

DID THE SPIES DESERVE WHAT THEY GOT?

Shelach Lecha, June 20, 2020

Rabbi Jonathan Aaron

TALMUD SOTA 35a

The verses continue: **“But the men that went up with him said: We are not able to go up against the people; as they are stronger than us”** (Numbers 13:31). **Rabbi Ḥanina bar Pappa says: The spies said a serious statement at that moment.** When they said: **“They are stronger,” do not read** the phrase as: Stronger **than us** [*mimmennu*], but **rather** read it as: Stronger **than Him** [*mimmennu*], meaning that **even the Homeowner, God, is unable to remove His belongings from there, as it were.** The spies were speaking heresy and claiming that the Canaanites were stronger than God.

Why did the spies praise the land and then slander it? **Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Meir, Any slander that does not begin with a truthful statement ultimately does not stand up in the end,** i.e., it is not accepted by others.

The spies said: **“And we were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so were we in their eyes”** (Numbers 13:33). **Rav Mesharshiyya says: The spies were liars. Granted,** to say: **“We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes,” is well,** but to say: **“And so were we in their eyes,” from where could they have known** this?

They asked themselves: “Why is God treating us like royalty when we are not deserving of such treatment?” Because of their sense of unworthiness the Jewish people could not have absolute trust in God.
Chafetz Chayyim

We see that the sin of the golden calf was forgiven, while that of the spies was not forgiven. Why was this so, when in both cases the people regretted their actions and repented? In regard to the calf, we are told (Ex. 33:4), “The people heard this bad tidings and mourned,” while in regard to the spies it states, “the people mourned greatly.” The answer is that the main element in repentance is that a person should realize that even though he is a frail mortal who cannot possibly undo the damage caused by his sin, he now wishes to serve God without any further sin. That was the level the Israelites attained after the sin of the golden calf, because that was their first sin. At that time, they did not even know that repentance helps to undo the wrong caused by a sin. Therefore the Torah does not mention any repentance in regard to the golden calf, but merely that the people who mourned what they had done. Seeing this, God forgave their sin. However, in the case of the spies, they already knew that repentance has the power to forgive sin, and their repentance was therefore not complete; they repented with the idea at the back of their minds that they would be forgiven. The Torah therefore tells us here, “the people mourned greatly” – they acted the same way they had acted the first time. That was why their repentance did not help.
Simcha Bunim of Pshischa

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Close analysis of Scriptures shows that the sin of the spies was two-fold: *1. Before reporting to Moses, word had been deliberately leaked to the people, instigating them to rebel and against Moses and against conquering the land, and thus also against G-d. 2. After reporting to Moses, they instigated open rebellion against conquering the land.*

Intelligence workers and spies must give their commanders an accurate account of what they saw, without doctoring or enhancing their report. But they are also obliged not to leak intelligence information to unauthorized persons. Leaking information (especially on sensitive matters such as the strength of the enemy or new armaments at the enemy's disposal) to the people or to lower ranks of the army can dishearten fighters and serve as a psychological weapon helping the enemy. For the people do not know the operational plans, or the weapons and forces at the disposal of the supreme command, or the techniques and tactics that will be used against the enemy in the light of the intelligence information received.

Of course one cannot expect the supreme command to tell the people the plan of attack, battle tactics, and surprise maneuvers that have been planned in order to capture the objective; for doing so would aid the enemy insofar as these are precisely the things that enemy intelligence wishes to know. When the spies sent by Moses returned from their mission, they did not come directly to Moses and report what they saw; rather, first they leaked their report to the people (13:26): They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land. Twice the Torah emphasizes that all the people heard the sobering report on the Anakites, the Amalekites (whom the people already knew from Joshua's battle against Amalek) and the heavily fortified cities. The people became frightened and began to grumble and have doubts whether they were truly up to the task of conquering the land.

Shmuel Reichman, Times of Israel Blog, 2019

The spies' physical sight was perfect; what they lacked was spiritual sight. They physically saw giants burying their dead. They, however, *interpreted* this to mean that the land kills its people and "consumes its inhabitants." In reality, as the Midrash explains, Hashem performed a miracle to aid the spies in their mission. God killed off the leaders of the giants in each city so that the dwellers would be distracted, ensuring that the spies would not be discovered. The death of the giants was the surface fact, the spies' fault lay in the meaning they projected onto it. Similarly, the spies reported to the Israelites that when they came across the giants "we were like grasshoppers in *our* eyes" (Numbers 13:33). They projected their fear and lack of faith onto the giants. In *their own eyes*, the giants viewed them as grasshoppers. They were no longer transmitting an account of objective reality, rather, they were depicting and projecting their own spiritual and existential insecurities onto their experiences. This was their two-fold mistake. They not only misunderstood their physical experiences, but then projected their misunderstanding onto the report they brought back to the Israelites.

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In his book *The Courage to Create* (1975), Rollo May writes, “We are called upon to do something new, to confront a no-man’s-land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths and from which no one has returned to guide us. This is what existentialists call the anxiety of nothingness...To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and which few people realize.” He asserts that “if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself. Also you will have betrayed our community in failing to make your contribution to the whole.”

This then is the sin of the scouts: their failure to contribute to their community because of their negative attitude and narrow perspective. They seemingly lack the courage to leap into the unknown and confront “no-man’s-land,”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law, and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise. All these, in Judaism, become ways of bringing the Shechinah into the shared spaces of our collective life.

The spies did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilisation and its discontents. This was the mistake of deeply religious men – but it was a mistake.

Clearly this is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of the time-out-of-time and place-out-of-place that was the experience of the wilderness. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.