

remember how murmuring, complaining, and *lashon hara* – rooted strongly in ingratitude, negativity, and fleshly self-indulgence were allowed to take over and derail the camp of the Redeemed? Do you remember how serpent speak began to spread from mouth-to-mouth, from tent-to-tent, and from tribe to tribe as soon as we exited the ‘Beauty Realm’ safe harbor of Sinai? Do you remember how even Moshe, Miryam, and Aharon got caught up in the toxic tidal wave of criticism? Do you remember the damage one rant, one whine, or one gossip-session can do to the community? I hope you remember those things. I hope the remembrance of those things is moderating the way you allow yourself to think, feel, speak, and act. Now it is time for a re-test! Will you let the lessons of parsha *B’ha’alotcha* regarding negative thought, emotion, and speech moderate the way you allow yourself to think, feel, speak, and act toward the things the Creator has infused with pulsing empowerments of *kedusha* (KJV ‘holiness’). In case you have forgotten, those things include the Sabbath, the mitzvot and testimonies of Torah, the *Mo’edim*, the *Mish’kan* (KJV ‘tabernacle’) and its *avodah* (KJV ‘service’), the calling of the Covenant nation of *B’nei Yisrael*, and, most on point for this week, THE LAND OF ISRAEL? It is bad enough to *kvetch* and complain over food, conditions, and throw a hissy fit over people, associations, and circumstances that you don’t like. But when you start to attach negativity to that which the Holy One has designed to release the positive energy and empowerment of His Holiness into the world ... well, when that happens, step back, because there is likely to be some jaw-dropping fireworks!

Remember What The Holy One Did to Miryam

Miryam, Moshe and Aharon’s older sister, was the matriarch of the most blessed and consecrated family in *B’nei Yisrael*. She had played a prestigious role in the narrative of the Great Redemption. She had been the human *lightning rod* through which the nation received the Heaven-sent ‘Song of the Sea’ in the ecstatic aftermath of *Yam Suf*. When she let her mind, emotions, and tongue break free from the Holy One’s revelation flow, however – and wandered off into the dank backwaters of the flesh – she became an *anti-holy terror*. The Holy One called her on it. Nevertheless, He was actually very merciful. First, He inspired Moshe to break the ‘*lashon hara* cycle of toxicity’ by not only forgiving her for the slanderous betrayal she committed against him but actually praying fervent, effectual prayers for her healing. Then He worked in the heart of Miryam herself, enabling her to fly through the *Metzora-cleansing protocols* in the minimum amount of time. She was pronounced gloriously *tahor* (clean), after only seven days. She has since returned to the camp with full privileges, restored health, and renewed focus. She is humble again. She is thankful again. She is full of love, joy, and shalom again. She delights to serve her family, her nation, and her Redeemer-King again. Having personally received mercy and forgiveness, she has become

capable of being infinitely more merciful, forgiving, patient, and wise in relation to others. She therefore carries a new level of *gravitas* – i.e. ‘true tone’ Kingdom weightiness – that elevates all her conversations. She is doing a whole lot less fretting over ‘evildoers’, and a whole lot more listening, smiling, and talking about things like hidden potential, opportunities for growth, mission calling, and inspired vision. She is radiating *shalom*, *simchah*, and thanksgiving throughout all her spheres of influence. She is no longer sassy or opinionated. She exudes calm, confident compassion. She epitomizes kindness and understanding. Her words no longer have a cynical, self-righteous, short-sighted, or judgmental edge. She even sings a much purer, infinitely more beautiful version of *Ashirah L’Adonai*. As a consequence of these changes in Miryam, her level of influence in and the quality of her impact on the community – and the world – are both greater than ever.

In the immediate aftermath of what has happened with Miryam, all murmuring, complaining, whining, pity-partying, *k’vetch*-ing, and *lashon hara*-spreading in the camp has come to a screeching halt. But there is ... well ... has anyone besides me noticed that there is a bit of an *elephant in the room*?

Wait a Minute ... What About Aharon?

The elephant in the room is: “*so ... what about Aharon?*” Everyone knows that our esteemed high priest was there spewing *lashon hara* out of both sides of his mouth right alongside Miryam. See **Numbers 12:1**. Miryam has felt the sting of the Holy One’s discipline – what about her co-conspirator Aharon? Does his position exempt him? Does he get to walk away from the cesspool of toxicity he helped Miryam create as if he was pure as the driven snow? Not on your life. Unfortunately for Aharon, the law of sowing and reaping is very much still effect. Aharon has a higher title, with an elevated level of responsibility, and that means he has a far higher level of accountability than Miryam. He who is called to be the model of ‘*hinei mah tov shevet achim gam yachad*’ (KJV Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together)² level unity in the camp isn’t going to get off nearly as easy as his sister Miryam did for his part in clogging up the well of Divine revelation with ethnicity-centered trash talk. Aharon is going to be allowed to reap what he sowed in *lashon hara* at a level far beyond a seven-day flare-up of *tzara’at*. He will absorb the full measure of discipline, *in kind* - from the very people before whom he spoke negatively concerning his brother. As long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter **Genesis 8:22a**. The seeds of *lashon hara* that Aharon sowed are still alive and fertile. They are eventually going to find fertile soil, and just the right conditions, where they can sprout, leaf, bud, flower, mature – and produce their inevitable harvest. The Holy One knows it is coming – even if Aharon doesn’t. But alas for Aharon and

² See Psalm 133.

everyone associated with him – especially Moshe – in that day!

***Meanwhile – What is the Next Challenge In Store for us
in the Great ‘Proving Ground’ Narrative?***

Why are things suddenly so uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and challenging? Why is everyone suddenly so over-the-top irritable, disrespectful, and self-obsessed? Well, it is that time of the cycle. Welcome to the Kingdom of Heaven's annual '*Proving Ground Season*'. Welcome to the season of the Refiner's Fire. Welcome to long, hot 'Wilderness Days' in which the pressure tests come fast and furious, and whatever is in us - for 'good' or for 'evil' - is revealed for the whole world to see.

It is in this season each year that we learn the most important lessons about what walking and communing with the Creator in real time, as His Ambassadors of *Kedusha* (holiness), *Chokmah* (wisdom), and *Shalom* means – for us as a witness throned and for the world as an ecosystem. Walking in Covenant with the Creator, we discover each year as we read and relive the narrative of our ancestors' post-Sinai Wilderness experiences, means letting Him guide us through life's challenges, and discipline us - and never giving up or giving in to discontent. It means continuing to serve our King and His Kingdom as agents of hope, healing, redemption, restoration, reconciliation, and wholeness even while we are in the throes of extreme physical, mental, emotional and relational discomfort. The Holy One is trying to teach us that the mission of bringing the Beauty Realm of Heaven, and the joy of knowing and serving the Holy One, to real people and places on a physical earth requires mature vessels of holiness and blessing – humble vessels willing to grow in both wisdom and favor and with man as they confront in humility and overcome in gentleness every challenge and situation life throws at them. Our King wants us to know that being His Ambassadors means learning to love like He loves, and to hold fast to *shalom*, *simchah* [joy], and *tikvah* [hope] the way He does – and to do so no matter what is being thought or said, or what horrible injustices and outrages may be occurring, around us. He wants us to know that we have to learn to face - but never embrace, carry, or speak or act in resonance with - the dark energy of anger, and offense, fear, disappointment, or despair. He is teaching us that walking with Him as our one and only King means refusing to bow our knee, even a little bit, to any person, any movement, or any of the false gods, ideas, ideals, slogans, or philosophies of the pagan cultures unto which He has sent us as Witnesses of His Goodness and Glory. He is teaching us that being in Covenant with the Creator means learning to recognize - and to refuse to even listen to, much less repeat, any form of slander, accusation, opinion, fearmongering, propaganda, or demagoguery.

The road through the Wilderness 'Proving Ground' obstacle course the Holy One has designed for us to traverse in this season is long, with many a winding turn.

The desert scape in which we are required to navigate this course each year is harsh and unforgiving. It has to be. It is, after all, designed to cause every shallow veneer of spirituality and religion, and every hidden fleshly or pseudo-intellectual agenda, that remains in us to evaporate. His word, especially as set forth in the Kedusha Discourse, serves as the Holy One's surgical scalpel; but His decaying tissue extractor of choice is a long hot summer in the 'Proving Ground' of the Wilderness. He intends that in the heat of the desert everything remaining of our residual animalistic natures will be located, triggered brought to the surface in unflattering ways, and exposed for all to see. He wants our willing enslavement to fleshly appetites, urges, drives, and desires to be revealed – and disposed of. He wants the truth about our self-obsessed, hypocritical, and secretly narcissistic attitudes of entitlement and victimization put on full display – and recognized as the toxic waste they are. He wants our fatal attraction to pseudo-intellectual abstractions, to false-morality, justice, and fairness matrices, to over analyzing everything we see, and to forming half-baked self-righteous opinions based on a steady diet of the fruit of the tree of knowledge laid bare – and abandoned forever. He wants the tendency of our judgmental minds to jump to toxic conclusions based on perceived 'facts' that constitute the polar opposite of Divinely Revealed Truth to make us sicker than too much quail – so we will quit indulging it.

What Could Possibly Be The Source of that Dreadful Odor?

In phase one of the 'heat of the desert' narrative our critical tongues wagged to and fro like the tail of a dog greeting an old master. Our fleshly emotions, physical appetites, and pseudo-intelligent opinions concerning abstract concepts like 'morality', 'ethnic superiority', and 'social justice' were being exposed as the whiny, cynical, serpentine distractions they are. The process has not been pretty or pleasant. A lot of debris piles are forming around us all. Some may be looking around asking: *What ... is ... that ... smell?* The Holy One would say: "Don't you recognize it, Beloved? It is the stench of your own foul breath and putrid flesh!"

So ... are we *undone* yet? Are we ready to ask the Holy One to send a *seraf* with a burning coal from Heaven's altar to touch our unclean lips and make them useful again? Alas, the Holy One knows that we are not ready to pray that prayer – with any seriousness, at least - quite yet. Don't worry, though - over the next two parshot of Torah the Holy One plans to fix that – big time! Welcome to phase two of the 'heat of the desert proving ground narratives'.

What other things that are irreconcilably inconsistent with our calling and mission need to be brought to the surface here in this desert 'proving ground'? What stubborn pockets of fleshly and pseudo-intellectual folly are still hiding within us? What other aspects of our fallen nature have to be extracted and confined to the

toxic waste bin? What kind of assaying protocol does the Holy One have planned mind for us *this* week?

Gird up your loins, Dear One - it is the week of *Shelach Lecha*³. If you thought last week provided some tough tests, just wait until you find out about the challenges this week's season of testing in the wilderness holds!

This Land Is Our Land

We left Sinai as a great cloud of witnesses. After a few hiccups – and much-needed attitude adjustments – early on, we now find ourselves cutting through the desert like a well-oiled machine. We have traveled miles across the desert floor – and set up and broken down camp a whopping 18 times (see Numbers 33:16-36), without incident. We seem to have finally learned our lesson about negativity in general and negative speech in particular. Carrying tribal banners held high, and waving flags bearing each family's colors, for weeks we have been moving as one new man – a force to be reckoned with - straight toward *Eretz Yisrael*. Our first encounter with the place we have been hearing our ancestors laud and praise, laugh about, and pine for is just a few wadis and desert scapes ahead of us. As soon as we reach Kadesh Barnea, the hills on which Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov grazed their flocks and herds will begin to materialize on our horizon. It is springtime – and those hills should be green, covered with a carpet of flowers, and inviting. We can hardly wait until one of our number yells out the words we have longed all our lives to hear: *Yisrael Ho!*

Ah, *Eretz Yisrael* - how our hearts have longed for you! Your *terra firma* has been the rock on which the anchor of our faith has rested through all the trials and tribulations of life in the *Diaspora*. No matter what traumas we endured in our land of captivity, the knowledge that you were promised to us and our descendants forever by the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov was what kept us going. Through all the prejudice, through all the pogroms, through the ostracism and ghettoization, through the concentration camps, and through all the days of holocaust that made up the 'Egypt experience', the thought of returning to you kept a *song in our heart*, a *smile on our lips*, and an *ember of hope burning in our breast*. You are not just 'a' land. You are not even just 'the' land. You are OUR land! We are eternally and unbreakably connected with you. You are a part of our DNA. Your soil is in our blood. You are 'home'. You are the beautiful land bridge that the Creator of the Universe designed especially for us, and has called us to convert into the primary base of earthly operations for His Eternal Kingdom. And now, as our great cloud of witnesses, led by the Pillar of fire and Cloud,

³ The first word in the title phrase for this parsha is *shalach* - *shin, lamed, chet*. This is Strong's Hebrew word #7971, pronounced *shaw-lakh'*. The second word is *lecha* = *lamed, kaf sofit*.

approaches the oasis of Kadesh Barnea from the South, and you become visible to our natural eyes as well as our spiritual ones ... well, our relationship will be sealed forever – won't it?

When Dreams and Realities Collide

The Holy One sits on His Throne, completely calm, biding His time. He knows all things from the end to the beginning. Whatever men may think, or wish, or plan, or desire, or hope, He knows what is *actually going to happen* - and when, and how, and why it will happen. He knows that taking possession of the land of milk and honey will not be easy or simple for us. And He knows that our taking possession of the land is not about to happen any time soon. He knows we won't be able to just walk into Eretz Yisrael, announce: '*Honey, we're home – what's for supper?*', then kick back in our favorite chair sipping wine while the table is set. He knows *the beautiful dream of returning to Eretz Yisrael and the reality of possessing, cleansing, and stewarding it* are two separate things. He knows the land is indeed destined to be our land – but He also knows that is not going to happen – indeed *cannot* happen – just yet. The corruption of the land by the 'ites' is not yet reached its fullness. The Kena'an's ultimate spiritual *point of no return* has not yet been crossed.

Forty years will have to pass. Moshe, Aharon, and Miryam, and everyone else who ever bowed the knee to Pharaoh and ate bread at his table will have to die. A new generation – one that sees itself as having no choice or option but to enter into, possess, and steward the Land, whatever the cost – will have to arise. And so, the King calls Moshe into the Tent of Meeting, and instructs him: ***Shelach lecha anashim v'yaturu et-eretz Kena'an ... send out men and have them tour/scout/explore/reconnoiter the land of Kena'an. Numbers 13:2.*** The Holy One speaks this directive knowing full well that in doing so He is about to set in motion a chain of events that will culminate in the most famous episode of *espionage-gone-wrong* ever known to man. Moshe will indeed send out 12 men to scout/explore/reconnoiter the land the Holy One intends to establish as His Kingdom's base of operations. For 40 days – from mid-spring into to mid-summer - these twelve men will walk the height and depth of the land. They will collect samples of the produce they find growing in the vineyards and orchards. Somewhere along the way, however, for ten of these men, the *dream of Eretz Yisrael and their perspective of the 'reality' of what they sensed it was actually going to take to possess Eretz Yisrael* are going to collide. They will discover to their chagrin that during our sojourn in Egypt the land in which the patriarchs dwelt has been invaded, overrun, settled, and horribly corrupted by all kinds of 'ites'. Here, there, and everywhere they will see these warlike 'ites' - Amorites, Kena'anites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Cruel, bloodthirsty, flesh

obsessed peoples, one and all, these barbarians have carved up the land of milk and honey into provinces of perversion and strongholds of terror, each ruled by a different – but equally fierce - warlord. Each warlord is supported by a band of militant loyalists who rule their local population with an iron fist. At the heart of each of these territories stands a heavily fortified city – a mighty stronghold out of which the warlord and his henchmen operate.

Not one of the ‘ites’ the twelve encountered on the tour of the land proved to be friendly. Not one seemed to have any intention of leaving the land – much less expressed any interest in welcoming 2 to 3 million sons and daughters of Avraham. To a tribe and to a man these ‘ites’ were surly, irritable, armed, and dangerous. They were mafia-like cartels, ruled violently by vicious thugs. We thought Pharaoh, the taskmasters, and the Egyptian charioteers were cruel? They had nothing on these guys! And to top it all off, some parts of the land – especially the area around Hebron, where Avraham had chosen to live in his later years, and bury Sarah – were now inhabited by fearsome giants – descendants of Anak.

Dream – say hello to your corresponding *reality*’!

The Clash of Faith and Trust in God With Reason and Logic

Whenever dreams and reality collide, men have to make a choice as to which of the two forces they will allow to control their thoughts, their emotions, their speech, and their behavior. Will the God-inspired vision that gave birth to the dream in the first place prevail – or will the human-reasoning generated perception of feasibility that men quickly label ‘reality’ prevail?

For two of the spies - Y’hoshua and Kalev - it was a *no-brainer*. What, to them, did – or could - reason and logic have to do with the choice before them? It was for *Eretz Yisrael* that they were born. It was for *Eretz Yisrael* that they left Egypt. It was for *Eretz Yisrael* that they lived and breathed. To them, the dream of *Eretz Yisrael* – and the magnificent and magnanimous promise of the Holy One that gave birth to that dream – were the driving force that defined everything they were and motivated everything they did. When they came back from the 40-day tour of the land, therefore, they were smiling from ear to ear, beaming with delight, and leaping and dancing and praising the Holy One. More energized and excited than ever, they spoke first, urging the people to rise up and immediately follow the pillar of fire and cloud forward into full possession of the land the Holy One had promised.

To the other ten spies, however, the choice was not by any means a ‘no-brainer’. It was, in fact, definitely a *brainer*. Though they looked at the same things inside the

Land that Y'hoshua and Kalev looked at, their fallen brains kicked into operation instead of their uplifted faith, and they saw something vastly different. They imagined worst-case scenarios. They projected odds and feasibilities. They crunched cost numbers. They estimated casualties. They calculated probabilities of failure. They resorted to analyzing strategies – and figured on everything that could go wrong going wrong in the worst possible ways. And somewhere in the process of the paralysis of over-analysis they let the voice of human logic drown out the voice of the Holy One. It took over their faculties of thought, emotion, speech, and action. They shouted with great conviction: ‘the ‘ites’ are too strong for us.’ And simultaneously the voice of human reason drained their hearts of the last vestiges of faith, and whimpered: ‘we would be better off going back to Egypt and asking Pharaoh if he would let us be his slaves’.

The human brain, in its fallen state, is the ultimate fear-monger. If you listen to it, you will always let fear get the best of you - and turn you delusional. That is what happened at Kadesh-Barnea. The majority – ten of the twelve spies Moshe sent out – let their fallen minds lead them down the dark hallways of paranoid schizophrenia. They opened their mouths and out came a toxic river of negativity on steroids. They fear-mongered. They conspiracy-theoried. They levied accusations. They assigned blame. They spewed delusion after delusion of gloom, doom, disaster, and catastrophe. And what was worse is that they believed – indeed were convinced of every word they said. They forgot who – and WHOSE – they were. They focused only on the physical challenges of possessing Eretz Yisrael, ignoring totally the beautiful Divine promise of it.

Of course, the negativity of the ten played havoc on the rest of the people’s fleshly emotions. Fear once evoked quickly escalated to terror – and turned very, very ugly. The result was an emotional bloodbath, in the course of which the sweet stream of Divine revelation that has been flowing over us got drowned out by a flood of human-generated disinformation. Hence, by week’s end an entire generation of gloriously redeemed Souls found itself wandering in circles around - and ultimately dying off in - the dry, hot, middle-eastern desert that was supposed to be our launching pad.

Welcome, One and All ... to Yishma’el’s World!

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves however, perhaps it behooves us to stop and take a look around. We have not passed this way before. We have entered a *strange new world*. We are no longer in sight of Mount Sinai. We are no longer in the familiar surroundings of the *Desert of Sin*, where we have spent most of our time since we left Egypt. We have now entered a whole new level of ‘wilderness’. Watch your step! This place is strange and foreboding. And absolutely nothing that

one encounters here is ever quite as it seems. In this part of the wilderness there are *hidden dangers* and *trap doors* everywhere. Remember, each year at this time the Pillar of Fire and of Cloud leads us into the wilderness to test us regarding what we did – and did not – learn during our sweet sojourn at Sinai. Our Bibles call this stage of our choreographed journey the ‘*Wilderness of Paran*’. The concluding portion of last week’s parsha introduced us to this stage of the wilderness journey with the following words:

V'achar nas'u ha-am meChatzerot

And then the people left Chatzerot,

vayachanu b'midbar Paran

and they camped in the desert of Paran.

[Numbers 12:15-16]

This place called *Paran* is going to be our ‘new home’ for quite a while – a whopping 38-½ years as a matter of fact. So let’s try to get a little perspective on our new ‘*home away from home*’. *Paran* is first mentioned in Torah as the barren area between Be’er-Sheva and Egypt to which Hagar and Yish’mael settled after being cast out of Avraham’s camp. See Genesis 21:20-21: ***... the Holy One was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.***

Warning! Where we find ourselves prophetically as we begin this week’s studies is right smack dab in the middle of *Yish’mael’s world*⁴ - a realm where the ‘spirit of Yishma’el’ affects - and threatens to infect - anyone who enters that world. If the idea of entering such a world doesn’t cause your heart to beat a little faster, and make your palms begin to sweat yet, trust me, it will. Or at least it *should*. Because if you understand Yish’mael at all – you will understand that his spirit is a very dangerous spirit – and that *his world* sizes up to be a VERY dangerous place where one false move could very easily mean death. We who claim connection to the covenant the Holy One made with Avraham through Sarah’s son Yitzchak need to come to recognize – and be prepared to deal with - the *spirit of Yish’mael*. That spirit is still very much alive and well – and making its devastatingly destructive impact felt - in the 21st Century.

The Spirit of Yish’mael Lives!

But what exactly *is* the spirit of Yish’mael, you may ask. As Tevye said in Fiddler on the Roof, ‘*I’ll tell you!*’ Yish’mael’s spirit is *the attitude and approach toward life* that necessitated that Yish’mael be banished from Avraham’s household. Let’s

⁴ Yish’mael himself is of course by this time long since deceased – having lived only 137 years. But though Yish’mael himself is dead, his descendants are still living, and as we shall see, his ‘spirit’ remains the dominant worldview in Paran where he lived most of his life and died.

refresh our collective memories on that subject, shall we? Do you remember when Yish'mael and Yitzchak were growing up together in Avraham's household? When Yitzchak was weaned, Avraham held a celebration. Here is how Torah describes what happened:

*And Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned.
And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, **scoffing**.
Therefore she said to Avraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son;
for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son"*

Yish'mael has a *scoffing* spirit. It is a spirit that neither recognizes nor values, but instead speaks evil of, that which is set apart to the Holy One. Yish'mael's spirit is unhappy, ungrateful, irreverent, and overflowing with aggression. Why do I say this? Remember back when Hagar was pregnant with Yish'mael? As soon as she realized she was fruitful where Sarah was not Hagar assumed an attitude of entitlement earning Sarah's chastisement. Unwilling to accept discipline, despite being pregnant Hagar elected foolishly to run away into the desert and headed toward the land she truly valued – the land of Egypt. Before she could get to Egypt however, the Angel of the Holy One appeared to Hagar, counseled her to return to Avraham's camp and submit to Sarah, and prophesied to her about the child in her womb. The angel described the son she would bear, who was destined to be named Yish'mael, prophetically as follows:

V'hu yihyeh pereh adam
*He shall be a wild donkey of a man*⁵;
yado vakol v'yad kol bo
His hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him"
[Genesis 16:12]

That prophecy, of course, came true. Yish'mael took on all the characteristics his mother Hagar had exhibited after she got pregnant and none of the characteristics of his father Avraham. He adopted his mother's attitude of angry, self-righteous insubordination. He embraced his mother's attitude of entitlement. He took upon himself his mother's concept of victimization. And worst of all, he picked up and carried his mother's idea that Kena'an was not his home, that Avraham's chosen seed was an inferior people, and that the Holy One was not his God.

Our appointed time in Yish'mael's 'wild donkey of a man' world has come. We got a foretaste of how negatively charged the atmosphere of this area of testing is last week. But however challenging you found our introduction to this unforgiving patch of desert last week, you need to prepare yourself for a greater challenge. Yish'mael's world it is about to get even more treacherous. We will find not just a

⁵ *Pereh* is a wild donkey [cf. Isaiah 32:14, Hosea 8:9, Job 6:5, 11:12, 24:5] and hence this prophecy is sometimes translated 'a wild donkey of a man' [Targum Yonatan; Ramban].

few malcontents but the majority of our camp *awash in Yish'mael's spirit*. If we do not carefully guard our hearts and souls, we will soon find ourselves *exhibiting Yish'mael's traits* – the very ones that required that he be banished from his father's presence. We will - to our horror - see ourselves start acting like 'wild donkeys' who will buck and kick against, and scoff and mock and 'bray' *l'shon ha-ra* concerning everything the Holy One has set apart as holy. We will hear *l'shon ha ra* coming from our mouths *minimizing the Divine Bridegroom's covenant, angrily attacking His faithful remnant, and totally rejecting His land of promise in favor of Egypt – or the nearest desert.*

The Fateful Life-Choices Represented by Yish'mael's World

Consider what happened when Yish'mael and Hagar were 'cast out' of Avraham's household. All of Kena'an was before them. Where did they go? Did they at least stay in the beautiful land the Holy One had promised to Avraham and his descendants forever? No – they eschewed the holy land altogether - and chose instead for their place of residence a desert *outside the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael* – the barren wilderness called *Paran*. Yish'mael did not value the land of *Eretz Yisrael* one whit. He disdained it totally in favor of 'the badlands' of *Paran*.

Consider also who Yish'mael took as a wife once he left the household of faith. Did he seek out someone participating in the covenant the Holy One made with His father, into which he had been circumcised? No. He instead took for his wife an *Egyptian*, like his mother. Given a choice, he chose to bring into his home *the ways and culture of Egypt* instead of the ways and covenant of the Holy One.

The seven primary characteristics which are telltale signs of the presence of the 'spirit of Yish'mael at work – whether in us or in others - are therefore:

1. *A cynical, mocking spirit;*
2. *An untamable, irreverent, wild donkey-like attitude;*
3. *An argumentative, combative approach toward other people;*
4. *A tendency to devalue the land of Eretz Yisrael, and bind their hearts to another land;*
5. *A tendency to choose foreign ways over the ways of the Holy One and the covenant which the Holy One made with Avraham;*
6. *An attitude of special entitlement,*
7. *Blaming the faithful remnant of the Avrahamic covenant for all problems.*

Tread softly now, Dear Reader! This is the place – and this is the season of the year – when the spirit of Yish'mael runs rampant through the Camp of the Redeemed. It happens every year at this season. Something attention grabbing occurs – either in the Camp or in the World at large - and suddenly everybody has an attitude, an opinion, an offense, and an unsightly chip on their shoulder. It is so

easy to get caught up in the drama of this season. But we have come to the Kingdom at such a time as this for a far more important purpose. It is so easy to take offense, to take sides, to take a flying leap into the fray of meaningless argument - and thereby to swallow the wily enemy's lure hook, line, and sinker. It feels so right - but it is just a trap. The great calling of the sons and daughters of the Most High is not to immerse ourselves in the petty arguments, offenses, controversies and conflicts of the day; it is to *transcend* them. It is so easy to forfeit the calling of the Holy One upon our lives and slip into outrage, cynicism, sarcasm, and negativity - right back into the cesspool of irrelevance out of which He called us in the first place. But irrelevant and offended is not who the Bridegroom-King redeemed us to be. We are called to live lives, speak words, and engage in behaviors that release atmosphere shifting Light and Salt - not become just another tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to *make sure that while living in Yish'mael's world you do not start thinking, talking, and acting like Yish'mael*. Alas, some of us – indeed most of us - will. Vast numbers of redeemed souls will fall into the trap and turn into *Paranas* – a toxic species I call the *piranhas of the sand*. But what is that to you? You do not be one of them!

Whose Spirit is at Work In You?

Alas, over the next few weeks in *Yish'mael's world* many of our ancestors are going to fail the test of the Wilderness of Paran. Multitudes of them will start thinking, talking and acting much more like Yish'mael – the son cast out - than like the chosen sons they are. They are in great numbers going to become *scoffers* and *mockers*, *whiners* and *blame-shifters*, *biting the Hand that feeds them* and *blaming the faithful remnant of the Avrahamic Covenant – and ultimately the Divine Bridegroom of Heaven Himself - for all their problems*. They are going to eschew the land of promise – the land of milk and honey the Holy One swore to give as an inheritance to them and to their descendants forever – in favor of a *dry, dusty desert* and a *fatalistic, death-obsessed Egyptian way of looking at everything*. Each time these ancestors speak it will start sounding more and more like a wild donkey's 'eeee-awww', 'eeee-awww'. Whose spirit do you think is at work in them? And what is more important, whose spirit do you think is at work in you?

Let the Covenant-Faithful Remnant of Encouragers and Faithful Witnesses Arise!

Just as our forefathers were at Kadesh-Barnea, we today find ourselves entering a season of agitation, incitement, accusation, and fear-mongering. This season is however just a test. Stay *calm*. Stay *focused*. Stay *faithful to the Covenant* and yielded to the Heart of the God of the Covenant. Honor and value what *HE* honors

and values. Press forward in what you are called to do. Keep the main thing the main thing. Do not let raw emotion or your fallible, imperfectly informed sense of 'right and wrong' distract you or get you into fruitless arguments and controversies. Be true and faithful witnesses of His Goodness, His Greatness, and His Promises!

After all, the world has more than enough conniving agitators, angry accusers, opinionated scoffers, sarcastic naysayers, and self-righteous blame-placers. There is no point adding your voice to any of theirs. What the world needs instead – especially in these critical days - is *level headed, kind spirited, visionary encouragers*. What the world needs is *faithful witnesses who will stand unshaken by the rhetoric of hate and blame and accusation and victimization*. What the world needs is humble, thankful lovers of God who will *calmly, honestly, and faithfully testify of that which is wholesome and good and wise*.

Be an *encourager* – *this week, and always!* Look for someone in your sphere of influence who is discouraged and speak a word of hope, of life, of faith, and of peace into their situation. Bless each member of your family, releasing them from restrictions and limitations inconsistent with their destiny. Bless those who hate you and persecute you, releasing them from the restrictions and limitations within them that cause them to hate, fear, and misunderstand you. And then turn your face to Heaven and bless the Creator Who gives you life, health, and the breath to speak these blessings. Be the faithful witness for the Holy One that you are created, redeemed, and commissioned to be. Be a bright and shining lamp in someone's darkness.

In the season that is about to unfold before our eyes the world is going to desperately need *encouragers*, not agitators, accusers, scoffers, naysayers and blame-placers. So ... *let the encouragers and faithful witnesses arise!*

Introduction to the Opposite of Encouragers and Faithful Witnesses; Introduction to the World of Spies – And the Mind Games They Play

The Holy One knows we need to learn some hard lessons here in Yish'mael's world. And He has allowed us to be subject to just enough heat – and sensual deprivation – to bring out the worst in us. He is not tempting us; but He is testing us. The tests of this season always seem to center around *strategic diversion*. Our Bridegroom-King knows we do not yet understand that all it takes is just a little disinformation, propaganda, and/or emotionally charged rhetoric to divert most redeemed people's attention away from - and dilute their enthusiasm for - the great mission to which we are called. And so, He introduces us to the world of spies – and the mind games they play. The spies among us will traffic in half-truths. Their first target will be our vanity. They will play on our lustful appetite for pseudo-

intelligence. They will say whatever it takes to confuse, distress, or outrage us. They will spread whatever rumors it takes to scare us. They will pull out every stop to depress us. They will exhaust every trick in the book to get us to indulge outrage. They will incite some of us to violence – and others to despair. Highly skilled at manipulating attitudes, emotions, moods, and opinions, they will exploit the weakness of our fallen minds by bombarding them with cynicism, sarcasm, rhetoric, demagoguery, fear, and accusation. Their goals are dissension and despair.

The focus of the negativity bombardment this week is going to turn from attacks on our spiritual identity as the *Sh'ma*-People of the Bridegroom-King to *attacks on our connection with the special, supernaturally-blessed plot of physical land the Holy One promised to give us as a beachhead from which to launch Kingdom operations*. Understand, therefore, that every time *the praisers and encouragers* among us fall silent this week, agents of sedition and attitudes of dissatisfaction will start popping up in our ranks. Every time the voices of hope and passion for the Bridegroom-King in our camp rest, the agents of sedition will take the opportunity to sow tares – in the form of seeds of dissatisfaction, dissension, cynicism, sarcasm, and fear – everywhere they can.

What does this mean to you? It means that someone is probably going to come into your world this week wearing a *friendly smile* and sporting a *knowing look* – and spreading as much disinformation and misinformation as you will tolerate. It will all sound well-reasoned. It will all sound well researched. It will even sound well meaning. It will sound very, very logical. Human-generated disinformation and serpent-generated disinformation always shares those characteristics. After all, what would be the point of testing us with something that is blatantly false or obviously spurious? So be very attentive this week. Stay on your toes. If you will only stay alert, attentive, and in tune with the Holy One you will find that the disinformation spreaders will strike a discordant note in your spirit. You will discern that their words will incite a noticeable twinge of fear in your heart. You will notice that their logic will be accompanied by a palpable mist of confusion that starts to attack your mind. Your pulse will race. You will feel the onset of emotions like anger and outrage. You will find yourself taking up offenses, and thinking critical and judgmental thoughts. These are not your portion – these are just the telltale signs of that there are spies in your midst. If you will but *sh'ma*, you will soon recognize that what you are hearing carries neither the tone or the message, much less the sweet passion, of the Bridegroom-King's Voice – but carries instead the tone and the message, and foul stench, of the whispers of the serpent.

Just remember this – you can always recognize the serpent’s voice by [a] its *focus on sounding intelligent*, [b] its *negative content*, and [c] its *accusatory tone*. Remember the Garden of Eden? Remember how the serpent approached Chava and whispered - as if he had researched it all out and knew what he was talking about - ‘*Did God truly say?*’, ‘*You will not surely die?*’, and ‘*in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*’

Remember the goodness and power of our King. Remember His Promises. Remember your calling. Our calling is not to either denounce or embrace the culture in which this espionage is taking place. Our assignment is instead to infiltrate it quietly, then systematically, and strategically set in motion the instrumentalities of its demise. Don’t buy into the disinformation. Reject the negativity. Do not entertain either the cynicism or the accusation. Face and confront the fear. Always filter absolutely everything you hear or read through the pure lens of Torah-based, Messiah-focused revelation. We have a critical mission to fulfill on the earth - and it is not in the least bit negative – or frightening - in its valence. We are highly trained *special ops* personnel on assignment. We are secret soldiers of a Kingdom unknown - and definitely unwanted - in this world. Welcome to the real "*Mission: Impossible.*"⁶ Play the pre-recorded message. Accept the assignment. Strike the match. Activate. But remember this - *only he who does it all for love, in shalom, and with abundant joy, will succeed in this mission.*

The Gift That – if Accepted – Will Change the Recipient – and the Course of Human History - Forever

Our parsha actually begins with a God-encounter. Before the test is administered, the Holy One comes and hands out the *answer sheet*. Before we get the sickness, He provides us the cure. What is the subject matter of this God-encounter? The sweet Voice of the Holy One breaks into the world of men and declares in no uncertain terms that he is GIVING the land of Kena’an TO THE DESCENDANTS OF YISRAEL. Giving. The Land. To the Descendants of Yisrael. Got it? Well, at least ‘giving’ the Land is what our English Bibles say He’s doing. In Hebrew the operative verb is *noten*⁷ [*nun, tav, nun sofit*]. The first usage of this verb is found in Genesis 1:17, where it is used to describe what the luminaries of the Heavens which were created on the 4th Day of Creation Week were designed to do in relation to the earth. ***Vayiten otam Elohim ... l’ha-ir*** – they are to ‘give’ light on the

⁶ An American television series [CBS, 1966-1973; ABC 1988-1990], *Mission: Impossible* chronicled the missions of an imaginary team known as the *Impossible Missions Force*. At the beginning of each episode the leader of the force received his instructions on a recording that then self-destructed. A match was then struck, and the immediately recognizable theme composed by Lalo Shafirin began to play.

⁷ The *pa’al* form of this verb is *natan*, which is Strong’s Hebrew word #5414.

earth. Think for a moment, however, about how the luminaries ‘give’ light to the earth. They do not ‘give’ light one time and consider the deal done. They instead *engage in a process of transmission and delivery – an on-going process that continues in a Divinely ordained sequence of ebbs and flows*. All of the things our English Bibles call ‘gifts’ of the Holy One are like that. They are not one-time transferences. Unlike what we in the English world think of as gifts, they do not even suggest a change of ownership. That which the Holy One ‘gives’ always calls for - and defines, and empowers – a specific response from the recipient. Everything the Holy One ‘gives’ initiates *a covenant-furthering process*. The result of every ‘gift’ of the Holy One is the establishment a permanent partnership between [a] the Holy One, [b] the recipient of the ‘Gift’, and [c] the subject matter of the ‘Gift’. None of the Bridegroom-King’s gifts are ‘*once and done*’. All His gifts are truly ‘*gifts that keep on giving*’.

As we start *Shelach Lecha*, therefore, what the Holy One is in the *process of establishing a long-term three-way relationship between Himself, the descendants of Yisrael, and the land of Kena’an*. Both the manifestation of the gift and the extent of enjoyment of this ‘gift’ of the land will ebb and flow with time. At strategic times the land will feel and look like the exclusive possession of the descendants of Yisrael. At other times the relationship between the people and the land will appear much less obvious and physical. But whatever the appearances, that relationship the Holy One is establishing will be permanent and eternal. And from henceforth and forever we can be fully confident in two things: [a] that the Holy One will be a silent partner in the relationship between the descendants of Yisrael and the land, and [b] that our degree of enjoyment of and sense of connection with the land by the descendants of Yisrael will be directly proportional to [1] our degree of enjoyment of the Holy One’s Presence and [2] our level of passion for and delight in His Ways.

***Who Are the Intended Recipients –
and Who Are the Intended Beneficiaries – of the ‘Gift’?***

The Divine Bridegroom does not get very specific at all in His opening statement to Moshe in this parsha regarding to which members of the Community of Redeemed Souls encamped at Kadesh-Barnea the precious gift of the land of Kena’an is being given. That is because while He is offering the Land of the Patriarchs and of destiny to every member of the generation which He has delivered gloriously from Egyptian bondage, He knows in advance that the vast majority of those who came of age in Egypt will have neither vision nor stomach for the heritage of the Patriarchs, and will flatly refuse His offer.

He knows that by far most of those who spent adult years engrossed in the culture

and influenced by the mindset of Egypt have the mentality not of sons and daughters of the King of Heaven, but of freed slaves. He knows such people simply cannot see the value of, or even consider making the sacrifice necessary for, pushing beyond the thin veil of freedom to the deeper chambers of purpose, destiny and mission. He knows that by and large, despite experiencing the night of deliverance, the miracle of the Sea, and the glorious Theophany of Sinai, the vast majority of souls who put blood on their doorposts, carried babies through the Sea of Reeds, and sat under the Chuppah of Heaven at Sinai still have *no concept whatever of inheritance*.

Ah, but here is a spiritual truth the Holy One knows full well, even if we do not: What one generation of Redeemed Souls cannot because of the blinding of their wounded hearts or the stubbornness of their closed minds see clearly enough to value - and therefore refuses to claim - the generation of Redeemed Souls which follows will long for, treasure, and risk everything to obtain.

Note that the Holy One did not say that He was ‘giving’ the land of Kena’an to the group of former slaves He had redeemed from bondage in Egypt. Note that the Holy One did not say at this critical juncture – at this moment pregnant with destiny-shaping choices - that He was giving the land of Kena’an to the descendants of *Avraham*. He also did not, of course, say that He was giving the land to the descendants of *Yitzchak*. He did not even say that He was giving the land to the descendants of *Ya’akov*.

What the Divine Bridegroom of Heaven said at this critical moment was very interesting. He said He was giving the land of Kena’an to the descendants of *YISRAEL*. *Who exactly is that?* Is it possible that a person can be redeemed from bondage by the Holy One and not be a descendant of Yisrael? Is it possible a person can be a physical descendant of *Avraham*, of *Yitzchak*, and of *Ya’akov* and not be a descendant of Yisrael? Oh yes, Beloved, it is very possible. You see in every generation there are many, many descendants of Ya’akov. But few and far between are *descendants of Yisrael* – i.e. true heirs of the one *Who wrestled with the unseen warriors of the spiritual realm*, and though mortally wounded in the course of the struggle *refused to let go until the blessing of the Holy One was his*. It is the latter, true heirs of Yisrael, and only such persons, who value appropriately and are willing to face at any cost whatever obstacles must be faced and overcome whatever challenges must be overcome in order to claim and take possession of the precious gifts the Holy One has stored up for His Beloved.

What Exactly is Being ‘Given’?

The Holy One describes the subject matter of the ‘gift’ He is in the process of establishing as *eretz Kena’an* - i.e. *Kena’an’s land*. So ... *who was Kena’an*, and

where exactly was his land? Kena'an was the youngest of the four sons of Cham. Genesis 10:19 tells us what the land of Kena'an consisted of: ***And the border of the Kena'anim was from Tzidon as you go toward Gerar, as far as Gaza; then as you go toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.*** Sidon is about 150 miles North of Gaza. On the West therefore we know that the land that was the subject of the 'gift' the Holy One was establishing for B'nei Yisrael followed the coastline of the Mediterranean for approximately 150 miles.

The Southern boundary of the land ran from Sidon Eastward to what is now the Dead Sea. The eastern boundary of the land of entrustment is Jordan Rift Valley – but the Southeastern and Northeastern corners of the entrustment are not described.

A Look Ahead –

What Else Does Parsha Shelach Lecha Hold in Store for Us?

This will be a full and very exciting week. The parsha will open with the famous account of *chet ha-meraglim* [the sin of the “spies]. We will try to decide why spies were sent in the first place, who they were, and what exactly they were sent to do. Then we will examine what the “spies” did, and what they said, and how it all went terribly wrong. Next, we will eavesdrop on the passionate conversations between Moshe and the Holy One in the aftermath of *chet ha-meraglim*. If we are paying attention, we will learn some things we did not know about the Holy One's character - and about how he converses with those who would appear before Him as “intercessors”. We will then go “back to basics”, focusing again on the pathways to intimacy with the Holy One. Through the study of “Relationship with the Holy One 101” [a refresher course of sorts on what we learned in Leviticus 1-5] we will hopefully learn how to avoid the repetition of the mistake that caused our ancestors to die in the desert rather than enter into and possess the land of promise. Next we will discuss what we learn from the *chet ha-meraglim* incident regarding the Holy One's attitude toward sin, and how to approach Him in light of that attitude. We will also address the case of a man who, in open rebellion, intentionally desecrates the Holy One's Shabbat [Sabbath]. And finally we will then conclude our study with examination of the mitzvah of “fringes” – the tassels Torah tells us we are wear ‘on the corners of your garments’ to keep us ever aware of the *mitzvot* of the Holy One, according to which are to continually re-define our thoughts, our speech, our relationships, and, indeed, all aspects of our lives.

Do You Have A Vision For What the Holy One Is Seeking to Accomplish – in Your Life, Family, and World - in This Season?

Do you sense the *destiny-shaping implications* of the prophetic season in which you presently find yourself? Do you have a vision for what lies on the horizon of your life? Do you have a revelation of what new spheres of influence the Holy

One longs to open for you - and what He wants you to introduce into those spheres of influence? Do you have any idea what new kinds and depths of relationships the Holy One has prepared for you - and what the impact of those relationship will be for the world? Do you have any inkling of what sorts of obstacles and challenges you will face in the upcoming season – or what it is going to take, and cost, for you to overcome and transcend those obstacles and challenges?

Are you truly a *descendant of Yisrael* with an inheritance you cannot wait to explore and claim in the Bridal Chamber of the Great King – or are you content to be just a *freed slave with a glorious testimony*? Business as usual is no longer an option. The Bridegroom-King is calling. The time has come to *boldly advance in response to the Bridegroom-King's call* – or to tuck your tail between your legs and retreat. So, which will it be? This is, you see, our first critical *season of hard choices*. There will be lots of *people spouting opinions in this season*. There will be *propaganda*. There will be hidden *agendas*. There will be *honest differences of opinion*, and there will be *blatant demagoguery*. There will be clashes of both *ideologies and personalities*. There will be *reports all over the map*. There will be *gnashing of teeth by the fear-mongerers among us* and irresponsible *saber rattling by the hawkish ones among us*. It will be easy to lose the Voice of the Bridegroom-King in the din of it all. But Heaven help us if we *sh'ma* the voice of another at such a time as this!

The Haftarah for the Week of Shelach Lecha

Joshua 2:1-24

We will be supplementing our reading from *Shelach Lecha* with readings from the 2nd chapter of Sefer *Y'hoshua* [the book of Joshua]. In this traditional haftarah we will see another set of *meraglim* [spies] sent out – this time by Y'hoshua. As the Redeemed Community was finally preparing to cross the Yarden into Eretz Yisrael and take possession of the Land in which Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov had sojourned, the first obstacle before them was the fortified city of Yericho. Y'hoshua sent a two-man 'special force' into the land in general and into that city in particular to 'spy out' its defenses, and determine just what the Redeemed Community would be 'up against'. Unbeknownst to Y'hoshua or the 'special forces' team that he sent out, the Holy One had a divine appointment prepared for them – with a gentile woman named *Rachav* [Rahab]. Some say Rachav was an innkeeper. Others call her a prostitute. But whatever her means of livelihood she was destined to play a very important part in the Great Story of Redemption. Through accepting the role the Holy One ordained role for her to play, and risking everything for it, she and her family will become the firstfruits of all the households of the *goyim* to experience engrafting into the Redeemed Community.

The Apostolic Message for the Week

Our message from the ‘apostolic writings’ is taken from *Sefer Ivritim* [i.e. the book of Hebrews]. The writer of this *sefer*, who was clearly was of Hebrew descent, is expounding for us upon the experiences our ancestors had *b’midbar* [in the desert]. One of the things of which this writer deems it important to remind us is the decree the Holy One issued in the aftermath of the *chet ha-meraglim* [sin of the spies].

The writer will lay before us two basic options and approaches to life: we can choose to ‘harden our hearts’ as our ancestors did in the wilderness OR we can choose to press forward and enter the ‘rest’⁸ of the Holy One. Each of us must make the choice: *The Holy Spirit says today, if you sh’ma His Voice: Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion – in the day of trial in the Wilderness; when your fathers tested Me, and tried Me, and saw My Works 40 years.* Hebrews 3:7-9.

We can choose to live by *revelation* - i.e. the Torah as taught us by Moshe and modeled for us by Yeshua - OR we can walk according to *the Serpent-speak of the self-appointed experts* – religious, social, and political – of our day. If we choose the former we are true descendants of Yisrael. If we choose the latter we will become the latest casualties in the war raged by the spirit of Yish’mael against all that is holy and good. We are, you see, deeply immersed in Yish’mael’s world - and being influenced powerfully by his spirit - even here, even now. Now is *the moment of destiny-shaping decision*.

May you always live by revelation, and base your decisions on the Torah of the Holy One, Not what your eyes and ears tell you is good, or what men – even leaders – tell you is right.

The Rabbi’s son

Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week

The 8th Petition – Mish’pat [Redemption-Focused Justice]

Ha-Shivah Shof’teinu k’varishonah

Return judges like You gave us in years past

v’yoetzeinu k’vatechilah

and counselors as You provided in our best days

v’haser mimeinu yagon v’anochah

remove from us our sighing and our sorrow

u’m’loch aleinu atah Adonai l’vadechah

come and reign over us; be our only ruler

⁸ Hebrew *m’nuchah*, *mem*, *nun*, *vav*, *chet*, *hey*, Strong’s Hebrew word #4495, pronounced *men-oo-khaw’*.

b'chesed uv'rachamim v'tzadikeinu b'mishpat
rule us in covenant love and in compassion and rule us with righteous judgment

Baruch Atah Adonai Melech ahev tzedakah u'mishpat
Blessed are You, O Holy One, King Who loves righteousness and justice