

In the aftermath of the disastrous sin of the spies, a group of Jews named the ma'apilim attempted to lead the charge to Eretz Yisrael. Despite their positive intentions, they were thoroughly defeated. What were they thinking?

Abarbanel, Bamidbar 14:40

15th c. Spain

They thought they could rectify what they had wronged by rising early in the morning to ascend to the top of the mountain, as if regretting what they had done, and they said, "Behold, we will go up to the place that Hashem has spoken of, for we have sinned." And Moshe rebuked them over this: "Why are you transgressing the word of Hashem? It will not succeed" — meaning, in this, too, you are acting rebelliously.

There is no doubt that Yisrael, in saying "Behold, we will go up," did not do complete teshuvah — for they should have said to Moshe, "Pray on behalf of your servants, for we have sinned to Hashem." Instead, they trusted in their own strength and might to prevail, and Hashem did not desire this. Therefore they did not succeed in their actions, and Hakadosh Baruch Hu did not accept their teshuvah — unlike how He accepted the teshuvah of those bitten by the snakes, for those had acknowledged their wrongdoing and said to Moshe, "We have sinned, for we spoke against Hashem and against you," had their teshuvah accepted and were healed.

אברבנאל במדבר יד:מ

דון יצחק אברבנאל

וחשבו לתקן את אשר עותו במה שהשכימו בבקר לעלות אל ראש ההר כמתחרטים ממה שעשו ואמרו הננו ועלינו אל המקום אשר אמר ה' כי חטאנו. ומשה הוכיחם עליו למה זה אתם עוברים את פי ה' והיא לא תצלח. כלומר גם בזה ממרים הייתם...

ואין ספק שישראל באמרם הננו ועלינו לא עשו תשובה גמורה כי היה להם לומר למשה התפלל בעד עבדיך כי חטאנו לה' אבל בטחו בכחם ובגבורתם לעשות חיל ולא בחר ה' בזה. ולכך לא הצליחו במעשיהם ולא קבל הקדוש ברוך הוא תשובתם כמו שקבל תשובת הנשוכים מהנחשים לפי שהודו לפשעם ואמרו למשה חטאנו כי דברנו בה' ובך ולכן קובלה תשובתם ונתרפאו.

The Abarbanel explains that the ma'apilim never changed their root behavior. They continued to deny their reliance on Hashem, and believed their own ability determined their ability to conquer Eretz Yisrael.

Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 14:41

19th c. Russia

Even though it is good to rectify a sin through the very matter in which one sinned, this does not apply where the teshuvah itself is also against the word of Hashem — and a mesirat nefesh of this kind is not accepted, as will be explained in Parshas Korach and in Sefer Devarim (10:17).

And even though they should have believed Moshe's warning, nonetheless they steeled their hearts to think that this warning was only in order that the mesirat nefesh should be genuine.

העמק דבר במדבר יד:מא

ר' נפתלי צבי יהודה ברלין

אע"ג שטוב לתקן החטא בדבר שחטא, אבל לא במקום שהתשובה עצמה גם כן נגד דבר ה', ומסירות נפש כזאת אינה מתקבלת, כמו שיבואר בפרשת קרח ובספר דברים (יז).

ואע"ג שהיה להם להאמין לאזהרת משה, מכל מקום חזקו לבבם לחשוב שאזהרה זו אינה אלא כדי שתהא המסירות נפש באמת.

The Netziv argues that these actions could never be considered teshuva, because they actually went against what Hashem had commanded them through Moshe.

Akeidat Yitzchak Bamidbar Sha'ar 77:1

15th c. Spain

And even though they ultimately said, "Behold, we will go up to the place that Hashem has spoken of, for we have sinned" – it was of no benefit whatsoever, for their hearts were open and known before Him, that they had not returned from their hearts but only out of fear of the decree. This is like one who deserted the king during battle: if the king's anger flares up at him and he then says he will follow him – the king will not agree to this, nor will he rely any further on his love and service, for it did not come from his heart.

עקידת יצחק במדבר שער עז

רבי יצחק בן משה עראמה


ואע"פ שבסוף אמרו הננו ועלינו אל המקום אשר אמר ה' כי חטאנו לא יועיל ולא כלום כי לבם גלוי וצפוי לפניו שלא שבו מלבם כי אם מפני יראת הגזירה. משל לשב מאחרי המלך בעת מלחמה כי תעלה בו חמת המלך יאמר ללכת אחריו הנה לא יאבה לו ולא יסמוך עוד על אהבתו ועבודתו כי לא מלבו.

The Akeidat Yitzchak points out that the actions of the ma'apilim were clearly not done out of love and desire to return to Hashem, but rather fear and desperation.

Questions for Reflection:

1. According to each of the commentaries, the ma'apilim confessed, showed initiative, and demonstrated the desire to follow Hashem's will - so ultimately, where did they go wrong?
2. What is the difference between taking responsibility and taking control, and how does this relate to what Hashem wants from teshuva?

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