

**and you shall take from the fruit of the land** (Num. 13:20). Collectors of Israeli stamps, Carmel Wine drinkers and tourists to Israel are all familiar with the depiction of the very large cluster of grapes brought back by two of the scouts that Moses dispatched to report on the Land of Israel. We presume that it must have been large because it took two of the scouts to carry it back on a pole. But we could easily come up with several reasons why they carried it this way, including that maybe they thought it was a good way to protect the grapes from getting crushed, or maybe they wanted to dry them into raisins in order to preserve them. The motif of the large cluster of grapes is developed in the Talmud (Sotah 34a) and the Midrash (Bemidbar Rabbah 16:14) and is depicted in some of the earliest synagogue mosaic art, such as the floor of the recently discovered synagogue of Huqoq in the Upper Galilee which dates back to the 5th century CE. But nowhere does the Torah itself portray the cluster of grapes as excessively large and given that unrefrigerated grapes spoil within a couple of days, we wonder what condition the grapes would have been when they were finally shown to the people on the return of the scouts? Setting all those questions aside however, we should ask, what role does the cluster of grapes and the other fruit samples that the scouts brought back play in the story?

**A Literary Device.** We notice that the fruit of the land appears at each critical junction in the story.

וילקחתם מפרי הארץ. (יג:כ)	It's the <b>last thing</b> that Moses tells the scouts to do: Take some fruit of the land. (13:20)
וַיָּבֹאוּ מִשְׁמַרְיָה וְאַשְׁכּוֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׂאוּהוּ בַמֹּזַט בִּשְׁנַיִם וּמִן הָרְמָנִים וּמִן הַתְּאֵנִים. (יג:כג)	It's the <b>last thing</b> that the scouts do in the land.
<i>They came to the Wadi of Eshkol and cut down from there a branch and one cluster of grapes—they had to carry it on a bar [held] by two—and some pomegranates and some figs. (13:23)</i>	
וַיָּלְכוּ וַיִּבְּאוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה... וַיִּשְׁבּוּ אֹתָם דָּבָר וְאֵת כָּל הַעֲדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת פְּרִי הָאָרֶץ. (יג:כו)	It's the <b>last part</b> of their report to the people is showing them the fruit.
<i>Then 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>	

<sup>1</sup> Examples of famous **callbacks**: Rodney Dangerfield: *I get no respect...* Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*: *Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!* Chris Farley's line as Matt Foley, Motivational Speaker in the famous SNL skit: *Livin' in a van down by the river!* Another biblical callback: in the Book of Judges: **אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל**—*there was no king in Israel*.

וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בָּאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם זֶבֶת חֶלֶב וְדִבְשׁ הוּא וְזֶה פְּרִיָּהּ. (יג:כז)	It's the <b>last thing</b> they say about the land before they turn against it and depict it as foreboding.
<i>Now they recounted to him, they said: We came to the land to which you sent us, and yes, it is flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. (13:27)</i>	

It functions as a refrain, or a **callback**, a plot device upon which the whole story pivots, and which enables the story to

be told with suspense, dramatic tension and the need for resolution.<sup>1</sup> Moses tells them to take some fruit from the land, which immediately engages our curiosity: **what is going to happen with that fruit?** **Symbol of Fertility and Creation.** Fruit as a symbol of fertility hearkens all the way back to the beginning of the Torah: **וַיִּבְרָא**—*be fruitful and multiply*, is God's

overarching blessing for all creatures. By instructing the scouts to bring back fruit, Moses is presenting the land as a kind of Eden, and entry into the land as an echo of Creation.

**Geography and Water.** While the description of the land as **a land flowing** (more precisely: **oozing**) **with milk and honey** is often understood as a reference to its lushness (cue the Hora melody!) **it ought to be understood as description of the land in its uncultivated state.** The Israelites, a people raised on the lore of ancestors who tended flocks, would have understood it to be a reference to the kind of pastureland that was perfect for raising flocks of sheep and goats. It suggests that the animals would be so well-nourished that milk would constantly be oozing from their udders. The meadows, fields, rolling hilltops and grasslands would be so lush with wildflowers, that they would sustain innumerable colonies of murmuring bees whose honey was constantly oozing from their hives. Fruit is different. While fruit certainly grows in the wild, most fruit growing requires active cultivation. In order to be productive, fruit trees

require lots of water, protection from pests and animals, and lots of care. Thus, when the scouts presented the fruit to the people, they would have seen a symbol of developed land and the abundance of water.<sup>2</sup> We know that thirst and the lack of



<sup>2</sup> One of the most compelling interpretations of the **Four Species** gathered on Sukkot has to do with water: The **lulav** (palm branch) represents water found at desert oases, the **aravot** (willows) represent water from rivers, the **hadassim** (myrtles) represent water from mountain streams and brooks and the **etrog** (fruit of goodly trees) represents the copious amounts of water needed to sustain a citrus orchard, or any other kind of orchard for that matter.

water were a constant source of anxiety for the Israelites in the desert. *In asking the scouts to procure fruit from the land, Moses was trying to skillfully reassure the people that the land they were entering was not as parched as the desert they were currently traversing, and that it would in fact be able to support a population that was expected to grow by leaps and bounds in its future.*<sup>3</sup>



**The Subversive Interpretation.** Grapes, figs, and pomegranates, while considered to be among the defining species of the land of Israel *were also present in ancient Egypt*. We know this because they are depicted in Egyptian tomb art.<sup>4</sup> By bringing back fruits which would have been familiar to the Israelites from their sojourn in Egypt, the scouts were undermining the purpose of the mission. *After all, why go to a land that has the same fruit that grew in the land that you left?* It stands to reason that Moses would have wanted them to bring *fruit that was unique to the land of Israel*. When Moses says *וְהִתְחַזְקוּתָם וְלִקְחֵם מִפְּרִי הָאָרֶץ*-he is not simply saying *be strong and take the fruit of the land*, as if the fruit was heavy (as it is always depicted) but rather: *Make an extra effort, go out of your way, do not get lazy, do a little exploration, overcome your inertia, get something new, something that we haven't seen before*. But instead, they brought back fruit that was reminiscent of Egypt! No wonder they wanted to return there! After all, why risk the danger of war and death, when returning to Egypt would have afforded them the same perceived "luxuries" that they would have gotten in the land of Israel?! When Caleb and Joshua failed to convince the people that the land was good, they repeated the idea that the land *oozes with milk and honey*-*אָרֶץ זָבַת חָלֶב וּדְבַשׁ*, that it was abundant for pasturing flocks, and they don't bother even to mention its abundant fruit! But it was too late anyway. The people were ready to stone them.

**Fruit as the Symbol of Betrayal.** Our first encounter with fruit in the Bible is in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve eat from forbidden fruit. Western (i.e. Christian) tradition portrays that fruit as an apple, but Jewish oral tradition identifies it either as grapes or figs.<sup>5</sup> In this story, while grapes, figs and pomegranates are indeed symbols of fertility, water and cultivation, *they also symbolize betrayal of God and transgression*. Which brings us to another important place in

the Torah where we find fruit: **the ritual of the first fruits in Deuteronomy 26**. There the Israelite farmer takes his first fruits and brings them to the Temple in a special basket as part of his pilgrimage celebrations. The pilgrim recites a brief declaration which is comprised of a compressed history of

Israel and the exodus, culminating with an affirmation of God's gift of the land, and explains how he ended up at the place that God has chosen to present his first fruits in thanks:

וַיְבָאנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלֶב וּדְבַשׁ.  
וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת רֵאשִׁית אֶשְׁרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי ה'.

...and he brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land oozing with milk and honey. So now— here, I have brought the premier-part of the *fruits of the ground* that you have given me, O God! (Deut. 26:9-10)

*The story of the scouts is all about rejecting God's promise of the land. But the ritual of the first fruits is all about acknowledging the gift of the land and being grateful to God for fulfilling his promise! The ritual of the first fruits functions as an annual liturgical repair of the sin of the scouts' betrayal of God's promise of the land, just as the ritual of the Day of Purgation, Yom Kippur, functions as an annual liturgical repair of the sin of the Golden Calf, Israel's betrayal of God through idolatry.* The depiction of the scouts with the grapes has become, for lots of reasons, a powerful image in the Jewish imagination. We have projected onto that image feelings of joy and pride in the land, and a sense of the lands awesome and luxurious potential. But, like all symbols in the Bible, we can also *squeeze a lot of exegetical juice out of it* and derive from it a great deal of spiritual sustenance. Shabbat Shalom!

**During these historic days, we pray for the success of Israel's missions in Iran. May God protect Israel from the terror of Iranian missiles. May these whose homes have been destroyed find shelter. We pray for the return of the hostages on this 624th day of their captivity. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded. Amen!**

**This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Cindy Patrych Brotman and family in honor of the 65th birthday of David Brotman. Mazel Tov!**

<sup>3</sup> The sustainability of water resources is a source of anxiety in Israel. Even slight fluctuations in rainfall are cause for alarm. The 1935-37 Peel Commission, whose report led to the UN Partition Plan, raised serious concern about the lack of sufficient water resources to sustain a growing population of Jews. "There is a definite limit to the number of Jews that can be settled on the land," it wrote, "even when the utmost use has been made of the water resources of the country." (Peel Commission Report, p. 211.) Yeah, well, they didn't anticipate innovative Israeli water technology, and a national ethos around water conservation.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that the scouts did not bring back olives. Olives were not abundant in Egypt, and they do not ripen until

late September-December (around Hanukkah) which is later than the season in which this story takes place (the season of the grape harvest, which is early summer).

<sup>5</sup> The depiction of the fruit as an apple is based on a pun in the Latin translation of the Bible: *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil* is *Lignum scientiae boni et mali* (like malice). But *malum* in Latin means *apple* and which is a close homonym to *mali*-evil. For that reason, the *apple* enters the Western imagination as the fruit of the *Tree of Knowledge*, it is the *evil fruit*. In Bereishit Rabbah 15:7 there is an extended debate about which fruit it was, and the apple is not even among those that are considered! The pomegranate only appears as a possible fruit later in Kabbalistic literature.