

## What did the spies do wrong?

### Introduction

- Moses sends 12 spies to scout the land of Israel, at the request of the people [Deut. 1:22], who are not ready to accept God's statement that the land is good and that He will grant them victory against its inhabitants.
- Ten of the 12 spies bring back an alarming report about the strength of the enemy and say that he cannot be defeated, which demoralizes the people.
- God gets angry and decrees a forty-year wandering so the offenders will die before reaching the land.

What did the spies do wrong? Didn't they do what spies are supposed to do?

### Text

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel... So Moses sent... [twelve] righteous men of distinction [including Joshua and Caleb]... Moses... said to them: ...

"[Find out:] What [kind of] land is it? Are the people who inhabit it strong or weak? Are there few or many? [Is] the land... good or bad? [Are] the cities in camps or in fortresses? Is the soil fat or lean? Are there any trees in it or not?"

So they went up and explored the land... and returned... forty days later. They... came to Moses and Aaron and all... of Israel and [ten of the twelve spies] reported:

"...The land... is flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.

**However**, the inhabitants are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified... We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we... The land... consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature... giants... descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes."

[Numbers 13:1-33]

The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night. [They] complained against Moses and Aaron... saying,

"...Why does the Lord bring us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be as spoils. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt? ... Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!" Moses and Aaron fell on their faces... and Joshua and Caleb [the two dissenting spies] tore their clothes and said: "The land... is exceedingly good... The Lord... will bring us there and give it to us... Do not fear the inhabitants because... their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them."

The entire congregation threatened to pelt them with stones...

The Lord said to Moses:

"How long will this people provoke Me? How much longer will they not believe in Me after all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with a plague and annihilate them..."

Moses said...

"But [then] the nations... will say... 'Since the Lord lacked the ability to [give Israel the land] He slaughtered them in the desert...' Please forgive..."

And the Lord said:

"I... forgive... However... how much longer will I have to put up with this evil congregation? ... All those from the age of twenty and up... shall [not] come into the Land... except Caleb and Joshua... I will bring [your infants there]... but as for you, your corpses shall fall in this desert [after] wandering for forty years."

[The ten spies] who spread an evil report about the Land died in a plague...

The people said: ...

"We are ready to go up to the place of which the Lord spoke, for we have sinned."

[Numbers 14:1-40]

The spies' report came on the 9th of Av. Mishna: Every major disaster in Jewish history is connected to this date, beginning with the incident of the spies. [Ta'anit 4:6]

## What did the spies do wrong?

### 1-They scared and demoralized the people.

Counter: 39 years later, Moses himself said the same to their children, as they were about to enter the Promised Land:

You will be coming to conquer nations that are greater and more powerful than you, with great cities, fortified to the skies. They are a great nation, as tall as giants... [Deut. 9:1-2]

Counter-counter: Moses was saying that to young men, to bring some realism into their enthusiasm.

**2-They doubted God's power.** Their very mission implied doubt about the value of God's gift and God's ability to deliver it.

-God said "Send for yourself", meaning "I am not commanding you, but if you wish, you may send." Indeed, the people had come to Moses asking for that. [Deut. 1:22]

-Talmud: God told Moses, "I told them that the land is good. By their lives! Now I will give them the opportunity to fall into error through the words of the spies, so that they will not inherit it." [Sotah 34b, Midrash Tanchuma, Shlach 5]

-But spying for military preparations is OK. The Torah does not tell us to rely on miracles. It's the spies' presentation that was not OK. [Ramban]

**3-They thought God may have changed His mind.**

The spies reasoned that since Israel had sinned with the Golden Calf and in many places, God may not honor His promise of the land.

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]

**4-They did not do a thorough job.**

-Moses had tasked the spies: Find out if the people who inhabit the land are strong or weak. Implies physically **and** morally.

They did not report (or did not try to find out) what the inhabitants thought of them. Forty years later, Rahav in Jericho tells the spies sent by Joshua that the inhabitants feared the Jews:

I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that a great fear of you has fallen upon us. All the inhabitants of the land faint because of you... As soon as we heard [of the miracles God performed for you] our hearts melted, no courage remained in any man, because of you. [Joshua 2:9-11].

-And the Jews themselves knew that. Earlier, in their Song at the Sea, they had said:

The people of Canaan will melt away. Terror and dread will fall on them. [Ex. 15:15-16]

-The spies made unwarranted assumptions. They said: "In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes." In Talmud, Rabbi Mesharsheya asks:

The spies were liars. As regards "In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers", very well; but how could they know that "so were we in their eyes"? [Sotah 35a]

How did the spies know how the inhabitants saw the Jews?

**5-Being former slaves, they were fearful.**

Their fear was greater than their faith, because they had been slaves. They were not ready to fight battles and be free in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom. [Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 3:32]

### **6-They wanted to continue to live in the desert, in isolation with a direct spiritual connection to God.**

Hassidic masters: The spies did not doubt Israel could win battles, they just did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the desert, removed from civilization and its problems. They did not want to become just another nation. They were not ready to "leave home and launch". But God wanted engagement with the world, not retreat from it. [Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi]

### **7-They went beyond their mission.**

Spies are only supposed to provide hard information dispassionately. They have no business coloring their report with alarmist language or advising on a course of action. [Ramban on Num. 13:1, 13:27; Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, 15th-century Spain and Italy); Malbim on Num. 13:2]

### **8- They reported to the whole people.**

Spies are supposed to report only to the leaders, not to the whole people! The leaders then decide what to disclose, to whom and when. [Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th century Germany]

### **9-They spoke lashon hara against the land and God.**

The Talmud says:

-It was taught: Rabbi Eleazar ben Perata said, "Come and see how great is the power of an evil tongue! From where do we know [its power]? From the spies, because if this is what happens to those who bring an evil report against wood and stones, how much more will it happen to one who brings an evil report against his neighbor!"

How does it follow? Perhaps it is as explained by Rabbi Hanina ben Papa... who said: "A stark thing did the spies say in that hour, as it is written: 'For they are stronger than we.'" [The implication being "stronger than God", since God is with us.] [Arachin 15a]

-Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Meir: The spies began with a true report and then spoke ill, because any piece of slander needs some truth in the beginning to be heard through to the end. [Sotah 35a]

### **10-They were affected by their people's attitude.**

When one represents another, he is affected by the mindset of that other. Israel was distrustful of Hashem, and this colored the spies' judgment.

[Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, 18th-century Morocco]