

**PARSHAS SHLACH (2010)**

*Of Spies, Tigers and Flotillas*

*"Who are you going to believe? Me, or your own eyes?!"*

- Groucho Marx

This was the week of the "instant replay" – in sports; in Israel; in the Parsha.

Over the course of more than one hundred years of professional baseball there have been only 21 perfect games in all – and this month we almost witnessed 3 of them in a matter of weeks<sup>1</sup>. The hopes of the most recent of that pack were dashed in a most dramatic – Hollywood-esque even – way. With the last out – the 27<sup>th</sup> – the only thing between Detroit's Galarragas and his perfect game, Jim Joyce – an umpire for MLB since 1987 – called a player safe at first base. At first the crowd was unsure – they were saddened, sure, but only slightly incredulous. Then came the instant replay, played on a screen the size of left-center field. Shock. He *was* out! - And clearly so, by a half step, which in baseball, like Halacha, is the equivalent of several miles.

What unfolded next – both immediately after and over the course of the next 24 hours – was the stuff of one of George Will's many pining-for-the

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<sup>1</sup> Due more to the statistical shift -of going from 16 teams in 1963 to over 30 today – then share luck.

baseball-of-yore columns: Sportsmanship at its most honorable. The umpire admitted his error (like myself, I imagine most of us as adolescents have imagined if this scenario would ever present itself) and the pitcher did not utter a complaint. The next day, after the umpire's "I cost that kid his perfect game" confession, the denizens of Motown gave Mr. Joyce a standing ovation. Incredible!

Compare the above display of humanity's ability to be humbled at its capacity to err to the "flotilla" off the coast of Israel<sup>2</sup>. The world, the U.N., swiftly condemned, certain – certain! – that Israel had acted the part of the brutal thug (mind you that North Korea was given the benefit of an inquiry and the refrain from quick judgment after their game of Battleship the week last). But then came the videos of commandoes – commandoes! – attacked. To the credit of some – mainly UK news outlets, there was some backpedalling. But these were the rare exceptions. To most others, breaking away from their initial reaction seemed impossible and instead they chose the tired middle-east reporting game of mental gymnastics and moral equivalencies.

These two events – and the very different managements of them – colored greatly my reading of a Parsha, and its central story, that we all know well.

What, pray tell, was the severe crime of the Meraglim/spies? Is there indeed an prohibition of Lashon Hara (gossip) on Eretz Yisroel? Cannot someone exclaim upon a return trip from Israel "My, how hot it was!?" Or, was their crime the *result* of their words to a frightened nation (their subsequent forlorn, tears, and requests for a swift return to Egypt) – not

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<sup>2</sup> Flotilla, a word not heard since our studies of Christopher Columbus. Or, am I alone in this?

what they said but *when and to whom* they said it? Or, conceivably, it was the request for the mission in and of itself.

However, and in addition to the collusion of the above reasons, let us suggest something altogether different in the reading of this most central Biblical event as to what was the final catalyst of our sudden and eternal crime: something rather unique transpired as a result of *this* complaint of the nation – as opposed to most others. Kalev and Yehoshua seek to have *a dialogue*, to explain to the nation of their grave error and to remind the people that nothing can eclipse a pledge from Gd for a safe and swift victory and conquest of Canaan.

What was the reaction to the reasonable – if not palpable – case made by their leaders? “Let us stone them!”

It was at *this* moment – as opposed to the initial tall-tales (pun intended) of the spies that forced Gd to descend upon the camp, thusly approaching Moses to a harsh divine reaction.

Their – the entire nation’s – great sin may have been in their inability to submit to an “instant replay”, an argument that gave them a second chance to respond was ignored in the most primeval way. *This* was the critical peccadillo and a key example of a nation defined as an *Am Kshei Oreph* – A stiff-necked people.

This week’s Haftara too, with all of its evident allusions to the Pentateuch’s reading, hints to this theory as well: when Joshua’s nameless spies<sup>3</sup> presented reasonable conditions tempering Rachav’s request for her and her family’s lives being spared in the forthcoming

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<sup>3</sup> According to Chazal, they were Kaleiv and Pinchas.

battle, she replied, "...K'Dvareichem Ken Hu..." ("As you say, so it should be"). It was not enough to revisit the activities of the spies in Parshas Shlach and "do it right" in the days of Joshua, there was one last lesson to be learnt: the art of hearing another view out, considering it, and, if worthy, accepting it. This, the final straw in our sin in Parshas Shlach, was now, in Chaper 2 of the Book of Joshua fully rectified through those words of Rachav, a non-Jew.

The lesson of admitting error in the face of new, or forgotten points, is a challenging one. No doubt you, dear reader, are fantasizing as you read this of all those who have perennially disagreed with you on familial or spiritual issues wishing that *they* can come to terms with this ideal. Well, dear reader, is that not the pint? The point that you, maybe – just maybe – are the one to take a breath and wonder if your ability to consider that although sincere in your views and well meaning in your approach you too have at times disallowed a fair weighing of arguments.

I recall an argument in High School with a Rebbe of mine, me, the youthful idealist taking a fanatical, or perhaps stringent view, and he seeking to convince me to curb my passion. He made a point, a good one. Undeterred I moved on, "Yes, but..." I started. "Moshe, hold on. Have you ever heard or thought of the point I just made?", he reasonably asked. "Well, no.", I admitted. "Well, if you never thought of that before, does it not warrant a few moments of consideration?" A simple point but an epiphany for this teenager!

We demand of the world, incessantly and rightly, to reconsider the State of Israel and her challenges; we argue in fun, and sometimes in seriousness, about politics, this is healthy. Yet, while we believe we can change minds, we, at the same time, avoid it for ourselves like the plague. The rabbi sometimes *is* talking to you (and himself, actually).

May we have the Divine assistance to have the minds of a global body politic gone mad be opened to reason, may they have the integrity and intellectual honesty to revere the instant replay, and may we be the beacon, through our own actions and Talmudic honesty, of this ideal. May we soon merit the day when we can read the final words of the Haftara "Gd has given over the Land to our hands..." to the world's conformity.

We all can learn from Jim Joyce.