

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXVII: Shelach (Num. 13:1–15:41)

Essay 3. The sin of the spies and the destruction of the First Temple

מדְרָשׁ ילקוט על פסוק "ותשא כל־העדה ויתנו את־קולם", אמר רבי יוחנן אותו היום ליל תשעה באב הִיא אמר הקב"ה אתם בכיתם בכיה של חנם אני אקבע לכם בכיה לדורות עכ"ל. להבין קשר ענין עון זה עם חרבן הבית נקדים הפסוק "כִּי־עָלָה מִן־הַסַּלְוִיָנוּ בָּא בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֵינוּ לְהַכְרִית עוֹלָל מִחוּץ בְּחֹרִים מְרַחֲבוֹת", וכמה דקדוקים יש בפסוק הזה, ובפרט "מִן־הַסַּלְוִיָנוּ" מה ענין סלויות לכאן.

Ten of the twelve spies sent into the Land of Israel gave a slanderous report that the Land was filled with giants, leading the Israelites to cry out of fear.

Midrash Yalkut (remez 744) comments as follows **on the verse**: “**The whole community lifted up their voice, and the people cried that night.**”¹ **Rabbi Yochanan said: That night was the night of the Ninth of the month of Av. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: You wept needlessly; I will establish for you [a true tragedy over which there will be] weeping for generations.**”²

According to Yoma 9b, the First Temple was destroyed because of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed. How then is *lashon hara*, slander, implicated in the destruction?

To understand the connection of this sin of the spies with the destruction of the Temple, we advance the verse, “For death has climbed through our windows, has entered our fortresses, to cut off infants from without, young men from the roads.”³ There are many subtleties in this verse, and in particular, [regarding] “death has climbed through our windows,” what is the connection of windows to this?

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¹ Num. 14:1.

² Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 743:14, but this also appears in Taanit 29a.

³ Jer. 9:20.

וְכַתֵּב סֵפֶר טוֹב הָאָרֶץ, יֵשׁ לְמַעַלָּה חֵלוֹן אֶחָד מְכוּוֹן נֶגֶד בַּיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וּבַיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ כְּלוֹ תַּחַת הַחֵלוֹן הַהוּא וְכִשְׁהִיָּה הַשְּׁפָע יוֹרֵד מִלְמַעְלָה דְרָךְ צִיּוֹר מִלְכוּת הָיָה יוֹרֵד אֶז דְרָךְ הַיְשָׁרָה עַד חֵלוֹן הַנְּזַכָּר וְיֵרֵד מִשָּׁם עַד בַּיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וּמִבַּיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ יִתְפָּשֵׁט עַל כָּל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכִשְׁרָבוּ הַפְּרִיצִים בְּבַיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ רֵאשׁוֹן מִהַבֵּל דְּבָרֵי לְשׁוֹן הָרַע הַתְּחִיל לְהַסְגֵּר מְעַט מְעַט מִהַחֵלוֹן עַד שֶׁבִתְשָׁעָה בָּאֵב נִסְגָּר כְּלוֹ וְנִפְסַק הַשְּׁפָע וְנִתְחַרַב הַבַּיִת עַכ"ל. וְלַעֲלֵל אָמַר הַכָּתוּב "וַיִּנְדְּרוּ אֶת־לְשׁוֹנָם קִשְׁתָּם וְשָׁקַר וְלֹא יָכוּ", "חֵץ שׁוֹחֵט [שְׁחוּט] לְשׁוֹנָם מִרְמֵה דְבָר" וְכו', דִּהְיִינוּ נֶגֶד בְּעָלֵי לְשׁוֹן הָרַע.

The book, *Tov Ha'aretz* ["The Good Land"]⁴ wrote, "Above there is one window positioned across from the Temple, all of which is under this window. When the goodness was flowing from Heaven downward through the path of the pipeline [*tzinor*] of the final sefira of *Malchut*, it was descending directly to the aforementioned window, and descended from there to the Temple, and from the Temple it spread out to all the Land of Israel. When the uninhibited ones⁵ in the first Temple multiplied from the vanity of words of slander [*lashon hara*], [the goodness] through the window began to very slowly be closed off, until on the Ninth of Av, it closed completely, and the goodness ceased and the Temple was destroyed." Above, in Jeremiah, the Scripture said, "And they bend their tongue, their bow of falsehood, and not for truth have they grown mighty in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and Me they know not, said the L-rd."⁶ Jeremiah also said: "Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, they use their mouths to deceive."⁷ This is directed against those who speak slander.

וְהַשְּׁתָא אֲמֵי שְׁפִיר כִּי עָלָה מְנוֹת בְּחֵלוֹנָנוּ שְׁמַחְמַת הַבֵּל לְשׁוֹן הָרַע בָּא הַמְנוֹת בְּאוֹתוֹ הַחֵלוֹן וְשִׁנְסָגַר כְּלוֹ, וְנִדְעָ שְׁעָרַי הַמִּיִּתָּה הֵיא שְׁנִסְגָּרוּ וְנִסְתָּמוּ מֵאוֹתוֹ הָאָדָם אוֹרוֹת הַחֲכָמָה הַעֲלִיּוֹנָה, עַל דְרָךְ וְהַחֲכָמָה תַּחֲזִיקָ אֶת בְּעָלֶיהָ, וְלַפִּיכָה קָרָא לְסִגִּירַת הַחֵלוֹן מִיִּתָּה וְשִׁהַפֵּל אֶחָד, וְכִשְׁנִסְגָּר הַחֵלוֹן בָּא הַמְנוֹת בְּאֶרְמְנוֹתָנוּ שְׁנִתְחַרַב הַבַּיִת.

Now it's fine, i.e., we understand the reason that the verse states that "death has climbed through our windows," for because of the vanity of slander, death came through the same window that had completely closed. It's known that the basis of a man's death is that the lights of Supernal wisdom have been closed and shut off from the same man,⁸ in the way that "wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it."⁹ Therefore, the closing of the window is called "death," as it is all the same, and when the window closes, death entered into our fortresses,¹⁰ as the Temple was destroyed.

⁴ Rabbi Natan Shapira (1585-1633), Polish rabbi and Kabbalist.

⁵ Kiddushin 71a uses the term to refer to those who would indiscriminately use the 12-letter name of G-d.

⁶ Jer. 9:2.

⁷ Jer. 9:7.

⁸ The translator has not located a source.

⁹ Eccl. 7:12.

¹⁰ Jer. 9:20.

"להכרית עולל מחויז" שבשביל הלשון הרע אספרה באה לעולם, והאספרה בר מינו על הרוב נופלת על התינוקות, וזהו "להכרית עולל", נאפילו מחויז, כדאמרין בירושלמי דפאה שיהוא אומר פאן והורג ברומי אומר ברומי והורג פאן. ו"בחורים מרחבות" כדאמרין התם שדורו של דוד היו יוצאים למלחמה ונפלין מפני שהיו בהם דלטורין. ועוד הוסיף "ונפלה נבלת האדם פדמן על-פני השדה" דאמרין בפירק י' דפסחים כל המספר לשון הרע ראוי להשליכו לכלבים.

The verse says, **“to cut off infants from the streets,” for because of slander, diphtheria came to the world,¹¹ and the diphtheria, may it not happen to us, generally falls upon the babies, and this is [the meaning of the words] “to cut off infants.”** Even the words **“from without”** can be understood, as it says in the Jerusalem Talmud of tractate Peah, that [the speaker of slander] says something here and it kills someone in Rome, and he says something in Rome and it kills here.¹² I.e., “from without” is interpreted to mean the sin can cause harm “from a distance.” Regarding the words, **“and young men from the roads,” it says there in tractate Peah that the generation of David would go out to war and would fall in battle, because among them were informers.**¹³ [Scripture] also adds, **“the carcasses of men shall lie like dung upon the fields,”¹⁴ as it is said in the tenth chapter of tractate Pesachim, “Everyone who speaks slander is fit to be thrown to the dogs.”¹⁵**

Thus, we understand now that *lashon hara* can lead to the deaths of innocents, whether children or Jewish soldiers fighting a righteous war. Thus, one of the causes of the destruction of the First Temple, bloodshed, has a connection to *lashon hara*.

ובדרב זה יובן הפתוב למעלה "על-מה אבדה הארץ" וכו' "ויאמר ה' על-עונכם את-תורתתי אשר נתתי לפניכם ולא-שמעו בקולי ולא-הלכו בה". הם עזבו את תורתתי ולא זה בלבד אלא אף "לא-שמעו בקולי", שפמה פעמים הזהרתים שלא לספר לשון הרע והם מספרים ומקבלים אותו, ואף על פי כן שספרו לשון הרע וכבר חטאו, אם היו חוזרים לתורה היו מתרפאים, כדאמרין בערכין מאי תשנתיה דמצורע? יעסוק בתורה דכתיב "מרפא לשון עץ חיים", והם לא רצו בזה ולא הלכו בה לכן "אבדה הארץ".

In this way, the Scripture above will be understood, “Why is the land lost, laid waste like a wilderness, with none passing through? The Lord replied: Because they forsook the Teaching I had set before them; they did not hear My voice and they did not follow it.”¹⁶

¹¹ Shabbat 33a: “The Sages taught [in a *Baraita* that] . . . a sign of slander is diphtheria.”

¹² Yerushalmi Peah 1:1:49, “The one who speaks says [something] here and it kills in Rome, and he says something in Rome and it kills in Syria.”

¹³ Yerushalmi Peah 1:1:46, “Rabbi Abba bar Cahana said, the generation of David were all just [on the surface], but because there were [secret] informers among them, they would go out to war and would fall.”

¹⁴ Jer. 9:21.

¹⁵ Pesachim 118a: “And Rav Sheshet said, citing Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya: Anyone who speaks slander, and anyone who accepts [and believes the] slander, and anyone who testifies falsely about another, it is fitting to throw him to the dogs.”

¹⁶ Jer. 9:11–12.

They left my Teaching, and not only that, but they did “not hear My voice,” for several times I warned them that they shouldn’t speak slander, and yet they spoke it and accepted it.

Even despite this fact, that they spoke slander and had already sinned, if they had returned to the Torah, they would have been healed, as it says in tractate Arachin 15b, “What is the remedy for [one with the skin disease *Tzara’at*]?¹⁷ He should engage in Torah, as it is written, ‘The tree of life heals the tongue,’¹⁸ ” but they didn’t want this and didn’t follow it. Therefore “the land is lost.”

ובנה אתי שפיר אף המדרש הנ"ל לשהבית לא נחרב אלא לאחר שנסתם החלון והחלון לא נסתם אלא בעון לשון הרע, ובעת החרבון שחטאו בלשון הרע, נתעורר עליהם עון האבות ומצא מין את מינו וגיעור ומזל יום ושעה גרם, וכך אמר להם הקב"ה אני אקבע לכם בכייה לדורות שאם בגיכם יאחזו מעשה אבותיהם ויחטאו בלשון הרע יהיה להם בכייה לדורות ביום הנה דנקא.

In this way, even the above-mentioned Midrash is fine, that the Temple was not destroyed until after the window was closed, and the window was only closed because of the sin of slander. At the time of the destruction, in which they sinned by slander, the iniquity of the ancestors was awakened upon them, for “a type has found its own type, and is awakened,”¹⁹ i.e., just as the spies had committed the sin of *lashon hara* by falsely exaggerating the risks that would be faced in conquering the Land of Israel, their descendants committed *lashon hara* while the Temple stood. It is not the constellation of the week or the hour that determines what will happen, but rather the Temple was destroyed because of the sin of slander, even though the Jews had repeatedly been warned by G-d not to continue with this sin.²⁰ By this, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, “I will establish for you [a true tragedy over which there will be] weeping for generations,” for if your sons will hold on to the deed of their ancestors and will sin by slander, they will weep for generations on this very day.”

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¹⁷ Our version of Arachin 15b (and earlier variants) explicitly refers to a slanderer, rather than one who suffers from *tzara’at*: “Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina says: What is the remedy for those who speak slander? If he is a Torah scholar, [let him] study Torah, as it is stated: ‘A soothing tongue is a tree of life’ (Prov. 15:4). And ‘tongue’ [means] nothing other than slander, as it is stated: ‘Their tongue is a sharpened arrow [it speaks deceit]’ (Jer. 9:7). And ‘tree’ [means] nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: ‘It is a tree of life to them that lay hold of it’ (Prov. 3:18).” Earlier on Arachin 15b, Reish Lakish indicated that one became a *metzora* [מצורע], i.e., afflicted with *tzara’at*, because he was guilty of *motzi shem ra* [מוציא שם רע] [“giving someone a bad name”].

¹⁸ Prov. 15:4.

¹⁹ This saying appears at least as early as the commentary on Eruvin 8b by Rabbeinu Chananel (965-1055). See also Rashi on Avodah Zarah 73a.

²⁰ Cf. Shabbat 156a: “Rabbi Chanina said to his students who heard all this: Go and tell the son of Lei’vai [who had attributed personality traits to the day of the week a person was born], Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: It is not the constellation of the day of the week that determines a person’s nature; rather, it is the constellation of the hour that determines his nature.”