

Shelah Lekha - Why Davka Grasshoppers?
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 13, 2026 28 Sivan 5786



God tells Moses to dispatch one leader from each tribe to scout the land. Often described as a military reconnaissance mission, it ought to be viewed rather as a political mission led by political leaders. It is not a mission to glean facts, but a mission to shape public will and create the spiritual and psychological fortitude necessary for them to go forward. Just to put it in context: So far the people of Israel has:

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| (1) left Egypt |
| (2) traversed the Sea of Reeds |
| (3) received the Ten Commandments |
| (4) constructed the sanctuary |
| (5) received laws pertaining to their ritual, social, and ethical life |
| (6) organized and ordered their camp around its central shrine, and... |
| (7) assimilated all of the procedures for advancing in the wilderness. |

And currently, they are located in an intermediate zone, a transition space, between total slavery and total sovereignty. The task of these tribal legates

(who, by the way are never referred to as "spies") is to build up the people's enthusiasm and self-confidence to advance to the next stage of God's plan: to enter the land that God promised their forefathers, conquer it, inhabit it, and thereby bring blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:2). It is important to underscore once again that these individuals are not described as military men or strategists but **political appointees, all the men being leaders of the Israelites** (Num. 13:3). Their task is not to strategize a conquest or execute a covert operation. **Their job is to steward the people further along in its transformation from slavery to freedom. They are the principal guides, mentors, and storytellers¹ who will help the people be ready and able to become an independent and self-governing nation living under God's beneficent dominion.** Moses' charge to them is great theater.² It is a poetic and ceremonial declaration (punctuation added for emphasis):

עלו זה! בנגב! ועליתם את ההר! Go-up this way! To the Negev! Go-up to the mountain!
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This is a festive departure ceremony. Think of the US National Olympic Team departing for the Olympics.

Assembled in a dignified setting, the leader addresses them with a formal send-off, charging them to represent the nation, do their best, make all of us proud, and most

¹ This is the central theme in Matti Friedman's new book, *Out of the Sky*, in which he describes the mission of Hannah Senesh and the paratroopers who brazenly tried to rescue the Jews of Europe **not as commandos but as storytellers tasked with writing a Zionist story that would provoke action rather than despair**. Hadassah Magazine, March 2026. In this reading, the 12 scouts are not proto-Mossad agents but shapers of public opinion, i.e. storytellers.

² Setting aside the conflicting version of this story in Deuteronomy where the mission to scout the land comes in response to the people's request: **Then you came near to**

importantly, come back with many medals! And as they are escorted to their departure, we anticipate their triumphal return and look forward to receiving them as heroes. Departure, journey and return, are part of the universal human experience. When Moses charges the scouts at their departure, we get it. Moses' is telling them effectively, **go to the land and ratify for us that the land God is bringing us to is a good land, a fine land, a land that will receive us and sustain us forever**. Thus, when they return as heroes they will become embodiments of the national story and take their place as the next generation of leaders. The anticipated triumphant return of the scouts will imprint the people with their national epic, and they will now turn their hearts and their minds to the climactic project of the exodus. They will begin to imagine their future lives in their homeland. And they will begin to dream. Alas, the tribal legates go on their journey and return forty days later bearing the seemingly gargantuan-sized fruits of the land.³ But rather than ratify that the land is good, they trigger the deepest fears in the people.

Let us look closely at what the scouts say (Num. 13:27-29):

בָּאנוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדִבַּשׁ הוּא וְזֶה פְּרִיָּהּ. אִפְסֵי כִי עַז הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצִרּוֹת גְּדֹלַת מְאֹד וְגַם יְלָדֵי הָעֵמֶק רְאִינוּ שָׁם. עִמְלֵק יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וְהַחִתִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּהַר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב עַל הַיָּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן.

We came to the land to which you sent us, and yes, it is flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit-except 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! Amalek is settled in the Negev land, and the Hittite and the Yevusite and the Amorite are settled in the highlands, and the Canaanite is settled by the Sea and hard by the Jordan!

The fulcrum of their statement⁴ is **מְאֹד - exceedingly**. Everything about the land - including the fruit - is an excess. The people - abundantly powerful. The cities - abundantly fortified. The descendants of Anak - abundantly large, long-necked, gigantic. And then (cue the ominous music): Amalek - abundantly traumatizing. Hittites, Jebusites, and Emorites - abundantly populous on the hilltops. Canaanites - abundantly populous throughout the land from **the river to the sea**. That is the first description. There is

me, all of you, and said: Let us send men before us that they may explore the land for us and return us word about the route that we should [use to] go up against it and about the towns that we will come to. (Deut. 1:28)

³ This is the traditional depiction, especially of the grapes. Otherwise, why would there be a need for two of them to carry the cluster from a pole?

⁴ The midpoint in terms of the number of words. This is in many instances, the key word in unlocking the main theme of the text.

what to fear here. Fortifications. Populations. Arch-enemies with a history of unrelenting ruthlessness. Pagans who are associated in the deep past and in the most recent legislation⁵ as people with outsized licentiousness and sexual depravity. The people react with hysteria. Caleb tries to quiet them and reassure them, but the rest of the scouts go for the jugular (Num. 13:32-33):

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתֶּה אֶרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא וְכָל הָעָם
 אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מְדוּת. וְשֵׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מִן
 הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם.
The land that we crossed through to scout it out: it is a land that devours its inhabitants; all the people that we saw in its midst are men of [great] size, [for] there we saw the giants—the Children of Anak [come] from the giants—we were in our eyes like grasshoppers, and thus were we in their eyes!

It is as if they are presenting the land as a gargantuan monstrosity; a place of mythic proportions; like the forest or jungle in a folktale,⁶ the foreboding tundra, a field of quicksand, the immense ocean, or in science fiction, the terrifying black hole which you enter but can never escape. What they are saying is that the land is so immense, the people are so big, the habitations are so thick and impenetrable that all who enter it will be devoured. That is, everybody except the large people who live there who were obviously too big to be devoured! The scouts themselves were not devoured though. They evaded this horrific fate because they were small. As they say memorably, *we were in our eyes like grasshoppers and thus were we in their eyes!* But there is something very strange about their reference to themselves as grasshoppers. What does that even mean? Traditional commentators offer that this is simply an expression of their own negative self-image. *Look at them and look at us. Wow, they must see us as if we were small enough creatures to step on let alone do battle with them. We are no match for them.*

It is easy to arrive at that interpretation because we are always measuring ourselves - consciously or unconsciously - in relationship to others in terms of physical size. But if they were noting how small they were relative to the big bad Canaanites et al, *why did they choose the grasshopper as their metaphor?* They could have gotten more of a rhetorical punch with gnats, ants, lice, flies, flees or moths, all of which are much smaller and much easier to step on or squish to death. *Why davka the grasshopper?* The grasshopper, and its cousin, the locust, lives in swarms, a big mass of millions of insects



⁵ The story of Noah depicts Ham, the father of Canaan as *seeing his father's nakedness* (Gen. 9:22) which is very bad; the laws of forbidden sexual relations in Leviticus begin with this prologue: *What is done in the land of Egypt, wherein you were settled, you are not to do; what is done in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you are not to do.* (Lev. 18:3) They do pretty awful things there.

that undulates in the air until it lands *en masse* and devours everything. The eighth plague of locusts comes to mind.⁷ It left the hail-stricken barley fields of Egypt in total devastation. The swarm attacked, devoured, and vanished. Swarms have no central organization, no hierarchy, and no higher purpose other than to sustain themselves by eating what they can find and then disappear. *We were in our eyes like grasshoppers* is not about their negative self-perception of **smallness** but about their negative self-perception an **unorganized, undisciplined, swarm of pests** unable to create and sustain a culture and lay the foundations of a people settled in its land. They are saying: *In our eyes we cannot create an agrarian society; we cannot create a market and an economy; and we cannot create a society that is attuned to God and lives in accordance with his covenant. Despite everything that we have done here to organize ourselves and muster ourselves as a force, and situate our encampment in an orderly way around the place of holiness, where God's presence dwells among us, we see ourselves in a perpetual cycle of wandering and violence, swooping in and devouring fields and orchards, only to retreat, regroup and re-advance ourselves.* When Caleb tries to rebut their claim, he doubles down on the central word, **מָאֵד**:

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתֶה טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד. (במ' יד: 7)
The land that we crossed through, to scout it out—good is that land, exceedingly, exceedingly! (Num. 14:7)

As if to say: *My colleagues see the land with exceedingly large cities and people of exceedingly large size. But what I saw was a land that was exceedingly - I mean exceedingly! - good.* The people don't buy it. The scouts' report undermines God's goal which is why God takes it so personally, as it were:

עַד אָנֹכִי יִנְאָצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד אָנֹכִי לֹא יֶאֱמִינוּ בִּי. (במ' יד: 11)
Until when will this people scorn me? Until when will they not trust in me. (Num. 14:11)

For that, these people will remain in their uncivilized *grasshopper* state for the rest of their lives until a new generation emerges. The desert, not the land, will ultimately devour them. Upon hearing this, *וַיִּתְאָבְלוּ הָעָם מְאֹד - the people mourn exceedingly.* The mission that started out with lofty charge and an exceedingly important goal ended up becoming an exceedingly disastrous catastrophe, more catastrophic, some would say, than the Golden Calf. All because they saw themselves as **grasshoppers**, not leaders.

Shabbat Shalom!
 This parasha sheet is sponsored by
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⁶ Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, etc.
⁷ Exod. 10:5: *they will consume what is left of what escaped, of what remains for you from the hail, and they will consume all the trees that spring up for you from the field.*