

Shlach Lecha
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A leader from each tribe goes up to the land of Israel to scout it out in this week's Torah portion. They come back and scare their fellow Israelites by telling them that the land is one which eats or devours its inhabitants and is populated by giants. Never mind that those two thoughts are starkly contradictory. After all, how could the same land both consume those who live on it and sustain men of unusual size. The people, who already have displayed on numerous occasions their apprehension about going forward and a tentative, less than certain confidence in their mission go into panic mode. Once again they rebel against Moses and say it would have been better to die in the wilderness or to stay in Egypt than to go forward to the land that has been promised to them since it appears to be fraught with so many dangers.

Our commentators have a field day with this very rich narrative, raising all kinds of questions. As can be expected, a wide variety of answers are offered.

Among the issues which the rabbis in the time of the Talmud, as well as the exegetes of the Middle Ages focus on are: why did Moses send the spies? Why was it necessary to do so? After all, God had assured Moses, as well as the people that the land was one flowing with milk and honey. That should have been good enough for them.

In fact, the opening words "shelach lecha" "send for yourself" are considered by Rashi and Rambam to indicate that God is telling Moses – it isn't necessary to do this. But if you feel you or your people need the peace of mind from going to see the land, then fine. You do it. But it should be clear that this is not my idea, and you aren't doing this to please me. You are sending people for your own reasons.

From this perspective the sin was one of lack of faith, which is why this mission was doomed from the outset. In contrast to the haftarah portion, where Joshua also sent spies to reconnoiter the land, the purpose was different. In that instance they went to discover how to approach and enter the land. There was no doubt or uncertainty. The 12 who went forth during the time of Moses went in order to see whether or not the land could be conquered. Joshua's agents went to figure out how best to implement God's divine plan, whereas the 12 were not as intent upon fulfilling God's instructions, but in figuring out whether or not they should fulfill them.

Much of the discussion among our classic commentators centers on the question of what actually was the sin of the twelve spies. There are those who say they were punished because they spoke ill of the land of Israel. Others say they were guilty of instilling doubt and undermining the faith of the people. A famous line of reasoning discusses the problem as being the poor perception they had of themselves. "We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them." They obviously had a problem with how they thought about themselves. But as our commentators astutely observe, there is

no way they could have known how others perceived them. That would be a matter of speculation and projection. Ylkut Shimoni states, “The Almighty asks, ‘who said you were not in their eyes as angels?’” The projection of their own image as being like grasshoppers showed that they had a very low self image, to say the least.

But the Kotzker Rebbe takes it one step further and says that the problem was deeper than that. How others viewed them should not have bothered them. He points out the problems that ensue when one worries excessively about how others view an individual. He teaches that self esteem should not be dependent on the whims of others. Ceding control of your inner feelings and of how you feel about yourself to others means you have lost the ability to control your fate for you have given away power over your actions and thought.

This could have been the generation that brought the people to the Promised Land. Instead they are referred to as “dor hamidbar: the generation of the wilderness.”

The portion lends itself to the rich interpretations and various comments about its meaning. One area that is often overlooked at the beginning of our narrative is the list of the leaders and the names of the tribes they represent. We are told that they are distinguished men, “Everyone is a leader among them”. When our commentators study the list they notice that the order of the 12 tribes is one that is not replicated anywhere else in the Torah.

When the 12 tribes are listed, they sometimes are listed by birth order; sometimes they are grouped by their mothers, since Jacob had children with his two wives, as well as their two concubines. Sforino suggests that they are listed here according to the age of the leaders. Abarbanel proposes that the grouping is based on the sequence of the banners of the tribes when they camped. Ramban despairs of finding any order and says that the tribes are listed in the order of the personal greatness of the tribes.

I want to suggest as I was reading closely the list that I noticed something that some commentator may have noticed, but which in all my reading and review I did not find anywhere. This is one of the things that makes torah study so exciting for me. If you immerse yourself in the text there are usually one of a three things that can really be thrilling. One is when you figure out a difficult passage in the Torah or Talmud. The logic of the arguments of the rabbis or the meaning of the text may seem elusive, and after poring over the text, and much effort you suddenly get it: the aha moment, is one very gratifying aspect of Torah study. It affirms the intellectual sophistication of our sages. The second exciting facet of Torah study comes when you find that the question raised by a rabbi from long ago reflects questions of our generation and of our era. It is so fascinating to find that ancients grappled with the same issues which confront us. Then the next step is to see what they have to say about the matter and how their response or responses may help shed light on today’s quandaries. When this happens it affirms the relevance of our ancient texts and their eternal wisdom.

And the third thing is when you find something new in the text, when you offer an explanation or see something which is undiscovered. It is called a hiddush, since it is hadash, something new. It shows that the torah is constantly being interpreted anew and is part of its eternal attraction and allure. It is the equivalent of a scientist discovering a new formula.

So what is my hiddush? It has to do with the two heroes of the story, and with the listing of the tribes at the beginning of the reading. We learn that Joshua, son of Nun comes from the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb comes from the tribe of Judah. Ephraim, as you may recall is one of Joseph's two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh. Joshua and Caleb are the only two who courageously distance themselves from the majority report of the other 10 leaders. I picture them as working together, these two, who are descendants of Joseph and Judah.

Go back in time, and recall what happened in Egypt, and earlier. Judah and Joseph were anything but allies, as Judah helped to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. So part of the message of the passage is that obstacles can be overcome, and reconciliation between brothers and their offspring can occur.

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