

# The Maapilim!

Category: Bamidbar, Shlach

*Who were they, and what do they teach us about a family's role in someone's Jewish growth.*

## Did They Repent?

Good Shabbos!

Who knows the story of the Maapilim?

If you look up this term, you'll find it means "illegal immigrants who came to Palestine during the Aliya Bet program." But did you know that this week's Parshah also mentions the Maapilim?

This week's Parshah recounts the story of the Meraglim, the famous spies. The Jewish people pressured Moshe Rabbeinu to send spies to scout the Promised Land. Moshe was reluctant, insisting that if G-d wanted to give them the land, they should trust Him to provide it under good conditions. But the people were stubborn.

Finally, Moshe sent twelve spies, and they returned with a disheartening report: "We cannot go up—it's not going to work." Upon hearing this, the Jewish people wept throughout the night, refusing to enter the land. G-d then intervened, telling Moshe that if the current generation did not want the land, they would not receive it. Instead, they would perish in the desert, and the next generation would inherit the land.

This is the part of the story most of us know. But there's more. When Moshe informed the people of G-d's decree, they reacted unexpectedly. They mourned deeply, crying over the fate that awaited them. The next morning, filled with repentance, they declared, "We are ready to go up to the place of which the Lord spoke, for we have sinned" (Bamidbar 14:40). In a moment of clarity, they realized their mistake and sought to make amends.

Despite their newfound determination, Moshe warned them that it was now

against G-d's will: "It shall not succeed." Nevertheless, a small group, known as the Maapilim, defied this and ascended the mountain. Tragically, the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived there attacked and defeated them.

The Rebbe raises an intriguing question: It's a known rule that "Nothing stands in the way of teshuvah." Yet, even though the Jewish Nation repented from the Sin of the Spies and declared, "We are ready to go up to the place of which the L-rd spoke," Moshe still said, "It shall not succeed."

Now, this is a real problem. In Judaism, the principle is that nothing stands in the way of repentance. The Jewish people truly sinned when they initially refused to enter the land, but by the next morning, they regretted it and confessed, "We have sinned." So why did G-d not accept their repentance? After all, teshuvah is meant to rectify the past.

## **Elisha's Problem**

A famous story in the Talmud might shed light on this.

Elisha Ben Avuya was one of Israel's greatest Sages and the teacher of the renowned Rabbi Meir. However, Elisha eventually abandoned Judaism and actively opposed it. He would enter yeshivas and persuade students to leave their Torah studies for secular careers. He also advised the Romans, who ruled the land, on how to persecute Jews and make them violate Shabbos. Despite this, Rabbi Meir did not abandon his former teacher and continued learning Torah from him.

One Shabbos, while Rabbi Meir was lecturing in a study hall in Tiberias, someone informed him that Elisha Ben Avuya was outside, riding a horse. Rabbi Meir paused his lecture and went to meet him. Elisha asked, "Nu? What did you say in your lecture?" Rabbi Meir repeated his lecture, and Elisha corrected him, citing Rabbi Akiva. They walked together, the "teacher" on his horse and the student on foot, conversing as they traveled far from the city.

Suddenly, Elisha turned to Rabbi Meir and said, "Return back... the Shabbos limit ends here."

To explain: According to halachah, Jewish law, one is not allowed to walk more

than 2,000 amos—about 3,000 feet—outside the city into the wilderness on Shabbos. This distance is known as the “techum Shabbos,” the Shabbos boundary.

Amazingly, Elisha Ben Avuya, despite his apostasy, was concerned that his religious student might violate the techum Shabbos. Seizing this moment, Rabbi Meir turned his former master’s words against him: “You return too!” he urged, meaning that Elisha should return to Judaism.

Elisha then revealed a haunting memory. He had been riding a horse in Jerusalem on Shabbos, which also happened to be Yom Kippur, and had passed behind the Kodosh HaKodashim, the Holy of Holies. While riding past, he heard a Heavenly Voice, a Bas Kol, saying, “Return, O wayward sons—except for Acher.” (Acher, meaning “the other one,” was the nickname given to Elisha Ben Avuya after he renounced Judaism.) This voice seemed to exclude Elisha from the possibility of repentance. Believing he was doomed, Elisha essentially told Rabbi Meir, “I have no chance.”

Well, the Rebbe asks, was Elisha right to give up? Could anyone really argue with a voice from heaven?

The Rebbe asks a profound question: “Apparently, no one could come to Elisha with complaints.” He explicitly heard that he would not be accepted if he returned. So what do we want from him?

The Rebbe explains that despite hearing a voice from Heaven, Elisha needed to try to do teshuvah by pushing his way in. His repentance would have been accepted in spite of the Heavenly Voice. Judaism believes that nothing stands in the way of teshuvah. Even if G-d Himself seems to say He cannot accept you back, you still have a chance.

## **The Maapilim Left the Rest Behind**

But if that’s the case, we can come back to our Torah portion and ask, “Why did G-d not accept the Jewish Nation’s teshuvah and bring them into the Land? True, the Jewish Nation made a mistake, but they regretted it. Why not give them another chance?”

Perhaps we can say that the Maapilim were really nothing more than a small group—that most of the people were not with them. True, they all mourned when they heard they would never enter the Holy Land, but that doesn't mean they were all truly ready to enter immediately.

Imagine someone announcing that all Jews in this country have a one-time opportunity to move to Israel. If they don't, they will forfeit their right to enter the land forever. Everyone would be sad to hear they lost the right to make aliyah, but how many would actually be prepared to leave everything behind and move to Israel immediately?

Certainly, there would be individuals ready to do so—"a few Maapilim." The majority, however, would genuinely mourn the loss but wouldn't necessarily sell their houses and run to Israel.

So, this, my friends, is what happened with the Maapilim. The nation mourned greatly upon hearing they would never enter the Holy Land. But to be ready the very next morning to go up and fight to conquer the land? Only a small group of Maapilim were ready. Most people were not with them, and so "It shall not succeed," as Moshe said.

The entire concept and goal of entering Israel is "when all its inhabitants are upon it"—meaning the entire Jewish Nation enters the land together. But if this does not occur, and they are not ready to enter the land, then that's not the aliyah, the return to Israel, that G-d had in mind. That was not the promise G-d made to our Patriarchs.

So when Moshe said, "It shall not succeed," he meant that it's not enough for just the Maapilim to want to enter the Holy Land. We need everyone to want to enter, for the entire Jewish Nation to be united in this endeavor. Running ahead alone and leaving everyone else behind accomplishes nothing.

So, the lesson for us, my friends, is this: Many Jews want to enter the spiritual Land of Israel. They want to do more mitzvos, progress in their Judaism, learn more Torah, and climb the mountain. But they end up leaving the rest of their family far behind.

We must remember that to enter the Promised Land, we must have "all its inhabitants upon it"—everyone needs to get there together. If you don't succeed

in convincing your own family to join your journey in Judaism, you could ultimately end up like the Maapilim, G-d forbid. You could lose your way because, without family backing and support, you ultimately won't be able to stand alone.

When it comes to entering the Promised Land, the entire family has to get there together.