

A Daily Bread

Date: 22 Sivan, 5785 (June 18, 2025)

Torah Portion: Shelach

Topic: Disposition Toward Sin, Part 2

The third category is those whose names are loathsome and whose actions are loathsome. This refers to the spies sent by Moshe to explore the land of Yisrael, who came back with a false report. For example, Sethur son of Micha'el (Num. 13:13), whose name Sethur (Sesur) [סְטוּר] alludes that he caused 'destruction' (s'tirah) [סְתִירָה], and Gaddi son of Susi (ibid., v. 11), whose name Gaddi signifies that caused great anguish and suffering.

Sethur, son of Micha'el, represented the tribe of Asher. The name Sethur is related to the word 'destruction' (s'tirah) [סְתִירָה], for his false report regarding the land of Canaan was the cause of much destruction; the false report demoralized the people, who wept over their "sorry fate." As a result, the entire generation was condemned to die. Moreover, Elohim declared, "They indulged in weeping without a cause; I will establish [this night] for them [as a time of] weeping throughout the generations." That night was Tishah B'Av [the Ninth of Av], the date on which both Temples would be destroyed and many other tragedies would take place throughout the history of Yisrael.

Alternatively, he was named Sethur (Sesur) because he denied (sasar; סָתוּר) the deeds of the Kadosh Barchu, he contradicted the words of Elohim, in effect calling Him a liar (Sotah 34b). Elohim stated that it is "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:17), and "a goodly ...land" (ibid., 3:8). In contrast, the spies stated: "It is a land that devours its inhabitants" (Num. 13:32).

Another explanation: The Hebrew word סָתַר (sasar) means "concealed." The spies concealed all the signs and miracles that Elohim performed for the Yisraelites from the day they left Mitzrayim. They acted as though they knew nothing of them. Accordingly, they stated (Num. 13:31): "We cannot ascend to [fight] that nation, for it is stronger than we," pretending that the One Who performed so many miracles is unable to overcome the Canaanites.

We may ask, if the spies had a predisposition toward sin, to which their names alluded, why, then, did Moshe select them for this mission, which was fraught with spiritual danger? Yefeh To'ar suggests that one may not presume that someone with an unseemly name is wicked, since every person enjoys free will. Furthermore, at the time of their selection, all of the spies were righteous. Thus, Moshe had no reason to suspect that such righteous people would lead the people astray.

However, Nezer HaKodesh suggests that the fact that they possessed evil-sounding names actually led Moshe to select them: Since they had already overcome their inclination toward sin, thus demonstrating their fortitude, Moshe assumed that this strength would stand them in good stead when they explored the land and returned to report to their fellow Yisrael. Moshe's mistake was that he did not realize that they could still revert back to their innate nature.

The last category is those whose names are admirable and whose actions are admirable. This refers to the Twelve Tribes. For example, Reuben whose name connotes, "See (re'u) [רָאוּ] the difference between this son (ben) [בֶּן] and other sons," and Shimon, whose name connotes, "He listens (שׁוֹמֵעַ) to the voice of his Father in Heaven."

There is a word play on the word רָאוּבֵן; namely רָאוּ, see, בֶּן, son. The commentators (Berachos 7b) explain that in this prophetic declaration, Leah intended to compare Reuben with Esau, the son of her father-in-law (Yitzchak). Although Esau voluntarily sold his right of the firstborn to Ya'akov (Gen. 25:33), Scripture states that "Esau harbored hatred toward Ya'akov" (ibid., 27:41). By contrast, although Reuben's right of the firstborn was taken from him against his will and given to Yosef (1Chr. 5:1), nonetheless, Reuben was not jealous of Yosef. Moreover, he even tried to save Yosef's life.

The Midrash does not necessarily mean that Leah herself was aware of all the future events to which Reuben's name alludes. Rather, the prophetic meaning was known to Elohim and He planted this name in her mind. She gave her firstborn son the name Reuben based on the reason the Torah identifies; however, the name characterized him in ways beyond her understanding.

Ben Yehoyada suggests that Leah herself, in naming her son Reuben, indeed meant to make the statement: See the difference between my son and my father-in-law's son. However, by this she meant merely that Reuben would take after his father, Ya'akov, and be righteous (whereas Esau did not take after his father, Yitzchak); she did not intend anything more specific. However, Elohim intended a deeper meaning in her statement.

The Midrash expounds Leah's declaration, with the understanding that it relates to her future descendants. Leah's use of the term 'hated' in connection with Shimon's name alludes that he, in the future would bear a descendant who was an enemy of Elohim; namely, Zimri. And who will heal the plague that Zimri caused? The answer to this question is alluded to in the phrase, "He has given me this one also" (Gen. 29:33); namely, Pinchas, who in the future would be raised from Levi.

The Gemara (Sotah 34b) says that the names of the Spies were recorded according to their deeds. The Torah prefaces the list of names with the words: These are their names (Num. 13:4). It follows the list by saying: These are the names of the men (v. 16). The double mention teaches that the names possess expository significance.

Shalom.