not so much a show of utter defiance. Of course, their missiles were never "aimed" at Hashem Himself, perish the thought. Rather, the hurling of the stones was meant as a symbolic act, reflecting the essence of their hesitation to enter the Land.

The *meraglim* were concerned over the paradigm shift that entering the Land would entail. Eretz Yisrael, the Holy Land, presents a range of opportunities for spiritual growth. But they knew that such spiritual elevation could only be attained through much effort and difficulty. As Chazal declare: וְשֵׁשׁ מִתְּנוּת טוֹבוֹת נָתַן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכֹכֶן לֹא נָתַן אֱלֹהִים עַל יְדֵי יְסוּרִין, – “Hashem gave to Yisrael three wondrous gifts, but all of them were only granted through (the endurance of) suffering. They are: Torah, **the Land of Yisrael**, and the World to Come” (*Berachos 5a*). On the other hand, if the people were to fail to live up to the high standards of the Land, their descent would be swift. The Torah itself promises that the Land will not tolerate such failure; as it states: וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־כְּלֵי־חֻקֹּתַי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־כְּלֵי־מִשְׁפָּטַי וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא־תִקְיָא אֶתְכֶם הָאֲרֶץ – “And you shall observe My statutes and all of My ordinances, and you shall fulfill them, **such that the Land shall not spit you out...**” (*Vayikra 20:22*).

This, in the eyes of the *meraglim*, was the situation that confronted the people on the cusp of their entry into the Land: a beginning marked by difficulty and exertion to become elevated, followed by the potential for a swift and precipitous decline. They chose to demonstrate this concern by throwing stones, an act that mirrors this very circumstance. Hurling stones upwards, given their weight and the gravity factor, is no simple feat; it entails exertion and difficulty to get these projectiles airborne to any appreciable extent. But once they do sail upwards and then the downward trajectory begins, the descent is rapid indeed.

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