



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
DEVORIM / דברים
TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

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TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman who loved and supported Torah learning.



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TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

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The peace advocates insist that you can't blame the young Arabs for their terrorist actions. They are raised in poverty and deprivation! It's no wonder that they express their frustration through acts of terror. We, the free world, just need to better their living standards and the present situation will sort itself out.

Many criminals, even serial killers are defended with the same claim of a difficult childhood. We often blame our own shortcomings on our upbringings as well. But is this claim valid? Is it true? What does Torah say about it?

This week we begin reading the final book of the Pentateuch, Devarim - the book of Deuteronomy. This book is affectionately known as "The Torah's Sequel" because the entire book is Moses repeating to the Jewish people the story of their exodus from Egypt and forty year journey through the desert that had all been written in the first four books.

Moses opens his narrative with the story of the spies. You must wonder why Moses began his narrative with this story. After all the sin with the Golden Calf happened over a year before the spies were sent to Canaan. Yet Moses tells this story as if it was Israel's first sin.

That's not all. When you compare Moses' narrative to the original story in Numbers Moses changes many aspects. Here Moses credits the people with the idea of



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sending spies, "You all approached me and asked me to send spies." But in Numbers, "G-d spoke to Moses, send for yourself spies."

In addition, there is one major discrepancy. Moses relates that when the spies came back they gave a positive report. He says, "They reported that the land G-d is giving us is good." But, in the original we find that, although the spies did indeed say wonderful things about the land they also said that the nation living there were invincible and that if the Jewish people were try to conquer Canaan there would be no chance for victory. But here Moses doesn't mention that. Instead Moses blames the Jewish people. He says, "You did not want to go up to the land... You said, 'Our brothers have discouraged us.'"

Rashi points out that two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, did in fact only say good things about the land. Still why does Moses completely omit the warnings of the other spies?

Some explain that the purpose of the book of Devarim isn't simply to retell the history. Rather, five weeks before his passing Moses is admonishing the people and advising them how to avoid repeating their mistakes in the future. Therefore Moses doesn't go in chronological order. Instead he chooses the mistake he feels is the most pertinent, the story of the spies, for its message is the most important.

What is that lesson?



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Moses in effect is saying to the people, "Don't try to pass the blame to G-d for your mistakes. You alone, and nobody else is responsible for your failings." True, it was G-d who told Moses to send the spies. But it was only due to the begging of the people that G-d allowed it to happen. G-d hoped that after all of the miracles the Jews witnessed in Egypt they would come to believe in Him. Yet, you can't force people to believe so they sent spies, but it was the people's initiative.

Moses then went a step further. "Don't try to pass the blame to the spies either," he said. True, ten of them said that victory was impossible but even that did not remove the people's freedom of choice. Ultimately, people must choose for themselves what they will do. Therefore, Moses says, accept the responsibility for this decision for at the end of the day it was your own choice! You have only yourselves to blame.

The Nazis often used the excuse, "I was just following orders," to justify their barbaric behavior. But Moses told us that you can't pass the blame. At the end of the day every action man does is by personal free choice. When a thinking human being receives an immoral order he is expected to defy it. If he doesn't, there is no excuse big enough for him to hide behind!

The Jews in the desert were not the first people to "pass the blame". At the dawn of the human race G-d confronts Adam for having eaten from the tree of knowledge. G-d demands, "Did you eat from that tree?" And what does Adam say? He passes the blame, "The woman that you gave me made me do it!" and then Eve



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blames the snake for the sin. But G-d does not accept these excuses. "And to the Man He says, 'Since you hearkened to your wife's words...' because at the end of the day he chose to listen. He has only himself to blame.

What is the lesson for us?

When a person G-d forbid does something wrong, even if somebody convinced him to do it, at the end of the day it was his choice, and he must take responsibility for his actions. Obviously this rule applies to an even greater extent to a person who decides to do a good thing. Even if somebody convinced you to do a mitzvah, even if the Rabbi was sitting on your head for three weeks to do it, at the end of the day it must be your choice. Therefore when you *do* decide to do another mitzvah, G-d gives you all the credit.