

Table Talk: Parshat Devarim

In this week's Parshat Devarim, Moshe reviews some of the highlights of the nation's 40 years in the desert. One would assume that he chooses incidents that are particularly educational for Bnei Yisrael to think about. One such example is the sin of the spies.

Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael of that time when 12 Jews were chosen to go "check out" the land. But instead of that mission generating excitement and inspiring meetings about battle plans, the messengers convinced the Jews that it would be scary to enter the Land with so many enemies ready to fight them.

In the original telling of the story, the Torah tells us that the leader of each tribe, the *nasi*, was chosen to go on this mission. They were named and even described as leaders and princes (see B'midbar chapter 13) But now, when Moshe retells it, he leaves out their names and doesn't talk about their status at all. He says "I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe" (1:23).

Why would Moshe leave out their names and their status? Why de-emphasize their leadership and who they were?

One answer for why Moshe left out their names is that he just didn't want to talk Lashon ha'Ra. Why talk about those spies who led Bnei Yisrael astray? It doesn't matter now who they are. But that doesn't address all the descriptions that were deleted.

Perhaps, Moshe was trying to teach them that it doesn't matter who went and what they said! What is important to remember and learn from is what their (the nation's) reaction was! It's easy to say that it's exactly because they were the "princes" and leaders, Bnei Yisrael followed them. After all, aren't you supposed to follow your leaders? They, after all, were chosen by G-d to be the heads of tribes – why would they do something wrong?

What Moshe teaches Bnei Yisrael in highlighting and emphasizing their own response, without mentioning who came back with the information, is that it is always the nation's responsibility when they react to someone's comments or assessment. It doesn't matter who it was – their leaders, their princes – they should have realized that these men were leading them to lose faith in G-d and His ability to bring them success in conquering the Land. It's necessary to think critically at all times, no matter who's in charge. And the lesson, moving forward, is for the nation to remember at all times to ask themselves if the person they are following/believing is someone who brings them closer to G-d and His will or someone who is pulling them away.

Discuss: Why is it hard to question authority? When is it appropriate and when is it *chutzpah*? Have you ever had to go against your teacher, leader, friend or boss because you had a higher authority or value?

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