

Shelah: The Real Mission of the Scouts
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 29, 2024 23 Sivan 5784

Moses dispatches the scouts. The scouts tour the land and return after 40 days bearing samples of its fruit: grapes, figs, pomegranates. Then:

<p>וַיָּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶל כָּל עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל מִדְבַּר פָּאֶרָן קִדְשָׁה וַיָּשִׁיבוּ אֲתָם דְּבַר וְאֵת כָּל הַעֲדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת פְּרִי הָאָרֶץ (13:26)</p>	<p><i>They went and came before Moses, before Aaron, and before the entire community of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they returned word to them and to the entire community, and let them see the fruit of the land. (13:26)</i></p>
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Comment: Imagine the group of twelve scouts making their way to Moses, with their fruit.¹ Surely, their reappearance before the camp would have elicited excitement and curiosity. The text continues (13:27):



<p>וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ</p>	<p><i>Now they recounted to him.</i></p>
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Was this in private? Out of earshot? Or was this a public spectacle like a press conference, with people overhearing what was being said? 18th century Moroccan commentator Hayyim Ibn Attar (Or Hahayyim) says that it was a hybrid moment:

<p>דְּקָדָק לֹמַר "לוֹ", The text <i>is very specific in saying</i>, that they spoke to "<i>him</i>." i.e. Moses. Why did the text specify "<i>him</i>"? שֶׁהָיוּ מִיְחָדִים הַדְּבָר בִּיחֻד אֵלָיו, אֲבָל... This means that <i>they spoke to him directly in a single group</i> as they were standing before him. But... הַמֵּאֲמָר לֹא הָיָה לְמֹשֶׁה לְבַד <i>this communication was not to Moses alone</i> אֲלָא לְכָל הָעֲדָה הַשּׁוֹמְעִים... <i>rather it was in front of the entire community who was listening in...</i></p>	<p><i>however, are the people that are settled in the land are powerful the cities are fortified, exceedingly large, and also, the descendants of Anak did we see there! (13:28)</i></p>
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It was a private conversation, but everyone was listening in! As we watch this play out, we wonder: how are the people reacting? The scouts show off the fruit (13:27) and then they shift their tone abruptly:

<p>אָפֶס כִּי עַז הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב בָּאָרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלַת מְאֹד וְגַם יְלִדֵי הָעֵנָק רָאינוּ שָׁם.</p>	<p><i>however, are the people that are settled in the land are powerful the cities are fortified, exceedingly large, and also, the descendants of Anak did we see there! (13:28)</i></p>
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¹ The logo of Israel's Ministry of Tourism is nice but not helpful as commentary. In order for this text to make sense, either they were really big grapes, or this was a cluster of clusters. See photo.

² We call this story, the **Story of the Spies**, (*meraglim*) but nowhere in the story does the word *meragel* occur. We conflate it with the story in Joshua 2, and the story of Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt for food. When the

And it just gets worse from then on. Why didn't Moses preempt this? Why didn't he pull the scouts into a private "executive" session and get a preliminary report from them before going public? Does the CIA go public with important intelligence assessments, before going to the President? Does the Mossad deliver intelligence to the press before going to the Prime Minister? We could criticize Moses about the way he managed this event, but the criticism would be based on a faulty premise: that the mission of the scouts was a spying mission. On the contrary. **It was not to "spy" out the land, but to "scout" the land.** The mission was to "look at it" and take it in.



Really, to "marvel" at it, and to assess it in terms of *the people living there, whether they were strong or weak, whether they were few or populous. Whether it was good or bad, whether the cities were encampments or fortified. Whether it was "fat" or "skinny" and whether it was forested or bare* (13:18-20). The scouts were set up to deliver a positive report, otherwise, why would they be sent in the first place? The people who were chosen were leaders of their tribes. **That means that they were political representatives, able to withstand the rigors of going on a long trek, to be sure. But they were not chosen because they were good spies.** Despite how the later tradition frames this story, they were not "spies".² Rather they were leaders; political representatives. They have a political purpose: to prepare the people, build their morale, muster their courage and excitement, for the project of conquest and settlement. They are supposed to be the ones who will inspire them in the great task ahead: the realization of the promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These are not the venerable tribal princes who present wagons, vessels and sacrificial animals to the sanctuary. These are the new, vigorous leaders! Israel 2.0! The Next Generation! The ones who will harness the spiritual energy of the people and lead them in the realization of God's covenant. Only in the land will they be able to fulfill God's laws and become **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation** in the way that God intended. Only in the land will they, as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, enable *the families of the earth to be blessed through them*. This was not a reconnaissance mission to create a battle plan. It was not a spy mission for strategic purposes. It was a political mission to build on an



brothers appear before Joseph, who they don't recognize, he accuses them of being spies (Gen. 32:9):

<p>וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֻמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֶרְגָּלִים אֲתָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲרוֹת הָאָרֶץ בְּאֲתָם.</p>	<p><i>And Joseph was reminded of the dreams that he had dreamt of them. He said to them: You are spies! [It is] to see the nakedness of the land that you have come!</i></p>
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idea. It was a spiritual mission designed to generate excitement and morale, and to get the people to focus on coming home and building their new land. Most importantly, it was a mission to validate what had been stated about the land: **that it flowed with milk and honey**, meaning, that it was filled with economic and spiritual potential.

We can compare the mission of the scouts to buying a house. Today, when we buy a house, we look at photos of it online. If we like what we see, we arrange to see it in person. If that visit is successful, it will confirm what we felt about it when we saw it in photos, and we will "fall in love with it", i.e. we will develop excitement and desire to purchase it and live in it. The buyer's visit is not a reconnaissance mission, as much as it is an opportunity to validate our initial emotional response to the house that we had in our imagination. Similarly, the only "picture" that Moses and the people had about the Land of Canaan was that their ancestors were born and tended their flocks in it. They knew that God had promised it to them, as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They had heard that **it flowed with milk and honey**. They had a mental image of the land, passed down to them through the generations of their sojourn in Egypt. The dispatch of the scouts would have been a festive moment, and their return would have no doubt, been received with festivity. And even the grapes, pomegranates and figs would have served a theatrical purpose, to raise everyone's excitement, and to get them to fall in love with the land. Moses had no reason to suspect that this would end up as a catastrophe. But that's what happened.

So what motivated the scouts to deliver a negative report? Was it personal animus toward Moses? Was it lack of faith? Demagoguery? This is a great subject for discussion. The bottom line is though that they succeeded in undermining the project without providing a compelling alternative. The people immediately pick up on this and become agitated, aggravated and unruly. At that moment, Calev tried to calm things down:

<p>וַיֹּהֶם כָּלֵב אֶת הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נָעֲלֶה וְנִרְשְׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי נִכּוֹל נִכְלָהּ. יֵשׁ, יִשְׁרָץ נֶגְדָהּ! (13:30)</p>	<p>Now Calev hushed the people before Moses and said: Let us go up, yes, up, and possess it, for we can prevail, yes, prevail against it! (13:30)</p>
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Too little. Too late.

The Talmud has a fascinating midrash on this moment.

<p>"וַיֹּהֶם כָּלֵב אֶת הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה", אָמַר רַבֵּה: שֶׁהִסִּיתוּ בְּדִבְרֵיהֶם. אָמַר: אֵי מִשְׁתַּעֲבָא — אָמְרִי בִּי מִלְּתָא וְחִסְמִין לִי.</p>	<p>Calev said to himself: If I speak they will also say something about me and stop me from speaking. In other words, he is thinking: <i>How am I going to get control of the situation? How am I going to get them to listen to me? They're about to turn on Moses, so let me say something about Moses that sounds like I'm with them.</i></p>
<p>אָמַר לָהֶן: וְכִי זֶה בְּלִבְדִּי עָשָׂה לָנוּ בֶּן עַמָּרָם? סָבְרִי בְּגִנְתִּיהָ קָא מִשְׁתַּעֲבִי, אִישְׁתִּיקוּ.</p>	<p>He began to speak and said to them: And is this the only thing that the son of Amram, Moses, has done to us?</p>

³ This sounds so much like Dayyenu in the Haggadah. This is probably the kernel of that song, but here, all of these

They thought that he wanted **to relate something to the discredit of Moses**, and **they were silent**. Having gotten their attention, he now tries to convince them of Moses' greatness. A classic "bait and switch."

אָמַר לָהֶן: הוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, וְקָרַע לָנוּ אֶת הַיָּם, וְהֶאֱכִילָנוּ אֶת הָמָן.

He then said to them: He took us out of Egypt, and split the sea for us, and fed us the manna.³

אִם יֹאמַר "עָשׂוּ סוּלְמוֹת וַעֲלוּ לָרָקִיעַ" לֹא נִשְׁמַע לוֹ? "עֲלֵה נָעֲלֵה וְנִרְשְׁנוּ אֹתָהּ וְגו'".

If he says to us: Build ladders and climb to the heavens, should we not listen to him? "We should go up at once," even to the heavens, "and possess it" (Num. 13:30).

Paraphrase and Comment: Moses has done amazing things for us! Haven't we had enough proof of his leadership and the miracles that he is able to perform on our behalf? Haven't we been convinced by the exodus and the splitting of the sea and the miracle of the manna, that he is reliable as a leader? We can do amazing things under his leadership! If he tells us to do the impossible, we can do it with him! If he tells us to jump, we should ask, "How high?" Calev's argument is great rhetoric, but lousy politics. In this rendering, Calev fails to "read the room." He fails to acknowledge that in all of the miraculous experiences he lists, in each and every one of them, there is a counter-story. Before the exodus, the Israelites lived in great fear, witnessing terror and destruction. At the sea they were being chased by the Egyptians and thought they were going to die. The manna only came after they complained of starvation. In other words, while he correctly presented those events as miracles, they came only after terrifying experiences. Calev's task at this moment was to articulate and identify the great terrors that they have endured up until now and to remind them that God was with them. That God has not abandoned them and will never abandon them. **That we have had challenges in the past and with God's help, we will get through the challenges ahead of us.** He did not do that, and thus, the people turned on him. In contrast, here is how a great leader challenged his people at a decisive moment in their history: **We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.** Sir Winston Churchill, z'l.

<p>This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Jonathan Funk in memory of his beloved parents, Rabbi Julius and Pearl Funk, z'l and to commemorate Rabbi Funk's 18th Yahrzeit.</p>	<p>TODAY IS DAY 267. WE PRAY FOR THE HOST AGES. MAY GOD WATCH OVER THEM. MAY GOD SHIELD AND PROTECT THE IDF.</p>
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miracles are attributed to Moses! In the Haggadah they are attributed to God.