

TIMELESS TORAH

Shelach Lecha: The Moment That Changed History - A New Look at the Spies

The Message of the Pomegranate Shell

The episode of the Meraglim, the spies sent on a reconnaissance mission to the Land of Israel, is one of the most well-known episodes in the entire Torah. Instead of bringing eagerness and inspiration to enter Eretz Yisrael, the spies' report brought far-reaching and damaging consequences to the Jewish people. A remarkable Midrash sheds light on what seems to be a central theme behind this episode. When the spies describe the alarming size of the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan, they mention that compared to the giants, they felt like grasshoppers. This demoralising description of themselves, it seems, was inappropriate, but the Midrash states that Hashem 'forgave them' for that. According to the Midrash, though, what Hashem did not forgive them for was their next statement: 'And so we were in their eyes (13:33)'.

'How do you know how they perceived you?' asks the Midrash rhetorically, 'Perhaps they viewed you as angels!'

With these few words, the Midrash encapsulates the catalyst that caused the spies' downfall. It might have been understandable for them to have felt vulnerable, but they did not have to jump to conclusions as to the giants' perception of them. The commentaries elaborate on this theme, explaining how the spies were stricken with a lack of self-belief that eventually brought down the entire nation. This represents a cycle of negativity in which we feel that we are trapped in a certain position that affects not only the way we think of ourselves but also gives us the assumption that others view us in the same light.

Another curious Midrash relates that a giant, after eating a pomegranate, discarded the empty husk and threw it on the ground. This husk was so large that all twelve spies were able to enter it and shelter from the sun. Rabbi Norman Lamm, former Chancellor of Yeshiva University (d.2020), in a drasha delivered in 1952, commented on this Midrash in a scathing critique that highlights the devastating effects of the loss of self-belief. 'If a man thinks of himself as no more than an insignificant insect', he wrote, 'it is the inviolable law of nature that his fellows will think of him in the same way. If a man is willing to cringe in the pomegranate shells thrown to him, then thrown to him they will indeed be.' Without realising it, we can completely lose our self-respect and become dependent on the way we imagine that the rest of the world perceives us.

This was the trap into which the spies fell, but the message that the commentaries conclude with is that, as we say in our *tefillot*, 'Until now Hashem has not forsaken us' (*Nishmat*), and we can trust with full confidence that this will continue. This should generate the necessary self-belief to know that we are able to go the distance, whatever the challenges we face as a nation. Cringing in a discarded pomegranate shell is never necessary.

Digging for Victory?

Three different words are used in the context of this episode that all denote the term 'spying'. In the opening verse of the parsha (13:2), Hashem says to Moshe that he may send spies that will, '*v'yaturu* — look through' the Land. The people, however, used a different word when they requested to send the spies: in Parshat Devarim (1:22),



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the verse says that they asked that the spies should, ‘*v’yachperu* — search’. Finally, the spies themselves are referred to as *meraglim*, a third synonymous term. The Kli Yakar (Prague, d. 1619) explains that these three terms are used in progression. *Yaturu* is connected to the word *yitron*, which means something extra and higher. Hashem, when he allowed this expedition to be sent, said that they should look for the advantages of this Land over other lands; the mission of the spies was really to report back on all the wonderful elements of Eretz Yisrael. The people, however, had other motives. They asked that the spies should *yachperu*, related to the word *lachpor* — to dig — and to the word *cherpah* — disgrace. They were asking for a full, uncensored report, and clearly, if one digs too much, they will always find something that can be criticised. Lastly, the spies themselves were *meraglim*, the inevitable final stop on this downward trajectory. This word is related to the word *rochel*, slanderer, because they magnified the negativity that they found in a manner that bordered on falsehood.

The message for us here is that the difference between these three words is the attitude that one chooses when analysing a situation. Hashem told the spies to search; they could have searched for *yitronot*, for the features that would have encouraged them along a higher and better path. Instead, though, they searched indiscriminately, and they ended up contriving negativity.

The Choice of Positivity

‘And the people wept on that night’ (Bamidbar 14:1). That night, our Sages tell us, was the Ninth of Av, and a consequence of the weeping following the spies’ report was that the Ninth of Av would always be a date that

would be wept over. But what indeed was so significant about the tears the Jewish people shed on that first Tisha B’Av?

The Alshich (Safed d. 1593) discusses a seeming tautology in the verse. At first, the verse says that the *eidah* raised their voices and then says that the people (am) ‘gave their voices in crying’. The *eidah*, he explains, refers to the spies themselves, who at first, entered only their own tents and raised their voices, bewailing the misfortunes that they were expecting would befall their wives and children when they entered Eretz Canaan. Of course, the family members joined their father in his tears, until the neighbours came over to investigate the commotion. The neighbours, too, were affected and slowly, in concentric circles, spread panic over the camp. Thus, after the *eidah* raised their voices, the people ‘gave’ their tears to others.

Of course, the concern here was real; it cannot be said that their unease was needless. But what was necessary for them to display was faith, and instead, they spread panic from circle to circle until it reached the entire people. As Victor Frankl wrote in his seminal work, ‘Man’s Search for Meaning’ (1959), ‘Between stimulus and response lies our freedom to choose’. We cannot choose the circumstances we are given in life, but we do have freedom in how we respond. Instead of choosing to focus on what will push one into the trap of negative response, a person can look for positivity and growth. Eretz Yisrael, then, was not suitable for this generation who had chosen the path of false perspectives, but would be given only to their children, who would hopefully learn the critical lessons of faith and growth-oriented outlooks.

Next Week: Korach - Rebels & Revolutions: Learning the Lessons