

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHELACH

Military and Political Spying

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Parashat Shelach centers around the sin of the spies, which, as we noted in an earlier shiur, essentially forms the dividing line between the two parts of Sefer Bemidbar. Heretofore, the Sefer has dealt with a nation on the brink of entry into the land promised to them and their forefathers. As a result of the sin of the spies, however, the entire generation that had left Egypt faced the tragic decree of, "In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop" ([Bemidbar 14:29](#)). They were now fated to wander for forty years before reaching the Promised Land.

The beginning of the book of Yehoshua parallels the tale of the Exodus and the travels through the wilderness. Most notably, the splitting of the Jordan River bears obvious resemblance to the splitting of the Red Sea. (The text itself seems to associate the two miracles. Note the reference in [Yehoshua 4:14](#) to [Shemot 14:31](#).) Furthermore, Yehoshua's designation as national leader prior to the battle at Yericho - "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy" ([Yehoshua 5:15](#)) - brings to mind the appointment of his predecessor, Moshe, at the burning bush: "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" ([Shemot 3:1-5](#)).

Elsewhere, we discussed another parallel, that between the Revelation at Sinai and the battle of Yericho.

A comprehensive analysis of this parallel reveals not just similarities but also many deliberate contrasts. Today, let us compare and contrast the spy missions in the time of Moshe ("Moshe sent them to scout the land") and Yehoshua ("Go, reconnoiter the region of Yericho"). Chazal drew attention to the

connection between the episodes by choosing the story of Yehoshua's spies as the haftara reading for Parashat Shelach. The glaring differences between them can shed new light on the puzzling account of the spies in Parashat Shelach.

In both instances, the nation is preparing for conquest and the national leader sends spies as part of the nation's preparation. Let us now enumerate the differences between the two incidents:

1) THE NUMBER OF SPIES: Moshe sends twelve; Yehoshua sends just two. This discrepancy may relate simply to the size of the territory to be scouted: Moshe's spies must traverse the entire Land of Israel, while Yehoshua's scouts need to cover only the city of Yericho. However, other factors may also account for the difference, as we shall soon see.

2) THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE SPIES: The Chumash presents a lengthy characterization of Moshe's spies - "Send... one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one of a chieftain among them... all the men being leaders of the Israelites" ([Bemidbar 13:2-4](#)). The Torah stresses the fact that Moshe's scouts were not intelligence officers, but rather tribal leaders. The Torah even lists their names and tribal affiliations. This elaboration stands in sharp contrast to the anonymity of Yehoshua's scouts: "Yehoshua bin Nun secretly sent TWO SPIES from Shittim..." ([Yehoshua 2:1](#)). They carry no names or titles, leading us to assume that they are soldiers specifically trained for the complex task of spying.

3) PUBLICITY: The fact that specifically the tribal leaders serve as Moshe's spies leads to another critical facet of their mission - the involvement of the entire nation. Everyone is aware that the spies are being sent, and the procedure is conducted with full publicity. Beyond that, the Torah stresses the fact that each tribe required representation in the mission. Contrast this national

awareness and involvement with the secrecy with which Yehoshua commissions and sends his scouts. The return of the scouts also differs between the two stories, in corresponding fashion. Moshe's spies report their findings to the entire nation: "They went straight to Moshe and Aharon AND THE WHOLE ISRAELITE COMMUNITY at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them AND THE WHOLE COMMUNITY" ([Bemidbar 13:26](#)). Yehoshua's spies, by contrast, report their findings to him alone: "Then the two men came down again from the hills and crossed over. They came to Yehoshua bin Nun and reported to him all that had happened to them" ([Yehoshua 2:23](#)). This depiction leads us to believe that the nation is totally unaware of Yehoshua's scouting mission, and certainly not of its results.

4) THE SECRECY OF THE OPERATION: It appears from the verses that not only is the Jewish nation aware of Moshe's commissioning of the scouts, but the inhabitants of Canaan also know of the operation. Throughout the entire depiction of the scouting mission, nowhere do we find any indication of the spies' efforts to maintain secrecy. To the contrary, the Chumash alludes to their meeting with giants (13:22). Furthermore, the fact that they took fruits and carried them out on poles (13:23) suggests a lack of concern for camouflage. Yehoshua's spies, however, execute their mission with total secrecy, as stressed by the verse itself (2:1). When the spies' presence is revealed by the local authorities, they must hide from the search parties and then wait three days in the mountains before returning to Yehoshua. This reflects the kind of mission we would expect in a military context - one marked by secrecy, camouflage, and, upon accidental discovery, quick and strategic escape.

5) THE MISSION'S CONTENT: In Moshe's instructions to his spies, he does mention many tasks that one would normally assign spies: "Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? ...Are the towns they live in open or fortified?" (13:18-19). However, he adds other responsibilities that seem irrelevant and out of place in the context of preparation for conquest: "Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not?" (13:20). Even more

perplexing is Moshe's insistence in this regard: "Take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land." Why would he order the spies to bring samples of the land's fruit? Yehoshua, by contrast, issues a far more straightforward order to his scouts: "Go, reconnoiter the region of Yericho."

6) THE EXPRESSION "RIGUL": Only regarding the mission to Yericho does the text employ the term "meraglim," spies ([Yehoshua 2:1](#)). However, this expression never appears with regard to Moshe's emissaries. Rather, the Chumash describes their task as "latur," to scout the land.

In light of these differences, we need to reexamine the precise nature of the operation conducted by Moshe's scouts. Each of the aforementioned points suggests that Yehoshua's operation corresponds to our expectations of a military spy mission, while Moshe's mode of conduct seems difficult to understand.

The first four differences all pose the same problem: the mission's public and exposed nature. The public stature of the men involved, as well as the general publicity of the operation both domestically and internationally, violate the fundamental principle of spying - secrecy. Spies are usually young and specially trained to hide and escape, to collect information quickly and unobtrusively. Why would tribal leaders embark on a military spy mission, and in such a public manner?

The fifth issue also suggests that Yehoshua's mission is the more standard of the two. He requires military information as part of his battle plan. He has no interest, at this juncture, in the quality of Yericho's agriculture.

We must conclude, then, that the two missions have fundamentally different purposes. Yehoshua's operation is purely military. He therefore secretly commissions two spies to gauge the Canaanites' morale and preparation for war. They retrieve this information from Rachav and report to Yehoshua accordingly. Nobody besides Yehoshua knows anything about the mission.

Our parasha, however, deals not with military spies, but rather with a mission of general observation - "latur." Mosh's scouts had a political, not a military mission. The national "government," i.e., the twelve tribal leaders, traverse the land to become familiar with the nation's destination. Their interest lies not in military strategy but rather in getting to know the land they are destined to settle.

Their statement of mission, as dictated by Moshe, underscores this point more than anything else. They are ordered to report not only on the military status of the nations of Canaan, but also on the country's agriculture. They must inform the people as to the nature and character of the country they are preparing to conquer.

The Torah's censure of their negative report, then, is quite understandable: "Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted" (13:32). The scouts have assessed not only the prospects of conquering the land, but its inherent quality as well.

The public nature of their mission now becomes more comprehensible. The scouts operate as national representatives, the pioneering force preparing for the process of national settlement. They make no effort to hide. It stands to reason that the inhabitants spoke to them openly and without fear, unaware of their intentions for war. Many immigrants must have passed through the territory, and the inhabitants likely envisioned a respectable group of people who have come to the land to see whether their tribes could settle therein. Perhaps the natives of Canaan even proudly helped the scouts take the samples of fruit to advertise the land's quality. Quite reasonably, the scouts present their findings to the entire nation, not just to Moshe, as there is no need, at this point, for military secrecy.

Thus, in our parasha and haftara we read of two drastically different operations. Whereas Parashat Shelach deals with tourists sent to assess the nature and quality of the land, the

haftara tells the story of a military spy mission preparing the way for conquest.

(Translated by David Silverberg)

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>