

## The Danger of Assumptions

I was speaking with my grandmother yesterday and she shared the following story with me. Growing up in Cologne, Germany there were many immigrants moving into the city from Poland, Hungary, and various other countries. One of the things that united them was that they all spoke Yiddish.

One of her neighbors, the Landau family, had nine children and Mr. Landau recounted how he got his apartment for his family. When he met with the landlord to discuss renting the apartment they were going back and forth in broken German and Yiddish as Mr. Landau didn't speak much German yet.

The landlord asked Mr. Landau, "Do you have any children?"

Mr. Landau responded, "Nayn." – the *number* 9 (נײַן) in Yiddish.

The landlord was pleased assuming that he meant "Nein." – meaning *No* in German.

Mr. Landau moved in with his expansive family much to the surprise of the landlord and the rest, as they say, is history.

In our parsha Shlach we have one of the most famous stories in our own history about making incorrect assumptions with the story of the *Meraglim* (spies, or perhaps, scouts).

Who were the *Meraglim*? The Baal HaTurim explains they were distinguished (אַנְשִׁים), wise (the final letters of אֲנִי־לֵךְ אֲנִי־שֵׁם spell נֶחֱם), and righteous men (צְדִיקִים - if they are not righteous, their wisdom would be of no avail - *Atros Addar*) chosen from among the leaders of fifty and each were a prince and tribal leader which identify them as members of the highest echelon of officials. In short, they were the very best people possibly chosen for the mission.

However, the *Meraglim* made several incorrect assumptions that led to tremendous turmoil for B'nai Yisroel. Their actions extended their wandering in the desert to 40 years – a year for each day the *Meraglim* scouted the land (Bamidbar 14:34) and was the cause for the future calamities of Tisha B'Av.

They mention Amalek and the equally powerful nations that would never surrender their land easily (13:29). The very mention of Amalek was treacherous and was calculated to incite B'nai Yisroel against Moshe. The land of Amalek was not even a part of Eretz Yisroel, and Amalek would not have been a threat to a nation that was not crossing its borders. The *Meraglim* just assumed they would be a problem.

The *Meraglim* thought that the *land devours its inhabitants* (אֶרֶץ אֹכֶלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הִוא – 13:32) because wherever they went they saw funerals. Rashi explains that the *Meraglim* failed to realize that Hashem caused many Canaanites to die during their mission in order to divert the population's attention away from the unwelcome *Meraglim*.

Further, the *Meraglim* related that they saw giants there and that they, the *Meraglim*, looked like grasshoppers in their eyes (13:33). The Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859) commented that this

declaration was the root of the *Meraglim's* sin. They had no right to consider how the giants viewed them. As emissaries of B'nai Yisroel, they should have thought only of their mission and not assume what anyone else thought of them.

On the surface, the *Meraglim* did nothing wrong in describing what they had seen. They had been sent to make their own observations. The Ramban comments that the key word in their report that revealed them to be lacking in faith was the word אָפֶס (*Efes* – but/however – 13:28) to imply that it will be impossible to get to the richness of the land or conquer its people.

In a purely factual report, there was no need for such a qualifier. They should have continued to just state the facts. By using a word that implied contradiction to the optimism of their previous sentence – *We arrived at the Land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey and this is its fruit* (13:27) – they were, in effect, telling B'nai Yisroel that no matter how rich and blessed the Land was, it was beyond their reach.

The inhabitants were too strong and their cities too impregnable. Ordinary people could not do battle with giants. The *Meraglim* were advising B'nai Yisroel not to even attempt an assault on Canaan.

If the *Meraglim* would have subordinated their own understanding and motives to those of Hashem and if they would have trained their thoughts on the goal of performing Hashem's Will, they could have avoided their negative fate.

In the book *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* by Rabbi Michael Munk, he writes that in the Aleph Bet, the letter ע (*ayin*) precedes the letter פ (*peh*) since the eye (עין) perceives and then the mouth (פה) expresses the thought.

Rav Hirsch (1808 – 1888) explains (Bereishis 3:5) that through the narrow eye the entire universe is brought into focus. The Malbim teaches that the eye is the window to the brain, since it is through the sense of sight that man perceives external impressions that he then internalizes, enabling him to understand them more thoroughly.

In his Thursday night Mishlei shiur, Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr from the Merkaz HaTorah Kollel lead by Rabbi Boruch Gradon, taught us the following Gemara Sanhedrin (104b) which references Eichah (Lamentations 2:16 – איכה ב, טז):

“פצו עליך פיהם” אמר רבא אמר רבי יוחנן: בשביל מה הקדים פ"א לעי"ן? בשביל מרגלים שאמרו בפיהם מה שלא ראו בעיניהם.

With regard to the verse: **“They have opened their mouths against you”** (איכה ב, טז), **Rava says** that **Rabbi Yochanan says: For what** reason did the prophet **precede** the verse beginning with the letter **peh (פ)** to the verse beginning with the letter **ayin (ע)** in several chapters of Eichah (Lamentations)? Since **peh (פ)** means mouth and **ayin (ע)** means eye, it is **for the spies who said with their mouths [befihem - בפיהם] what they did not see with their eyes [be'eineihem - בעיניהם]**.

All of us can learn from the mistakes of the *Meraglim*. We all have our own agendas, interests, and aspirations. Do we follow them blindly or do we consider whether they align with what Hashem wants from us?

We need to remember Hashem throughout the day and to help keep this idea before our mind's eye we can look to the שְׁמַע (*Shema*) which we say at the start of our day in the morning, at the end of our day in the evening, and before we go to bed.

The Sforno explains a beautiful and practical example of the letter *ayin* (ע) in our davening is the large *ayin* (ע) in שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל (*Shema Yisroel* – Hear O Israel). The *ayin* (ע) is written larger than the other letters to indicate that the revelation of Hashem's Oneness on earth is to be perceived not only by the ear (שְׁמַע - *Hear*), but should be seen distinctly by the mind's eye (עין).

We are not here just to survive. We are here as partners with Hashem to do the one thing He cannot. To turn this world into a home with Torah values that is fit for Him.

Rabbi Yosef Shusterman taught this week that the *Meraglim* misunderstood that if Hashem wants B'nai Yisroel to enter the land of Israel and create a Torah environment there and settle the land making it a home we could do so. The *Meraglim* said we need to stay separate by remaining in the desert to protect ourselves. Hashem's response – it's no trick to keep Torah and mitzvot in the desert. The strength is in doing so in a difficult and uncomfortable environment where we'll face challenges – the physical world – in the inhabited land of Canaan, not out in the empty desert.

The needs of B'nai Yisroel were totally met by Hashem in the desert. It was a spiritual relationship in a spiritual environment. Entering the land of Israel transitioned it to a physical relationship in one sense that B'nai Yisroel would have to work the land and toil to live there. But if that's what Hashem wants, then that is what is best for us.

Every Jew is given a mission and the question is not IF we can accomplish our mission and be observant in the world, but HOW are we going to observe Torah and mitzvot in the world and fulfill Hashem's Will. Our mission is to accomplish - we are not here on Mission Impossible.

Writing these messages to you is a scary endeavor for me. I'm nervous before I send out every email, but I feel that it is the right thing to do and an opportunity for me to step out of the security of my individual world and integrate with my broader community sharing Torah thoughts and values. I previously never contemplated undertaking a project like this. It never even entered my mind, but here we are... If I have the כֹּחַ (*ko'ach* – strength, ability) to manage to put together a few coherent sentences it is only because Hashem allows me to do so.

I'd like to share another connection to the word עין (*eye*) that is relevant to this email project, Maayan HaTorah. The word עין (*eye*) is related to the word מַעְיָן (*Maayan* – a spring of water or *wellspring*). Just as a spring brings water from the depths to the light of the sun, so the eye brings perception of the world into the human mind. In fact, it's even referenced in this parsha when Moshe asks the *Meraglim* if the land *is good* (הַטּוֹבָה הִוא – 13:19). Rashi explains that הַטּוֹבָה הִוא means בְּמַעְיָנוֹת (*b'maayanot* – with springs).

Wearing my emunah glasses, I would say that this is not a coincidence that the parsha on which I launch the Maayan HaTorah email references *Maayanot*. When I read this Rashi it felt like a big hug from Hashem to me. Everything is *min hashamayim* – from Hashem.

There are three levels of relationships in this world. Between man and Hashem, between man and his fellow man, and between man and himself.

The story of the *Meraglim* illustrates the incorrect assumptions man made with Hashem. The *Meraglim* lacked the emunah to firmly believe to their core that everything Hashem does for us is good and for our benefit. Hashem wanted to bring B’nai Yisroel to the land of Israel. He didn’t need the *Meraglim* to scout the land which is why Hashem says שְׁלַח לְךָ (Shlach lecha – you send) a term implying permission, not a command.

Had B’nai Yisroel and the *Meraglim* have the proper emunah, they would have successfully entered the land on Hashem’s word alone without the need to check it out for themselves first. But they made improper assumptions.

I’d like to relate that to our own lives. We often make incorrect assumptions not only of other people or Hashem, but of ourselves. We assume that things are a certain way or that we cannot change, do better, or be different.

I never considered myself a writer and never pursued trying to be one. However, these last few weeks have been some of the most fulfilling and rewarding for me with this endeavor. I am now utilizing an untapped כֹּחַ (*ko’ach* – strength, ability) I assumed I didn’t have.

My grandmother likes to say, “when you look, you find.”

Let me know what untapped ability you find in yourself. I want to hear about it.

What untapped כֹּחַ do you have?