



SHELACH

From Honest Scouts to Sinister Spies

The Slippery Slope of Moral Erosion

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Shelach

Moses sends twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Forty days later they return—carrying a huge cluster of grapes, a pomegranate, and a fig,—to report on a lush and bountiful land. But ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than us”; only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered, as G-d has commanded.

The people weep that they’d rather return to Egypt. G-d decrees that Israel’s entry into the land shall be delayed forty years, during which time that

entire generation will die out in the desert. A group of remorseful Jews storm the mountain on the border of the land and are routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

The laws of the *menachot* (meal, wine, and oil offerings) are given, as well as the *mitzvah* to consecrate a portion of the dough (*chalah*) to G-d when making bread.

A man violates the Shabbat by gathering sticks, and he is put to death.

G-d instructs us to place fringes (*tzitzit*) on the four

corners of our garments so that we should remember to fulfill the *mitzvot* (Divine commandments).

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

When a good person takes a bad turn after a traumatic event, what do you think is really happening beneath the surface? Is it usually a moment of sudden collapse or the result of smaller, unnoticed changes over time—and how can we tell the difference?



Moses selected the leader of each tribe to scout the land of Canaan.

TEXT 1A

Numbers 13:3

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּאֲרָן עַל פִּי
ה', כֻּלָּם אֲנָשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה.

And Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran at G-d's instruction. They were all men, heads of the Children of Israel.

TEXT 1B

Rashi, ad loc.

"כִּלְמֵ אַנְשִׁים". כָּל אַנְשִׁים שְׂבִמְקָרָא,
לְשׁוֹן תְּשִׁיבוֹת. וְאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה כְּשִׁרִים הָיוּ.

"They were all men." When the Torah employs the word "men," it denotes people of prestige. At that point in time, the scouts were morally upright.

QUESTION

Why does the Torah stress that they were “men”?

ANSWER

The word “men” is used here to show that they were **good people**.

TEXT 2A

Numbers 13:16

אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח מֹשֶׁה
לְתוֹר אֶת הָאָרֶץ, וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן
נּוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ.

These are the names of the men Moses sent to scout the land, and Moses called Hosea the son of Nun, Joshua.

TEXT 2B

Rashi, ad loc.

"וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ וְגֹמֵר". הַתְּפִלָּה
עָלָיו: הֵ-הָ יוֹשִׁיעֶךָ מֵעֲצַת מְרַגְלִים.

"And Moses called Hosea . . . Joshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ)": He prayed for him, "May G-d save you (הַ יוֹשִׁיעֶךָ-י) from the counsel of the spies."

הוֹשֵׁעַ—save

Hosea

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ—G-d saves

Joshua

Moshe changed Joshua's name to pray that G-d protects him from the spies.



They're called "good men," yet Moses prayer for Joshua hints that something was already starting to go wrong.

TEXT 3A

Numbers 13:26

וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל
כָּל עֵדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

And they went and came to Moses and to Aaron
and to all the congregation of the Children of Israel.

The Torah gives a detailed description of their journey.



It says "And they went"



The Spies returned

Rashi: What is the point of the redundant "and they went?"



TEXT 3B

Rashi, ad loc.

"וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ". מֵהוּ "וַיֵּלְכוּ"?

לְהַקְיִישׁ הַלִּיכָתוֹ לְבִיאָתוֹ. מֵה בִּיאָתוֹ בְּעֵצָה רָעָה, אַף
הַלִּיכָתוֹ בְּעֵצָה רָעָה.

"And they went and came." Why does the Torah say, "And they went"?

To compare their departure to their arrival. As they arrived with wicked counsel, so did they depart with wicked counsel.



Rashi: It says “and they went” to emphasize their mindset at the start of their journey.

Three Stages of their moral decline

1. They started out fully kosher
2. Developed "counsel of the spies," and Moses prayed that Joshua be spared from it.
3. They developed a wicked counsel when leaving and returned with the same mindset

QUESTION

If the spies started out as good men and later became wicked, what happened in between that caused Moses to pray?

They were first called scouts, but Rashi switches the term to "spies," the same word Joseph used when accusing his brothers.



TEXT 4

Genesis 42:9

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵם מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם, לְרַאֲוֹת אֶת
עֲרוֹת הָאָרֶץ בְּאֶתְכֶם.

And he said to them, "You are *spies*; you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

TEXT 5

Dr. Ursula M. Wilder,
“Why Spy: The
Pathologies of
Espionage,” *Studies in
Intelligence*, vol. 61,
no. 2, June 2017

People who commit espionage sustain double lives. . . . [H]e or she initiates a clandestine second identity. From that time on, a separation must be maintained between the person’s secret “spy” identity, with its clandestine activities, and the “non-spy” public self. The covert activities inescapably exert a powerful influence on the person’s overt life. They necessitate ongoing efforts at concealment, compartmentalization, and deception of those not witting of the espionage, which includes almost everyone in the spy’s life.



“The nakedness of the land”:
A spy comes to uncover the
nation’s secrets. To do this,
the spy must be sneaky and
hide their identity.

TEXT 6

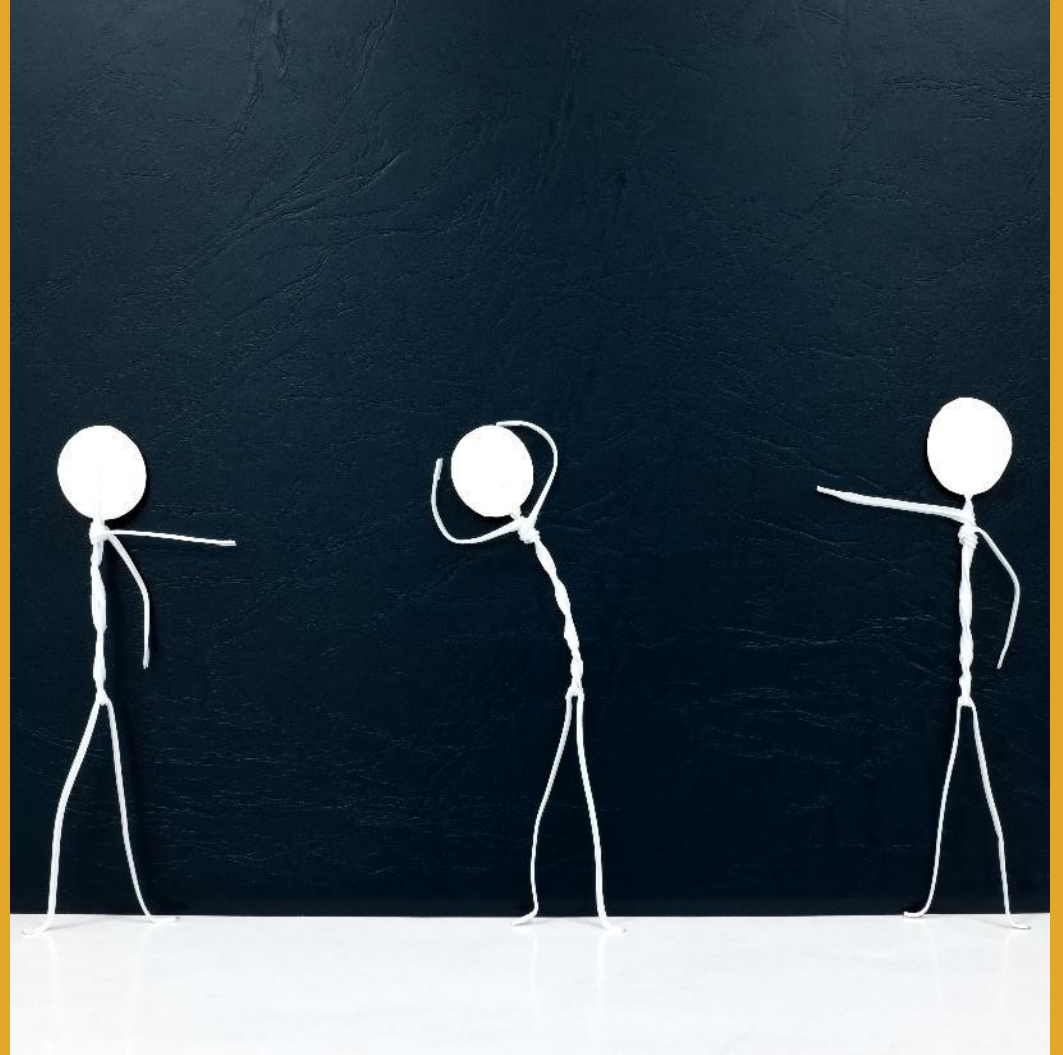
Genesis 42:10–11

י. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו: לֹא אֲדֹנָי, וְעֲבָדֶיךָ בָּאוּ לְשָׂבֵר אֶכֶל.
יא. כִּלְנוּ בְּנֵי אִישׁ אֶחָד נָחֵנוּ, כִּנְיִם אֲנַחְנוּ, לֹא הָיוּ
עֲבָדֶיךָ מְרַגְלִים.

10. And they said to him, "No, my master, your servants came to buy food.

11. "We are all sons of one man; we are honest; your servants are not spies."

Joseph accused his brothers of spying, while they insisted they were honest.



TEXT 7

Numbers 13:2

שְׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ
כְּנָעַן.

Send forth men for yourself, and they shall
scout the land of Canaan.



Moses never told the men to act as spies, he instructed them to **scout**, which is done honestly and openly, exactly as G-d had commanded.

TEXT 8

Rabbi David Kimchi,
Sefer Hashorashim,
Entry for *Tor*

פִּירוּשׁ הַתָּרִים . . . עֲנִין תְּקִירָה
וְחִפּוּשׁ.

The meaning of scouting . . . is to
investigate and to search.

TEXT 9

Rabbi Meir Leibush
Wisser, Numbers 13:2

ה' גלה לו שאינו צריך לשלוח מרגלים
על דרך זה, כי לא יכבשוה בדרך הטבע.
שבדרך הטבע עז העם היושב בארץ,
ואי אפשר לכבשם. רק שיהיה הכבוש
נסי על ידי ה'.

ולפי זה אין צורך לשלוח מרגלים
לראות את ערות הארץ, כי אין מעצור
לה' להושיע בכל מקום שיכנסו שמה.

רק, באשר ידע ה' שישאל בלתי
מאמינים בלבם שהיא ארץ זבת חלב
ודבש . . . ועל זה התיר למשה לשלוח
תרים לראות את טובת הארץ. לא
מרגלים לראות את ערותה.

G-d revealed to him that there would be no need for spies to secretly identify the land's vulnerabilities, for the land would not be conquered by natural means. Any attempt to capture the land by natural means would fail due to the might of its inhabitants. Instead, G-d intended to capture the land supernaturally. . . .

There was no need to send spies to uncover the land's vulnerabilities, for nothing could stop G-d from giving the land to the Jews, no matter how they might enter.

G-d permitted Moses to send these men because He knew the Jews did not believe in their hearts that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . Thus, He permitted Moses to send scouts to see the goodness of the land: not spies to see its nakedness.



There was no need for spying secretly since the land would be conquered miraculously.

Moses sent scouts only because the people didn't fully believe in its goodness.

TEXT 10

Rabbi Yeshayahu
Halevi Horowitz,
Shenei Luchot
Haberit, Torah
Shebichtav, Shelach,
Torah Or #25

לֹא שֶׁעָלָה אֶז עַל מַחְשְׁבָתָן לְהוֹצֵאת דִּיבַת רָעָה, כִּי נִקְיִים
וְכַשְׁרִים הָיוּ אֶז מְזָה.

רַק שֶׁהִחְטֵא הָיָה מוֹכֵן בְּכַח. מֵאַחַר שֶׁהִתְחִילוּ לְחַטּוֹא . . . בָּאוּ
לְיַדִּי כָּךְ לְבִסּוּף.

The thought of submitting an evil report did not enter their minds yet. At that time, they were pure and innocent of such thoughts.

However, the potential for their sin was established. After committing a subtle sin, . . . they eventually committed a complete sin.

ANSWER

They shifted from trust to strategy, and that small mindset shift opened the door to a negative outlook. Moses saw the danger early and prayed that Joshua wouldn't be drawn into it.

Three Stages of their moral decline

1. They started out fully kosher

Moses sent them as scouts

2. Developed "counsel of the spies," and Moses prayed that Joshua be spared from it.

The men chose to act as spies. Moses suspected a downfall and prayed for Joshua.

3. They developed a wicked counsel

The spies shifted from reporting the good to highlighting the land's weaknesses.

TEXT 11

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Agents and Partners 1:2

נְשִׁיחַ נְשַׁעְבֵּר עַל דְּבָרֵי מְשַׁלְּחוֹ, לֹא עֹשֶׂה כְּלוּם.
וְכֵן אִם טָעָה בְּכֹל נְשִׁיחַוָּא, בֵּין בְּקַרְקַע בֵּין
בְּמַטְלֵטְלִין, חוֹזֵר.

The actions of an agent who deviates from the sender's instructions have no validity. Similarly, even the slightest error on the part of the agent concerning land or movable property nullifies any transaction made by the agent.



When the spies went off mission, they broke their role as Moses agents losing his guidance and protection.

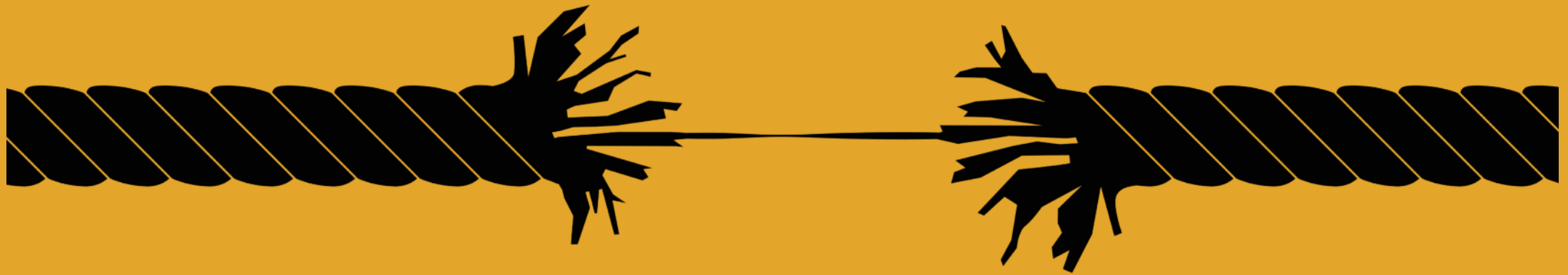
TEXT 12A

Sifrei, Numbers 30:1

מְצִינֵנוּ בְּכֹל מְקוֹם שֶׁנִּשְׁלַחְנוּ שָׁל אֲדָם
כְּמוֹתוֹ.

Every known Torah source [related to agency] states that agents are just like their sender.

By straying from their mission, the spies not only lost their authority but also broke their **spiritual connection** to Moses.



TEXT 12B

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, *Likutei*
Torah, Vayikra, p. 3b

מְאָמַר רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנָם לְבִרְכָה בְּעֵינֵינוּ שְׁלִיחוֹת, דְּשְׁלוּחוֹ שֶׁל
אָדָם כְּמוֹתוֹ. וְלָכֵן אֵין שְׁלִיחוֹת לְחֵרֵשׁ שׁוֹטֵה וְקָטָן שְׁאִינֵן
כְּמוֹתוֹ דְּהַמְשִׁילָת. אֲבָל כְּשֶׁהוּא בֵּר שְׁלִיחוֹת הָרִי הוּא כְּמוֹתוֹ
דְּהַמְשִׁילָת מִמֶּשׁ.

Our sages of blessed memory said that concerning agency, our agent is just like us. Accordingly, people who are deaf, mentally disabled, or minors cannot act as proxies for healthy adults because they are different from their senders. Only those who are *just like* their sender are fit for agency.



Being an agent means you **embody** the sender, fully representing them, not just following orders.

TEXT 13

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, *Likutei
Sichot* 33, pp. 83–84

שְׁמִדְתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה הִיא מִדַּת הָאֱמֶת, "וְנֹאמַת זֶה
מֹשֶׁה" (שְׁמוֹת רַבָּה ה, י). וְלָכֵן, כְּדֵי לִהְיוֹת
שְׁלוּחֵי שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, שְׁלוּחֵי שֶׁל אָדָם כְּמוֹתוֹ,
"כְּמוֹתוֹ דְּהַמְשַׁלֵּחַ מִמֶּנּוּ", אִי אֶפְשָׁר שְׁתַּהַיְגָה
אֶצֶל הַשְּׁלִיחַ שׁוֹם נְטִיָּה מִמִּדַּת הָאֱמֶת.

וְזֶהוּ שְׁשִׁלְחוּתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה הִיְתָה רַק "לְתוֹר אֶת
הָאָרֶץ" וְלֹא "לְרַגֵּל אוֹתָהּ". כִּי בְּעֵינֵי עֵינֵי זֶה,
שְׁלִיחוֹת בְּשִׁיכוֹת לְכַנְיֶסָה לְאָרֶץ, הִנֵּה צָרִיךְ
לִהְיוֹת כַּח הַמְשַׁלֵּחַ (כַּחוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה) בְּאוֹפֵן גָּלוּי.

עַל יְדֵי זֶה שֶׁהַשְּׁלוּחִים נָטוּ מִקְּוֵי שְׁלִיחוּתָם
וְהִחֲזִיקוּ אֶת עֵצָמָם לְמַרְגְּלִים, נִתְבַּטַּל בָּהֶם כַּח
הַמְשַׁלֵּחַ. כִּי נוֹסֵף עַל בִּיטוּל הַשְּׁלִיחוֹת מִצַּד
הַשְּׁלִיחוֹת, דְּעַל יְדֵי זֶה שֶׁשְׁלִיחַ מְשַׁנֵּה אֶת
שְׁלִיחוּתוֹ (בְּעֵינֵי עֵינֵי) בְּטֹלָה הַשְּׁלִיחוֹת, הָרִי
כָּאֵן, נִפְסְלוּ בְּעֵצָם מִלִּהְיוֹת שְׁלוּחֵי מֹשֶׁה. כִּי אִי
אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁהֵם יִהְיוּ כְּמוֹתוֹ דְּמֹשֶׁה, שְׁמִדְתוֹ מִדַּת
הָאֱמֶת.

Moses's key attribute was truth, as it is taught, "And truth, that is Moses" (Midrash, *Shemot Rabah* 5:10). It is, therefore, impossible to be an agent of Moses, to be "just like him," which means to be truly "like one's sender," if one deviates even slightly from the attribute of truth.

This is [the inner reason for] why Moses only sent them "to scout the land," not "to spy on it." For any agent to succeed on a matter so critical as entering the land, the power of the sender (Moses's power) had to be manifested openly.

When the emissaries deviated from their mission by considering themselves spies, the power of the sender within them became null. Firstly, their agency was legally nullified because they changed their mission—as any agency would be if the agent changed a (primary) condition of the mission. Secondly, they were intrinsically disqualified from being Moses's agents because they weren't like Moses, whose attribute was the truth.

Moses **embodied** the truth,
so the scouts needed to do
the same, but they didn't
follow his instructions, so they
lost their connection to him.





Once someone start bending the truth it's easy to keep lying, this is exactly what happened with the spies.

TEXT 14

Rabbi Yeshayahu
Halevi Horowitz,
*Shenei Luchot
Haberit, Torah
Shebichtav, Shelach,
Torah Or #25*

שְׁאָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנוּם לְבִרְכָה, "כָּךְ דִּרְכוּ שֶׁל יֵצֵר הָרַע, הַיּוֹם
אוֹמֵר לוֹ עֲשֵׂה כֵךְ, וּלְמָחָר אוֹמֵר לוֹ עֲשֵׂה כֵךְ, עַד שְׁאוֹמֵר לוֹ עֲבוֹד
עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה" (שַׁבָּת קח, ב).

וְאִם שָׁפַע עֲשִׂיָה הָרָאשׁוֹנָה לֹא עָלָה בְּמַחְשַׁבְתּוֹ עַל זֶה וְכֹשֶׁר הוּא מְזַה, מְכַל מְקוֹם גִּחְשָׁב כְּאֵלוֹ כֵךְ, מֵאַחַר שִׁיבָא לְיָדֵי כֵךְ עַל יְדֵי כֵךְ.

Our sages of blessed memory said, "This is the way of the evil inclination: today it suggests we do this, tomorrow it suggests we do that, until it suggests we worship idols" (Talmud, Shabbat 105b).

Even if the first time we succumb, the thought of idol worship never enters our minds because we are too pious for that, it is, nevertheless, considered as if it did, since the first succumbing eventually leads to it.

TEXT 15

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5685, pp. 98–99

דְּהִנְפֹּשׁ הַבְּהֵמִית אֵינוֹ מִפְתָּה אֶת הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת
בְּרָאשׁוֹנָה אֵיזָה דְּבַר אִיסוּר. עֶר קוֹמֵט גֵּיט אֹוֹן
זָאגֵט, טוֹא עֲבִירָה זֹו. כִּי אִם הִתְחַלָּה הוּא רַק מָה
שְׂמֻקְרָר אֹוֹתוֹ, עֶר מֵאכֵט אִים קֵאלֵט. וְהֵינּוּ עֶר
קִילֵט אָפּ מֵעֲנִינֵי אֱלֹקוֹת. וְאוֹמֵר לוֹ כָּךְ, אֲזִי וַי דוֹא
טוֹסֵט, לְשִׁמּוֹר הַבְּרִיאוֹת וְכוּ', זֶהוּ טוֹב, אֵט אֲזִי
דֵארְף מְעַן טָאן.

וְאַחַר כָּךְ אֹוֹמֵר לוֹ כָּךְ, דְּהִנְהַגַּת הָעוֹלָם, הֵינּוּ וַי א
דִיא וְוַעֲלֵט פִירֵט זִיךְ, פִירוֹשׁ דְּעַר גֵּימוֹס הָעוֹלָם,
אָט אֲזִי אִיז גוֹט, וְהַכֹּל עוֹשִׂים כָּךְ, וּמִדּוֹעַ אֶתָּה לֹא
תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן? וְאֵינוֹ מִבְּחִין בֵּין הֵיִתֵר לְאִיסוּר.

Our animal soul does not initially tempt us to do something forbidden. It doesn't come and say, "Commit this sin." It begins by cooling us off—making us apathetic to matters of Divinity. It tells us, "What you are doing is good because you are preserving your health [rather than because it is G-d's will], etc. This is good; everyone should do it."

Afterward, it tells us, "The way of the world—the customs by which the world conducts itself—is good. Everyone follows these customs; why shouldn't you?" At this point, it no longer distinguishes between the permitted and the forbidden.

TEXT 15

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5685, pp. 98–99

עד שְׂאוּמֵר לוֹ לֶךְ עֲבוֹד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה, הֵינּוּ עֲבוֹדָה שְׁהִיא זָרָה לוֹ לְגַמְרֵי, אִזָּא זֶאדָּ וְוֹאס עָם אִיז נִיט בְּעֶרְךָ זַיִן מֵהוּת. וְכִמוֹ שְׁנִרְאָה בְּחוּשׁ אִז עָם טְרַעֲפֵט אָפֵט אִז מִיא טוֹט זִיד אֲלִיִּן אַ חֵאפּ, טוֹט אַ וְוֹאונְדֶער, וְוִי קוּם אִיד צוּא אִזָּא זֶאדָּ? וְוִיא אָזִי אִיז מְעַן דָּאס אָזִי נִידֶערִיק גִּיפֵאלֶן, רַחֲמָנָא לְצִלָּן, אִז עָם אִיז רַעֲכֵט גַּם דְּבַר אָסוּר בְּפוֹעַל מְמִשׁ? וְמִי יִרְאֵנִי וְמִי יוֹדִיעֵנִי?

דְּעַר אַנְדֶּערֶער אִיז דָּאס כָּלֵל נִיט מְשַׁעַר, אִוּן עַר קָאן דָּאס גָּאָר נִיט מְשַׁעַר זַיִן אִז אַ צִיּוּר אָדָם זָאל זַיִן אָזִי נִידֶערִיק כּוֹי. וְגַם הָאָדָם בְּעֶצְמוֹ מְתַפְּלָא עַל עֶצְמוֹ, אִיד יִרַד, רַחֲמָנָא לְצִלָּן, בִּירִידָה עֲצוּמָה כָּזוֹ?

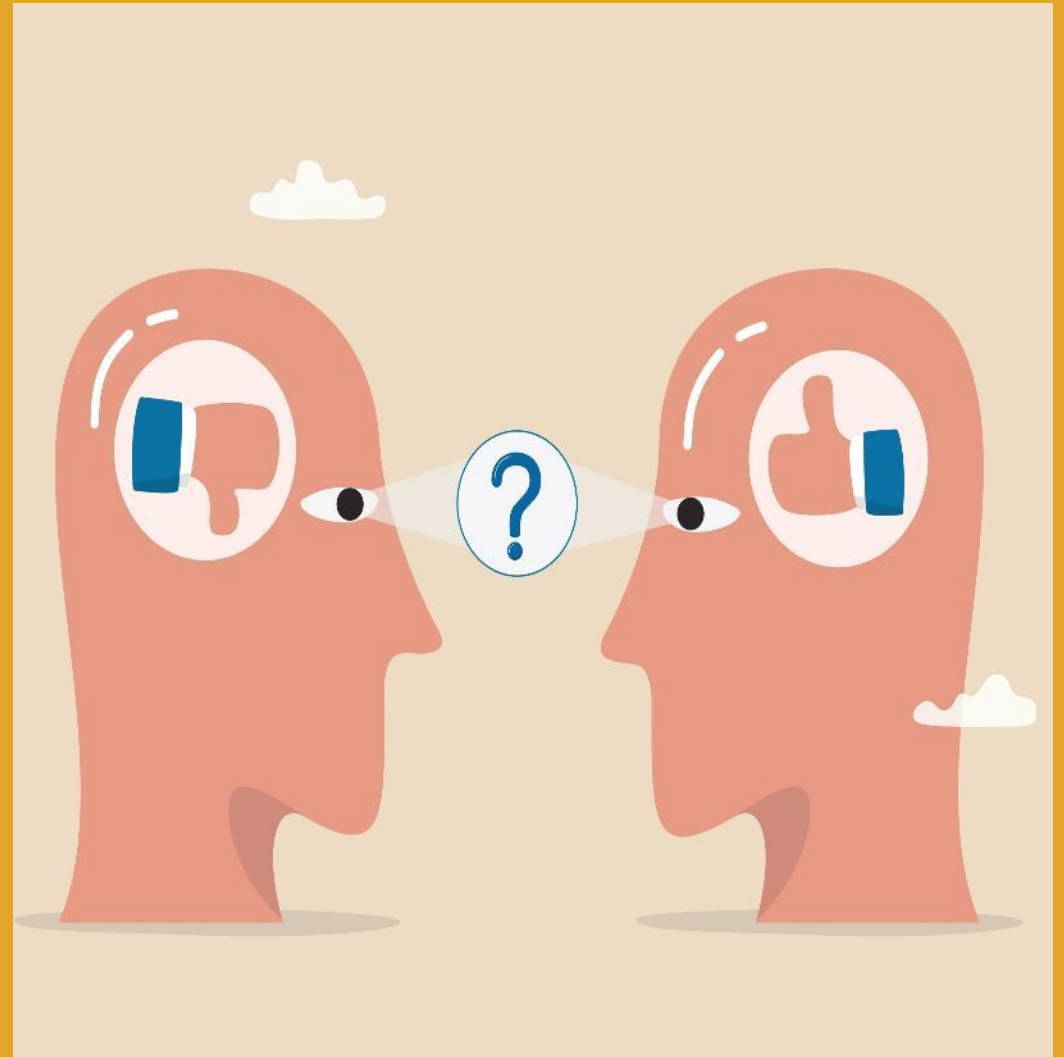
וְהוּא מְפָנִי הֶסְתַּת וּפְתִיִת הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַבְּהֵמִית וְיִצְרַר הָרַע, שְׁהִיּוּם אִוּמֵר לוֹ כּוֹי, עַד שְׂבָא לִידֵי עֲבוֹדָה שְׁהִיא זָרָה לוֹ לְגַמְרֵי כּוֹי. וְהֵהֱתַחֲלָה הִיא תַּאֲוֹת הֵיטֵר. וּמְרִיבּוּי הַשְּׂקִידָה בְּתַאֲוֹת הֵיטֵר, יְבוּא לִידֵי אִיסוּר רַחֲמָנָא לְצִלָּן.

Then it tells us, “Go worship alien gods,” meaning a way of life that is utterly alien to us, something that is entirely out of sync with our essence. We see factually that it often happens that one is suddenly astonished and wonders, “How did I come to such a state? How did I fall so low, G-d forbid, that even a forbidden act is permissible in my mind? Who will see me? Who will alert me?”

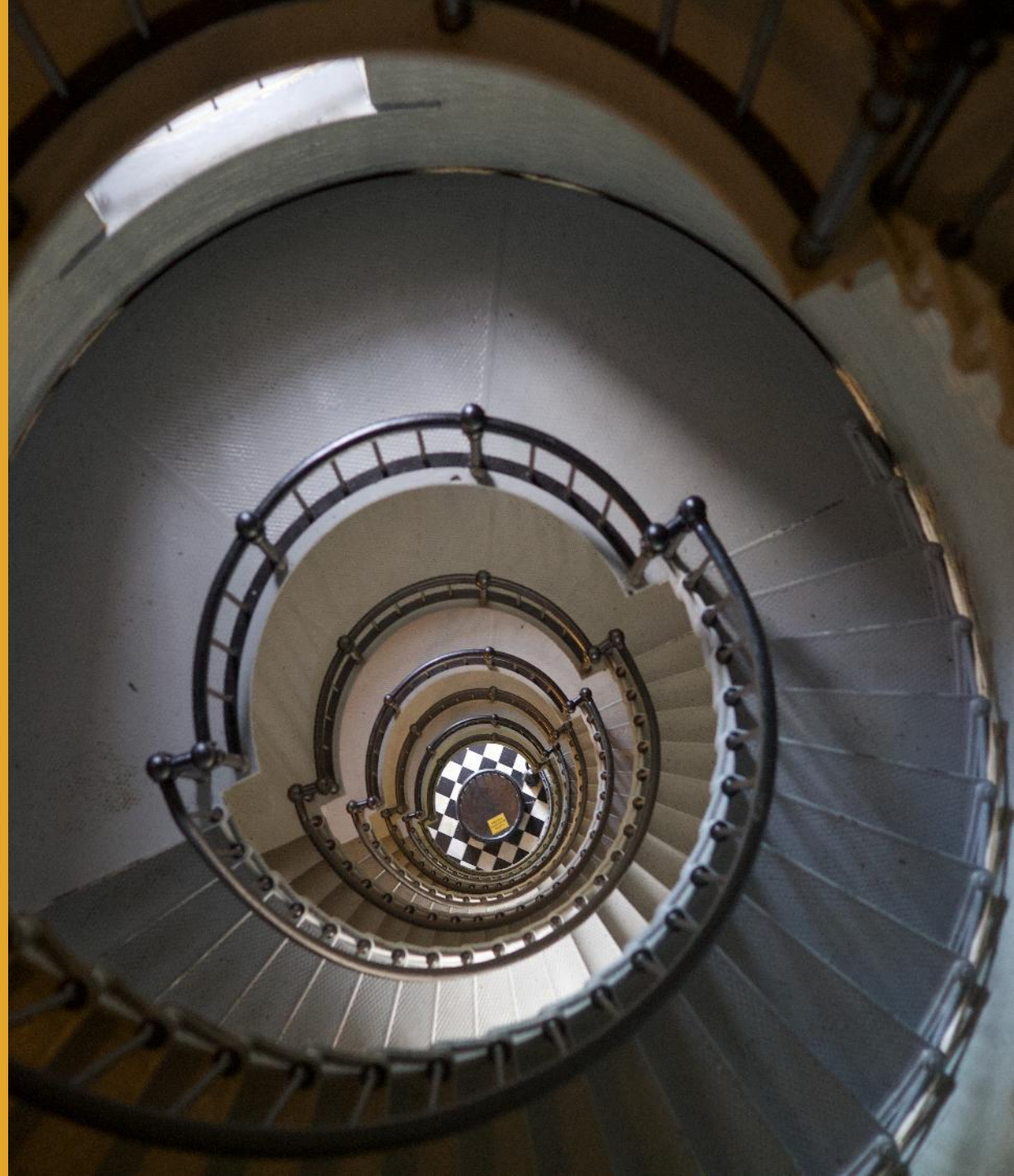
Others never imagine and can’t even conceive that we fell so low; even we are amazed by our terrible descent, G-d forbid.

All this is because of the incitement and temptation of the evil inclination, which sways us ever so slowly, until we reach a way of life that is entirely alien to us, etc. It begins with permissible desires. Excessive indulgence in permissible behavior leads to forbidden behavior, G-d forbid.

This turning point itself wasn't a sin, but it marked the start of their slow slide and made them vulnerable to the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination).



A downward spiral
never starts with blatant
sin, but with small shifts
away from G-d.





We need to make sure our choices come from honesty and truth, so little mistakes don't lead us off track.

KEY POINTS

1. Moral failings in good people are rarely sudden catastrophes. More often, they are the culmination of “slow leaks”—gradual erosions.
2. The initial “puncture” is rarely an outright sin but rather a shift in methodology or intention that subtly departs from what’s true and holy.
3. When acting on behalf of a spiritual mentor, we benefit from their merit only if we follow their instructions and embody their character and attributes as well as we can.
4. The evil inclination rarely begins with temptations to overt wickedness. Instead, it starts by blurring the lines between permitted and forbidden.
5. To prevent a “slow leak” from progressing, constant self-examination or objective, third-party input is crucial. At every decision point or shift in approach, we must put our underlying motivation under scrutiny.

