

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT SHELACH

The Mission of the Spies

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A The Problem

The sin of the spies is recorded in the Torah in Sefer Bamidbar and is repeated in Sefer Devarim, which records Moshe's final messages to the nation, recited on the plains of Moav just prior to their entry into the Promised Land (chapter 1). It is also mentioned in other places in Tanakh, sometimes explicitly and at length, sometimes only briefly and indirectly.

A close examination of the sources associated with this sin gives rise to a number of questions. Some pertain to the seeming contradictions, while others concern the actual content of the story, especially the nature of the sin itself.

We will deal with the following questions:

.1Who initiated the spy mission? Was this mission originally a Divine command that went wrong, or was the idea objectionable from the very beginning? From the wording in Parashat Shelach it would seem that the spies were sent by God's command (13:1), but from Sefer Devarim it would appear that it was the nation which initiated the project (1:22), and reading between the lines of Moshe's rebuke, it would seem that he did not consider it a positive initiative .

.2What was the nature of the mission and what were its aims? Were the men sent as "tourists" ("latur"), to witness first-hand the good of the land and its bounty, the strength of its inhabitants and its cities - as is suggested by the language of Sefer Bamidbar - or were they sent as military spies in order to discover the defensive weaknesses and the most convenient areas for conquest - as the pesukim in Sefer Devarim would seem to indicate? And if they were indeed sent in order to witness the quality of the land, why was this important now, before they entered the land ?

.3Were the spies sent only to the Negev and to the mountainous area adjacent to it (the Judean mountains in general and Har Chevron in particular), as described in Devarim 1, Bamidbar 32 and even Bamidbar 13:22, or were they sent to tour the entire length and breadth of the country "from the wilderness of Tzin to Rechov Levo Chamat", as stipulated in Bamidbar 13:21, and as would seem to be indicated by the length of their stay – 40 days in all ?

.4Was Moshe guilty of sin in this story? Was he punished for it? In Sefer Bamidbar there is no hint of any sin or punishment for Moshe. The only sin for which he is punished is that of Mei Meriva (the striking of the rock – Bamidbar 20:12, 27:14, Devarim 32:51). But from Devarim 1 it appears that he was in fact punished in the wake of the sin of the spies (ibid. 37.)

Let us first turn our attention to the contradictions between the different accounts and within the story itself. I would submit that the great number of contradictions precludes our dealing with them in a piecemeal manner. It seems that the spy episode in fact

comprised two distinct missions, one of which was a Divinely-ordained sacred venture, while the other was a practical mission, which resulted from Moshe's bending to the will of the people. The crux of this article will deal with the relationship between these two.

B "By God's Word"

In what sense was there a sacred mission? The verses in Bamidbar 13 do not hint at any human initiative. The entire mission is commanded by God: "And God spoke to Moshe saying: Send for you men and they shall tour the land of Canaan which I give to the children of Israel.... And Moshe sent them from the wilderness of Paran ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD." (13:1-3)

The purpose of this mission may be derived by comparing it to two other parshiot. One is the appointment of the princes for the purposes of the division of the land (Bamidbar 34:16-29). The style of this parasha is similar to that of the spies: In both cases princes are appointed for the tribes, and Calev ben Yefuneh, prince of Yehuda, is common to both lists. In Bamidbar 34, the function of the princes is clear - to divide the land, each prince for his tribe - and there is reason to believe that their function in our parasha is a similar one.

The second comparable parasha is that of the dispatch of tribal representatives by Yehoshua from Shilo to their destined inheritances:

"And Yehoshua said to the children of Israel: How long will you tarry in going to possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers has given you? Appoint from among you three men for each tribe, and I will send them and they will go up and traverse the land and mark it out according to their inheritance, and they shall come back to me... You shall therefore mark out the land in seven parts and bring it to me here, that I may cast lots for you here before the Lord our God... And the men went and passed through the land, and wrote it down by cities into seven parts in a book, and they brought it to Yehoshua to the camp at Shilo." (Yehoshua 18:3-9)

In both cases, in Yehoshua and in our parasha, we are dealing with preparations for inheritance of the land, and in both cases tribal representatives are sent to tour the land or to traverse it. My assumption is that tribal princes have to go and tour the land in order to designate it for their respective tribes.

According to Bamidbar 26:52-56, it would appear that the land should be divided by lottery. But according to the description in Sefer Yehoshua it seems that the fundamental division was done by the tribal representatives who toured the land, and the function of the lottery was simply to confirm Divine agreement to this division.

Based on the similarity to the parasha in Yehoshua, we may conclude that Moshe's spies went with the intention of marking out - by their very footsteps - the future borders, just like Avraham who commenced his acquisition of the land by fulfilling the command to "get up and walk the length and breadth of the land, for to you shall I give it" (Bereishit 13:17). For this reason, the spies had to inspect the rivers and the fertility of the land and its bounty ("Is it a fat or a lean land, is there a tree in it or is there none" - Bamidbar 13:20), the cities ("Are they in camps or in fortresses" - ibid. 19); the climate and the water ("And the nation that dwells in it; whether it is strong or weak" - ibid. 18; "there are

countries which breed mighty people and other countries which breed weak ones" – Rashi, *ibid*(.

For this reason the spies had to TOUR the country, rather than spy on it. They had to tour the entire length of the country, "from the wilderness of Tzin to Rechov Levo Chamat" (13:21), and for this they would indeed require forty days (*ibid*. 25). This mission, with the aim of granting the tribes of Israel their inheritance in the land, was a completely sacred mission and entirely in fulfillment of God's command.

C "And You All Drew Close to Me"

In contrast with this holy mission, there was also a practical, mundane one.

Upon hearing the Divine command to send the princes of the tribes to the land, the nation's awe at this prospect was accompanied by a mundane, simple, human fear of the impending war. It seems only natural that a nation would fear a prospective war, in unfamiliar territory, against mighty opponents whose reputation precedes them (see Devarim 9:1-2). This reaction itself would not merit a severe punishment. But I would suggest that it was the MIXTURE of mundane fears and human motives within the Divine awe and elevated spirituality at the prospect of inheriting the God-given land that was their downfall. The acquisition of God's inheritance was one of the most elevated experiences in the nation's history, a moment requiring the nation to rise above petty, individual, and even national, considerations, a moment which called for sacrifice of everything for this Divine gift and God-given opportunity. The source of their sin lay in the small-mindedness which gave rise to their fear.

The fear of the war led the nation to send SPIES to seek the easiest route for conquest: "And you all drew close to me and you s, 'Let us send men before us and they shall seek out the land for us and will bring us back word of the route by which we shall reach it, and of the cities to which we shall go.'" (Devarim 1:22(

For this mission the nation did not demand that TWELVE representatives be sent, nor that they be princes – simply "men." This mission had nothing to do with division of the tribal inheritances and the holiness of the land; here the aim was altogether utilitarian – to facilitate the conquest. This was an instance in which "anyone who adds, in fact detracts." Their human fear, even if not deserving of severe punishment, was surely not commendable.

D "You, Too, Shall Not Come There"

In examining Moshe's responsibility we should bear in mind King David's exclamation: "Who shall attempt to harm God's anointed one and be blameless?" (Shmuel I 26:9). What follows is something of a criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu, although it is clear that his motives were entirely pure. The Abarbanel already suggests a similar idea in his commentary on Sefer Devarim. A superficial reading of the parasha of the spies in Sefer Devarim would lead us to think that Moshe was denied entry to Eretz Yisrael in punishment for the sin of the spies. The verse "Against me, too, God's anger burned because of you, and He said: You, too, shall not come there" (1:37), appears in the context of the punishment for the sin of the spies, and is followed by the sin of the "ma'apilim" (which took place immediately after the incident of the spies). Abarbanel explains that the principle sins of Moshe and Aharon, for which they were punished by not entering the

land, were connected with the two principle sins of the nation in the desert. Aharon was punished for the golden calf, and Moshe for the spies. My explanation for Moshe's mistake is a little different from that of the Abarbanel, but is nevertheless based on the same fundamental approach.

Had the Jews entered Eretz Yisrael now, they would presumably have entered from the South, through the Negev, with the first fortified city being Chevron. Military spies would investigate the path of conquest, just as Yehoshua's spies went first to Yericho. Moshe's spies entered through the mountains and came to Nachal Eshkol (Devarim 1:24, and Bamidbar 32:9) in the Chevron area: "And they came up in the Negev and reached Chevron" (Bamidbar 13:22). Indeed, their description of the land centers on Chevron. They describe the fortifications – "And Chevron was built seven years before Tzo'an in Egypt" (ibid.) and the inhabitants – the "nefilim", children of Anak, are none other than Achiman, Sheshai and Talmai of Chevron – as well as the fruits of Nachal Eshkol, from Har Chevron. Thus we conclude that for the purposes of the MILITARY mission there was no need for twelve representatives, nor for them to be princes, nor for them to traverse the entire land. They needed only to see the Negev and Har Chevron, up to the city of Chevron, and this obviously did not require forty days, since their route – from Kadesh to Chevron and back to Kadesh Barnea – would have taken only a couple of days. The nation asked and demanded no more than this.

Moshe's mistake lay in combining these two aims, so fundamentally different in nature and in their details, into one mission. He may have done this in order to avoid the complication of sending two separate missions to Canaan, or he may have had some other reason. In any event, this represented a dual mistake. On one hand, combining the two missions was a sin against the holy task of sending princes of Israel by God's command. Burdening the emissaries of this holy task with a mundane mission would appear to be making use of a holy vessel for mundane purposes (me'ila). Furthermore, the military mission was not merely a mundane task, but one arising from a weakness of spirit, from a missed opportunity for greatness. Even if the understandable fears of the nation led Moshe to agree to send spies to the land, since his refusal would only have led to panic, allowing this mission to "hitch a ride" on the back of the holy mission ordained by God detracted somewhat from the latter.

Moreover, the combination of the two missions also did an injustice to the mundane mission, and one with disastrous consequences. A military spy mission has its own requirements and its own information specifications. A spying operation is doomed to failure if, rather than being planned with precision, it is tacked on as an afterthought to another dispatch.

From Yehoshua's spies we are able to learn something of the dangers inherent in espionage, as well as the characteristics of those selected for such missions:

.1Yehoshua sent two men and no more (Yehoshua 2:1). A group of twelve participants greatly increases the chance of being discovered by the enemy. A large group is always more visible and more clumsy when the situation calls for hiding, for escape or for evasion. Sufficient proof for this can be found in the story of Yosef's eleven brothers who are suspected of spying in Egypt .

.2The midrash informs us that Yehoshua sent men with a proven military record: Pinchas, who had proved himself as a general in the war against Midyan, and Calev, whose

qualities we come to discover in the story of the spies and later at the time of the conquest of Chevron and the subjugation of its giants (Yehoshua 14). What transpires in Yericho proves the wisdom of Yehoshua's choice: the spies are required to hide in an inn-keeper's house, they must climb down from the city wall using rope, and must hide in the mountains for three days. Would twelve respectable princes – some of whom may well have been old and physically weak – have been up to this task? We have full faith in the ability of the twelve princes to divide the land and its cities in a fair manner between the tribes and the households, but will this ability make up for their lack of military know-how for their secondary, additional task ?

.3Yehoshua sent his men on a short-term mission – from Shittin to Yericho and back, for just a few days. Nevertheless, the king of Yericho hears about it and manages to locate them (Yehoshua 2:2-3). Having spies in enemy territory for a full forty days would seem to be unjustifiably dangerous.

It would appear that there was no great danger involved in sending the princes to TOUR the country. Canaan was a land full of fruit-merchants, land dealers and sundry tourists. The group of princes would not look out of place, and their examination of the nature of the land, its climate and its water would not arouse suspicion. Suspicion arises – as in the case of the spies sent to Yericho – when men come to examine city walls, access and escape routes, city water sources for siege conditions, etc.

In trying to explain Moshe's motives for attaching the spy mission demanded by the nation onto God's mission, it would seem that Moshe was so convinced of the future success of the conquest of the land by God's word that he invested all his effort in the holy mission and did not pay sufficient attention to the spying, underestimating the dangers involved. He saw this as entirely secondary – after all, its aim was simply to set the nation's minds at ease. The disastrous result was, apparently, difficult to predict.

The emissaries set off for Canaan full of joy at the command with which they had been entrusted and certain of their route. It is doubtful whether they even took any professional espionage precautions. They came up from the Negev and reached Har Chevron. At Nachal Eshkol they picked a large bunch of grapes and some other fruits – all with the innocent intention of showing the nation the bounty of the good land – and hurried on to Chevron in order to proceed with the second part of their mission – to examine the access routes to this city of the forefathers, which was to be the first city for their conquest and, later on, the first city over which the household of David would rule.

It was on the way to Chevron that the turning point occurred. Even before entering the city they met the cold, suspicious eyes of Achiman, Sheshai and Talmai and their father, in the vineyards of Chevron, on the city outskirts. Their blood ran cold at the sight of the giants who looked at them like grasshoppers, and their joy at the mitzva evaporated. Only Calev entered Chevron. Only his feet trod its streets. His colleagues remained outside the city of the giants for fear of entering. From this point onwards the spies walked in fear and trepidation. Their secret had seemingly been discovered (the pasuk, "We seemed in our eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes – 13:33 – testifies to our lack of understanding of an exchange of glances with military significance; and they encountered an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. From day to day the danger grew, and with it their fear, which turned to terror and then to panic. Their emergence from the safety of the pillars of cloud and of fire into a hostile country proved unbearable. The emissaries' wish to return to their families and not to be sold as slaves in the local markets, or to be crushed

by the giants, gradually overshadowed their Divinely-ordained mission – the division of the inheritances. And when they returned after forty days, the story engraved on their pale faces, in their hollow eyes, on their heavy hearts, was far more convincing than the testimony of the bunch of grapes, the pomegranate and the fig.

The nation meanwhile had spent forty days in great anticipation. The division of the inheritances and the list of economic resources which each tribe would receive – on one hand, and details of the military challenge ahead – on the other, were the main topics of conversation. We may assume that after Moshe's declaration, "See, the Lord your God has given the land before you; arise and inherit as the Lord, God of your forefathers, has spoken. Do not be afraid and do not fear" (Devarim 1:21), the nation expected encouraging news. The depressed and terrorized appearance of the returning emissaries broke the tension. Fright spread like wildfire. For a moment, it appeared that Calev would be able to extinguish it, but the bitter reality soon became apparent. The mighty hero's words were too few and too late. The crying that night became a crying for all generations.

Our attempt to analyze the events and draw conclusions is certainly based on the wisdom of hindsight. As mentioned above, the scope of the debacle was difficult to predict. At the same time, the responsibility for what occurred still rests with the person who sent the spies – Moshe Rabbeinu: "God became angry with me too on your account, and He said, 'You, too, shall not come there.'" (Devarim 1:37)