

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Important ideas from Shelach, the story of the spies

How is it possible that 10 tzaddikim in 40 days turned into rishonim that merited to be killed on the spot? What went wrong?

There are many commentaries in the Me'am Loez on this parsha. Combined with various shiurim that I have listened to, it seems to me that the story reflects how solid and deep our emunah must become.

The Sfas Emes in "Flow from the Source" gives imagery whose metaphors reveal that "shape and form are qualities of the spiritual." Here are my questions and below that the quote from the Sfas Emes.

1. Does "shape and form are qualities of the spiritual." imply that there are actual spiritual shapes and forms we affect aside from those that we see in the physical world?
2. If water represents the vanities of this world and has no shape of its own but takes the form of the vessel containing it (see below metaphors), and the waters cover over our love for Hashem with opposing desires, what is the ship that keeps us afloat?
3. Is the emunah that we develop in our hearts [through our free willed choices when undergoing our nisayons] turning our hearts into vessels of emunah through which we may merit to receive and reflect Hashem's abundance and brachas?
4. Does our growth in emunah reveal to us that our ability to magnify the honor of Hashem no matter what define whether we choose for ourselves a status of being a shliach mitzvah?
5. Could it be that the ship, the vessel we are to form in our hearts out of emunah, is an actual spiritual shape and form?

Below is the section called "Don't Board a Ship" pages 256-257 from Flow from the Source, by the Sfas Emes

"The Story of the spies sent to search out the land of Canaan, is difficult to understand. Were they tzaddikim who went astray or were they wicked from the start? Was it a mitzvah to send them, or a sin? Rashi implies that Moshe knew they would give an evil report; he says that Moshe added a yud to Yehoshua's name as a prayer that Hashem save him from the plot of the spies. if so, why did Moshe send them?

The key to understanding where the spies made their mistake lies in the midrash at the beginning of the parashah, which begins with a halachah:

The Sages teach that it is forbidden to embark in a ship to sea three days before Shabbos...but a shliach mitzvah [someone sent to do a mitzvah] is allowed. Why? Because nothing is as dear to Hashem as one who fulfills his appointed task with self-sacrifice...(bamidbar Rabbah 16: 1

In the times of Chazal an ocean voyage was an uncomfortable and dangerous undertaking. A ship at sea could encounter situations that would require the combined efforts of everyone on board to keep it from foundering. In such a position one is obligated to save himself, even if he must violate Shabbos. The three days before Shabbos draw their kedushah from the approaching Shabbos. During those days a Jew must avoid putting himself in a position where he may not be able to appreciate the spiritual lights of the upcoming Shabbos or, G-d forbid, be forced to violate it to save himself from death. The exception to this rule is a shliach mitzvah, a person going to perform a mitzvah. He will be given siyatta diShmaya (heavenly assistance) to guard the kedushah of Shabbos even while involved in the most physical of acts.

"Going to sea" is analogous to living in the physical world. Before birth the soul exists in the security of the worlds above, where Hashem's presence is clear. A newborn soul descends to This World, where His Presence is covered like the sea that covers the land. Shlomo Hamelech says: *A multitude of water will be unable to quench the love [of G-d]* (Shiur HaShirim 8: 7). Shape and form are qualities associated with the spiritual. Water represents the vanities of This world; it has no shape of its own but takes the form of the vessel containing it (see Maharal, Gevuros Hashem, ch. 18 on the passage -- And she called his name Moshe because he was drawn (mishisihu) from the water (Shemos 2: 10).) While the waters cannot extinguish our love for hashem, they manage to cover it with opposing desires. The ship, representing closeness to G-d, keeps us afloat in this sea. But the desire to be close to Hashem is not enough to guard us from danger; the only safeguard is to become a shliach mitzvah.

The Jewish People as a whole are shluchei mitzvah; their task is to prepare the world for the revelation of Hashem's hidden glory. It "is an arrangement where the agent can achieve more than the One who sent him; it does not befit Hashem's glory to be revealed without us paving the way. Chazal (Pesachim 8A) say that a person performing a mitzvah will never be harmed. This rule only holds true, however, to the extent one is devoted to his task. If he mixes in his own needs - albeit something as negligible as looking for a needle while checking for chometz - he becomes a ship lost at sea. Our shlichus guards us and keeps us from submerging into the raging waters of the physical world.

Some more questions to think about:

6. Does naasa vnisma really mean that we are people who place the needs of the neshama above the needs

of our bodies so that we truly live in this world for the fullest Olam Haba we can accomplish?

7. Did the spies forfeit their status of shliach mitzvahs by failing to have emunah in Hashem and wanting to scout out the land?

8. Did Hashem withhold siyata deshmaya?

9. Why is learning the Torah portion sometimes easier to concentrate on than davening? Is it because we can learn Torah whether or not while we do so we are focusing on Yiras Shemayim, but to truly daven with kavannah we have to strive to be more into our neshamas, extending ourselves into yiras shemayim that reflects our emunah?

10. Is it inevitable that we will have one foot in each world or is it possible to have both feet in the spiritual realm and continue to walk in this world with Hashem?

May we extract from our painful emotions the strength to build volume and breadth into our emunah, shaping and forming our hearts into a ship to carry us through this world and may any resulting growth in reliance on Hashem's promise to Avraham Yitzchok and Yaakov help to redeem us speedily.