

Contemplate the Sedra, Israel are encamped overlooking Canaan; Moses sends twelve scouts to see the land, the produce, the people, the cities and its inhabitants, and to return with an authentic report.

But that was not what happened.

After forty days they come back, ten of these scouts deliver a downbeat account.

“The people are strong, the cities are fortified, warlike nations surround the land, and they consume their inhabitants”.

Israel on hearing their depressing testimony complain; they gang up against Moses and Aaron: “Why did G-d bring us to this land to die by the sword- would it not be better if we appoint a leader and return to Egypt?”

The punishment from G-d was harsh and swift, this had been the last straw. The Children of Israel were culpable and deserved to die. Instead, that generation would be destined to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all those above the age of twenty had died out.

What were these scouts thinking- they were all men of distinction, leaders of the Children of Israel. They had seen it all, witnessed the Exodus from Egypt with the ten plagues, beheld the splitting of the sea, consumed the manna from heaven and received the Torah at Sinai. Indeed their entire existence was dependent upon the day to day sustenance of G-d. Yet they blew it. Why would they want to discourage the people from entering the land?

I would like to suggest one simple response.

Living in the wilderness meant that they had everything delivered to them on a plate from G-d. Indeed their lives had become a spiritual existence.

Entering Canaan meant that first they would have to conquer the indigenous peoples of the land; thereafter they would have to grow their own produce with the backbreaking work that would entail. They would have to prepare their own food. It would mean being involved in the physical and material around them. Until now they had been cocooned in their little environment- completely reliant on their spiritual nourishment from G-d for all their needs.

So this was their problem, they didn't want to go into the land because they thought that the ideal spiritual existence meant being completely separated from the world and living an ascetic existence locked up in the wilderness.

In reality that was not what G-d desired from Israel. He wanted that they enter the land and build it up and that a true spiritual experience in Judaism was to be occupied in the physical and mundane and to elevate the material to the spiritual.

It is wrong to think that by living a life completely separated from the world that this is the ideal and that is what God wants from us.

Indeed the word mitzvah (commandment, precept) alone means to connect- because through fulfilling mitzvot in a physical sense one connects up with the Divine. And every mitzvah in some way connects the physical with the spiritual, which is what Judaism is all about.

Have a great Shabbos