

Parshat Shelach Lechah 5777

Fake news, Clickbait and the Chet haMeraglim

As a child, I always felt there was an air of the ancient about the Chet HaMeraglim. Whilst the issues of being careful in public speech are eternal, if it had happened now in the 21st century, I reckoned at the time, couldn't we just send in the video cameras and there would be no doubt of the real state of affairs? Yet, in the last ten years, this episode has become painfully modern, as the spread of the internet and social media have become prevalent and news media do everything to entice us to click on a link and make them money, news reporting has become increasingly polarised and sensationalised.

The Halachic impact for us of this new media reality is quite profound. Previously, in our observance of shemirat halashon, we concerned ourselves with speech and listening. But in the age of smartphones and social media, online browsing is where we become most likely to transgress, either by reading or sharing false or misleading information. I believe this is a huge new area of Halacha that requires expounding by someone far more learned and qualified than myself, but as a starter, I'd like to touch on what we can learn from the episode of the Chet haMeraglim and how that applies to the challenges we face in protecting ourselves from seeing and spreading Lashon Hara online today.

Let us start by looking first at the wording of the first phrases of the Meraglim's report:

כֹּחַ אִיִּם כִּי-עָז הָעָם, הֵיִשָּׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָעָרִים, בְּצִרּוֹת גְּדֹלַת מְאֹד וְגַם-יְלָדֵי הָעַנְקָה רְאִינוּ שָׁם.
בְּמִדְבַּר יִי

There is much debate among the Mefarshim about what the Meraglim did wrong. On first reading, the report seems relatively clear and straightforward. There is not much to debate about Eretz Yisrael being a land flowing with milk and honey, but on closer inspection, the careful choice of wording and style is designed to sew doubt in the minds' of the people. Ramban points out that the

use of the word 'Efes' (13:28) would have been unnecessary in a purely factual report but it was carefully placed inbetween the pieces of evidence to add opinion to the report and suggest it would be impossible to conquer the land because of this information. The careful choice of a word here or there is the difference between true reporting and biased opinions.

Rashi brings attention to the unarguable truth at the start of the report that it was indeed *זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדִבֶּשׁ הוּא* and suggests that even this was part of the carefully constructed misleading report. He quotes the ma'amar Chazal from Sotah 35a which states that 'Any false matter that does not have a bit of truth at its beginning does not hold up at its end'. R' Hirsch draws attention to how the report was delivered. The decision of the Meraglim to report their findings immediately to Bnei Yisrael, bypassing Moshe and Aharon who would have provided nuance, context and leadership in subsequent reports. R' Hirsch comments that this decision "took the form of an accusation against Moshe and Aharon in the presence of the entire nation".

Finally, the greatest fake news trick that we see today is playing on our greatest fears, even if they are irrelevant to the context of the report. In passuk 29, the Meraglim play their trump card *בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב, עַמְלֵק יוֹשֵׁב*. Rashi and others note that Bnei Yisrael did not need to conquer Amalek to enter the land, just live nearby, but the Meraglim mentioned them first because they knew Bnei Yisrael feared Amalek most.

As Kohelet taught us *ain kol chadash tachat hashemesh*, the blueprint for publicly spreading false information and misleading people is in the Torah too - fake news has been around a lot longer than the internet. Play to people's fears, add words that create bias, don't check sources with reputable or respected authorities and most importantly remember to start off with some truth before meandering into the half truth and lies. As we pick up our smartphones, we need to be aware of the shemirat halashon danger zone we are entering and be skeptical, judgemental, analytical and alert to protect ourselves from transgressing.