

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHELACH

Aliya

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The concept of *aliya*, going to the Land of Israel by "ascending," is derived from this week's parasha. While "ALoH" is a common verb in the Torah, until now it has referred to ascending mountains (Har Sinai – Shemot 19;3,23,24 and many others), or when **leaving** a country, when it basically means to depart without any particular destination (leaving Egypt – Shemot 1,10 and 12,38). Of course, it also means ascending in other senses not connected to travelling. In our parasha, the word appears repeatedly, meaning to travel specifically to *Eretz Yisrael*, and in fact dominates the narrative.

God spoke to Moshe, saying:

Send men, and they shall **search** the Land of Canaan.... (13,1-2)

Moshe sent them to search the Land of Canaan, and he said to them: **ascend** (*alu*) through the south, and **ascend** (*va'aliteml*) the mountain (area) (13,17)

They **ascended** (*va'yaalu*) and searched the land, from the Zin desert until Rechov on the way to Chamat.

They **ascended** through the south, and came to Chevron.... (13, 21-22)

Calev stilled the people unto Moshe, and he said: Let us surely **ascend** (*alo naale*) and we shall possess it, for we can surely overcome it.

But the men who had **ascended** with him said: we cannot **ascend to the people**, for he is mightier than we. (13,30-31)

Interestingly, when the spies returned and reported to the people, they did not describe what they did as *aliya*.

They told him, and said: We **came** (*banu*) to the land to which you sent us, and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. (13,27)

Only when they answer Calev, and declare that they **cannot** go to the land, do they use the term *aliya* – "we cannot **ascend** to the people, for he is mightier than we" (13,31). In the very next sentence, when again describing what they **did** do on their trip, they revert to other verbs to characterize their travels.

They maligned the land which they had searched before the Jews, saying: The land which we **passed through** (*avarnu ba*) is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are mighty men. (13,32)

So, Moshe repeatedly tells the spies to do *aliya*, and the Torah describes them as having done so, but they themselves, when describing what they did, use other, more neutral terms – indeed, they explicitly state that *aliya* is impossible. It seems that the difference between Moshe (and Calev and Yehoshua) and the spies revolves around this term.

What exactly is the specific meaning of the term *aliya* that makes it the focal point of the parasha?

The repeated use of the term to refer to the movement of the Jews from Egypt to Israel caused the Sages to conclude that "*Eretz Yisrael* is higher than all other countries" (Sifre Devarim 152). While it is true that Egypt is for the most part at sea level, and the heartland of Israel is mountainous, on a *pshat* level this does not explain a verse where Par'o expresses his fear that the Jews will flee Egypt – "and when a war will occur, they will fight us, and depart (**ala**) from the land" (Shemot 1,10). Par'o did not care whether the Jews would climb mountains or descend into valleys, nor is the exact destination a matter of concern. What is important is that they will leave. *La'a lot min ha-aretz* means to depart.

At other times, it is not at all clear that movement upward can be intended. After Yitzchak successfully finds water in Gerar, the Torah says that "he went up from there to Be'er Sheva" (Bereishit 26, 23). Are we to conclude that the trip from Gerar to Be'er Sheva included an ascent in altitude? Sometimes it describes a meeting, without any knowledge of altitude at all. An angel tells Eliyahu to go meet the emissaries of the king, who are on the way to consult pagan idols. "The angel of God said to Eliya the Tishbi: Rise and go up (*kum* alei) to meet the emissaries of the king of Shomron" (2Kings 1,3). Nor can this be explained because Eliyahu was sitting when the angel spoke to him, as the emissaries report to the king that "A man ascended to meet us...." (ibid 6).

Then there are the uses of *aliya* in the context of war. When the Jewish army enters Yericho, after the walls collapse, the verse describes this as an *aliya*.

The people made noise, and blew *shofarot*; and when the people heard the sound of the *shofar*, the people made a great noise, and the wall collapsed, and the people **ascended** (*va-ya'al*) to the city, every man straight ahead, and they captured the city. (Yehoshua 6,20)

More explicitly, Calev proceeds to conquer the city of Dvir after conquering Chevron. Chevron is one of the highest points in the southern mountains, and Dvir is in that section of Yehuda known as the lowlands (*shiflat Yehuda*). The verse describes his movements as

Calev drove out from (Chevron) the three sons of the giant, Sheishai, Achiman, and Talmai, the children of the giant. From there he **ascended** to the inhabitants of Dvir, and the previous name of Dvir was Kiryat Sefer. (15,14-15).

Generally, in dozens of cases in Yehoshua, Shoftim, and Shmuel, an attack on a city will be described as *aliya*, and, while in some of the cases it is possible that some sort of physical ascent might have been involved, the regular use of the verb to describe the action indicates that, in context, it means to attack, or to lay siege. Consider the repeated use in the opening section of Shoftim:

After the death of Yehoshua, the Jews asked of God, saying: Who shall **ascend** first from us unto the Caananites to fight them.
God said: Yehuda shall **ascend**; behold I have delivered the land to his hand.
Yehuda said to Shimon his brother: **Ascend** with me in my lot and we will fight the Caananites, and I will go with you in your lot; and Shimon went him.
Yehuda **ascended**, and God delivered the Caananites and the Prizites to his hand.... (Shoftim 1,1-4)

Even if the conversation took place in the Jordan Valley, and the Canaanites inhabited the hill country, the repeated use of the verb, without any particular destination or description of an actual geographic journey, makes it clear that the intention is not to convince us that Yehuda was gaining altitude. Rather, it is clear that *aliya* in these verses, as in many others, means to go to war, to conquer, to overcome.

The common meaning to all these usages, including of course the simple meaning of the word when used to describe climbing a mountain, is a movement involving effort or deliberate purpose and concentration. In nearly every case, there is an element of **overcoming** an obstacle, as is most clear in the conquest examples above. But the intent is not to the physical effort needed to overcome the obstacle, but to the mental one, which is why it is a kind of ascent. It is the equivalent of the Biblical "girding of one's loins." Hence, when Eliyahu is sent to meet the messengers of the king, in the example cited above, he is not going for a casual meeting, but for a confrontation. The messengers are on their way to place the king's request before the pagan gods of the neighboring countries, and Eliyahu is intercepting them and repelling them. The proper translation, in context of the verse (*kum alei likrat*), is not to rise and **meet** them, but to rise and **confront** them. To ascend to a city in Shoftim means to go to **conquer** it (and not to **visit** it). Par'o is not expressing his fear that the Jews may merely leave Egypt, and surely not that they will **climb** on the way out, but that they will **escape** the bonds of Egyptian slavery, that they will liberate themselves.

The common element in the different physical actions described as being *aliya* is the psychological concentration of effort, the readiness of purpose, and the directed application of strength. Even if you are moving in an upward direction, if somehow you are doing so by inertia, it would not be described as an *aliya*.

This then is the context of the discussion between Moshe, the spies, and ultimately the Jewish people. Moshe deliberately instructs them to ascend to *Eretz Yisrael*, repeating the instruction a number of times. If not quite meaning that they should conquer the land, he was nonetheless telling them that their psychological state should be one of conquest, of confrontation, of standing up before an obstacle and overcoming it. Indeed, the Torah states that they did *aliya* – "They ascended and searched the land" (13,21) – but when they reported on their mission, they stated merely that "We **came** to the land" (13,27). Later on, they lowered the level even further, no longer "coming" (*banu*) to the land, but only "passing through" (*avarnu ba*). Somewhere along the line, their self-perception of what they had done changed; in other words, somewhere along the line they lost that determination, that purposefulness, that underlies the activity rightly called *aliya*. We can rightly surmise that the change took place when they met up with the **inhabitants** of the land, who psychologically overwhelmed them, as the spies explicitly stated in one of the most famous explicit statements of psychological self-defeat. "And there we saw the *nefilim*, children of the giant of the *nefilim*, and we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes" (13,33). Hence, when they explicitly state their opposition to conquering the land, they say, "We cannot **ascend** to the **people**" (13,31). It is unusual to find the verb of *aliya* used in relation to a people rather than to a place, but in context, where the *aliya* is not geographic necessarily but psychological, this statement exactly reflects their position.

Calev understands this clearly, and attempts to rouse the Jews to defy the defeatist message. "**Alo naale** – let us surely ascend, and we shall overcome them" This does not mean, let us go there and we shall be victorious, but rather, ascend, gather your strength, and then we shall succeed. The spies answer: we are unable to ascend to those people, you can visit there, there is no problem being tourists, but *aliya*, overcoming the obstacles, is impossible, for us, as well as for you (and, by implication, for God as well).

That the difference between the spies and Calev is basically psychological is explicitly stated by God when he speaks to Moshe. "And my servant Calev, **since a different spirit was with him**, and he followed Me, I shall bring him to the land to which he came, and his seed will inherit it" (14,24).

This explains what happens immediately afterwards, the story of the *maapilim*.

Moshe spoke all these things to the Israelites, and the people mourned greatly.

They arose in the morning, and the **ascended** the summit of the mountain, saying: We are ready (*hinenu*) to **ascend** to the place of which God spoke, for we have sinned.

Moshe said: Why are you transgressing the word of God, but this shall not succeed.

Do not ascend, for God is not in your midst, and you shall not be smitten by your enemies....

But they made the effort (*vayaapilu*) to **ascend** to the summit of the mountain, but the ark of the covenant of God and Moshe did not move from the camp. (14, 39-44).

A group of Jews understands exactly what has happened, and resolves to correct the situation, accepting upon themselves precisely what Calev had demanded. They **ascend** the mountain, saying "*hinnenu v'alinu*." The word *hinenu*, in all its forms (*hinei*, *hineini*, etc.) has no natural translation in English. Here it means what I used in the translation above – they are saying, "behold, we are ready." It is an expression of preparedness, of readiness, of resolve and effort. Similarly, their action at the end is prefaced with the verb *vaya'apilu*, a most unusual one. Rashi and most of the commentators explain that it means that they strengthened themselves, they made an effort. This psychological effort is the crux of the reaction to the story of the spies. They are doing precisely what the spies had not done.

I would like to suggest that this explains why we are suddenly facing a mountain on the way to the land. The *maapilim* ascend a mountain, which has not been part of the story until now. The commentators conclude that apparently the way to the land lead over a mountain at that particular point. While that may be true, it is strange that the Torah stresses that geographical feature, even though it is irrelevant to the story. What is more, the fact itself is suspect. For the confrontation with the Canaanite to make sense, the Torah places them on top of the mountain, blocking the ascent of the Jews. "The Ameleki and the Canaanite who dwelled on the mountain descended and smote them" (14,45). And yet, previously, when God told Moshe that they cannot proceed directly to the land, the verse states, "The Ameleki and the Canaanite dwell **in the valley**, tomorrow turn and travel through the desert in the direction of *yam suf*. The literal contradiction between the "mountain" and the "valley" is striking. I think the Torah deliberately puts a mountain on their path, to strengthen the "picture" of a climb, an ascent. This is strengthened even more by the twice-mentioned feature of "the summit of the mountain." The *maapilim* had truly internalized the message of Calev, and were now ready to ascend to the very summit of the mountain, physical and metaphorical, that stood before them. There is here a perfect marriage of the real and the metaphorical. A mountain, the summit, *hinenu*, *maapilim*, and of course, the repeated *aliya*, all combine to paint the *maapilim* as the finest example of people who are ready to struggle to conquer, to perform *aliya*.

This is what makes their story so tragic. The message of the Torah is not that if you try hard enough, you can do anything. The message is that to accomplish that which God has commanded you, you need to gather all your strength and resolve. Once God is not with you, inner resolve is irrelevant. As Moshe says, "it shall not succeed." "*al taalu*" – "Do not **ascend**, for God is not in your midst." Psychologically, these people are heroes, possessing admirable character; in fact, precisely that character trait that the parasha is all about. But it is too late, the die has been cast. Character in the service of God is what the Torah is all about, but it is useless if not in accordance with His will. Jewish history will have to turn back for forty years, and nothing will be able to change that.

Postscript: The use of the term "aliya" in this shiur refers only to the verb which dominates the parasha. It was not meant to imply anything about contemporary aliya. But that does not mean that it does not have implications in that area as well. I leave this to the reader.