

A Daily Bread

Date: 23 Sivan, 5785 (June 19, 2025)

Torah Portion: Shelach

Topic: Condemning Oneself

It is written (Num. 14:2), “All the children of Yisrael murmured against Moshe and Aharon, and the entire assembly said to them.” The implication of the verse is that “the Children of Yisrael” and “the entire assembly” are two different groups. The Midrash identifies the second group as the members of the Sanhedrin.

The Midrash offers a parable to introduce Elohim’s response to the above complaint: This is analogous to a king upon whose judgment platform someone ascended to be judged. The defendant uttered something from his mouth by which he condemned himself to a certain punishment. In response to that, the king disregarded his own standard procedure of judgment and condemned the defendant based on the words of his own mouth. The king said to him, “With the judgment that you uttered from your own mouth – with that I shall judge you! It shall be done to you just as you have said.” So too, did the Kadosh Barchu, say to the Children of Yisrael, “As I live – the word of YHWH – if I shall not do to you as you have spoken in My ears. In this Wilderness shall your carcasses drop” (Num. 14:28-29). As a king responded to the defendant’s murmuring, Elohim declared that the judgment will be equal to their murmuring. This means that by claiming they would prefer to die in the Wilderness, the people “chose” their desired punishment, which Elohim then administered.

Ohr Yechezkel explains differently. In his view, this punishment, exemplifies a fundamental idea in Elohim’s relationship with Man. Namely, that the way Elohim relates to a person depends entirely on how that person lives his life, and what he shows his values to be. For example, if a person strives to emulate Elohim by engaging in *chesed*, by doing kindness to others, then through his deeds and his striving he *becomes* this sort of person – one who seeks to go in the ways of Elohim’s *chesed*. Therefore, Elohim relates to him as such, and shows him kindness from Above.

When Klal Yisrael expressed a wish to die in the Wilderness and never enter Eretz Yisrael, they made a statement about the kind of people they had become: that is to say, they “condemned themselves” as being a people who reject Elohim’s great gift of the Land of Yisrael. Elohim judged them in accordance with their own words. The words were not a choice of punishment; rather, they revealed Yisrael’s internal disconnection from Eretz Yisrael. Their punishment reflected what they had become.

Ramban illustrates this idea (Num. 14:18), by noting that Moshe’s prayer on Yisrael’s behalf following the sin of the Spies differed in key aspects from the similar prayer he articulated after the sin of the Golden Calf (the thirteen Attributes of Mercy). Moshe did not mention the merit of the Avos. Why not? Because the gift of the Land was *their* inheritance, but Yisrael was rejecting that gift. Ohr Yechezkel elaborates: Those who embrace Elohim’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy may invoke them in beseeching Elohim’s mercy. But in rejecting Eretz Yisrael, Klal Yisrael had dissociated themselves from the Patriarchs’ legacy. Therefore, Moshe could not appeal to that aspect of Elohim’s mercy in his prayer. In this instance, Yisrael passed judgment upon themselves; the words they spoke in denigration of the Land disqualified them from appealing to the merit of the Avos.

Chazal teaches that when the wicked perform good deeds, they too receive reward. However, unlike the righteous, they are *not* repaid in the next world, but only in this world (Deut. 7:10). This seems unfair. The briefest moment in the World to Come is far better than all the combined pleasures of our mundane world (Avos 4:17). Thus, the wicked are paid “pennies” for *mitzvos* that are actually worth vast sums! The answer is that people are paid in the coin they value. The sinful ways of wicked demonstrate that they value the pleasures of this world over those of the next. Since they prize payment in this world so highly, they condemn themselves to precisely such payment. The righteous, by contrast, attach little importance to physical things, and great importance to the spiritual. Because they care nothing for mundane pleasures, they are not rewarded in this world, but only in the next. Here too, reward and punishment are determined by the recipients: through their own choices in life, they condemn or acquit their own selves.

The Baal Shem Tov draws an important lesson from our Midrash regarding judging people favorably. Often, we hear of someone who has committed a sin, and our instinct is to condemn the sinner. The Baal Shem Tove warns us that by so doing, we may be condemning ourselves. As we seem from our Midrash, when Elohim passes judgment upon a person for sinning, the person himself ratifies the sentence. How is this accomplished? By brining him news of someone who committed a similar act. If he condemns the sinner, he endorses the punishment; therefore, he too is punished.

Accordingly, it is vital to judge people favorably, even if they have sinned. Rather than condemn a sinner, one should seek out extenuating circumstances that will cast him a more positive light. We must recognize that people are not inherently wicked, but transgresses out of weakness, unable to withstand the temptation placed before him by the yetzer hara. By judging others favorably, we judge *ourselves* favorably as well, and as a result, we receive a favorable judgment from Above.

Shalom.