

Becoming G-d's People

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* begins with the well-known tale of woe known as the “*Chet Hameraglim*” (“the Sin of the Spies”). The *Mishnah* in *Taanit* 4:6, and the subsequent discussion in the *Talmud Bavli*, teach us that the Spies returned from their journey to *Eretz Yisrael* on the night of Tisha b’Av. Their interpretation of this journey caused the following reaction on the part of our ancestors:

- 14:1 The entire community raised a hubbub and began to shout. That night, the people wept.
- 14:2-3 All the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron. The entire community was saying, ‘We wish we had died in Egypt! We should have died in this desert! Why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by the sword? Our wives and children will be captives! It would be best to go back to Egypt!’
- 14:4 The people started saying to one another, ‘Let's appoint a [new] leader and go back to Egypt.’ (Translation by Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*, emphasis my own.)

Our ancestors’ response, as the *Mishnah* notes, led to the Divine decree that forbade nearly all Jews of the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert) from entering the Promised Land: “*B’Tisha b’Av nigzar al avotainu she’lo yichnasu l’aretz.*” Moreover, our Sages note, that *lail Tisha b’Av* (the night of the 9th of Av) has been set aside for misery and destruction ever since that ill-fated time.

Strangely enough, however, the pejorative word “*meraglim*” (“spies”) is never used in our *parasha*. In fact, the princes of the tribes who set forth on this unfortunate mission were called by the honorific title “*anashim*” (“men”). As Rashi (1040-1105) notes:

“Every instance of the term *anashim* that appears in the text of the Torah is a term of distinction [literally importance]. At that time they were righteous.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:3, translation my own) The princes’ task was clearly defined as one of exploring (“*v’yaturu*”), searching (“*vayaturu*”), and examining (“*meture*,” *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:2, 13:21, and 13:25). In addition, the infinitive form of the verb “*latur*” (to seek out or to discover) is found in 13:16. If this is the case, why are these noble and upright *anashim* known for all time as “the *meraglim*?”

In order to answer this question, we must turn to the first chapter of the final book of the Torah, *Sefer Devarim*. Herein, we find *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Our Teacher Moshe) reviewing the history of the trials and tribulations of the *Dor Hamidbar*. Not too surprisingly, he focuses upon the failure of the tribal leaders in our *parasha*. It is in this context that the Torah explicitly states that the men **spied out the land** (*v’yiraglu otah*), instead of exploring or discovering it as they had been commanded:

20. And I said to you, "You have come to the mountain of the Amorites, which the L-d, our G-d, is giving us.

21. Behold, the L-d, your G-d, has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-d, G-d of your fathers has spoken to you; you shall neither fear nor be dismayed."

22. And all of you approached me and said, "Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come."

23. And the matter pleased me; so I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe.

24. And they turned and went up to the mountain, and they came to the valley of Eshkol **and spied it out**. (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own).

Our Sages note, in their trenchant homiletical analysis of *Sefer Devarim* 1:22, that the *Meraglim* apparently had evil intentions from the onset of their journey. Thus we find in *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 34b:

“That they search the land for us” — R. Hiyya b. Abba said: The spies aimed at nothing else than discrediting the land of Israel. Here it is written: That they may search [ve-

yahperu] the land for us, and elsewhere it is written: “Then the moon shall be confounded [*ve-chaferah*] and the sun ashamed etc” [Isaiah 24:23]. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*)

What transformed these great and noble men, these universally recognized leaders, into mere “spies?” My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), suggests that their grievous error and subsequent downfall resulted from their radical misconception and consequent misperception of the nature of the Land of Israel. This is best viewed in contrast to the manner in which Moshe perceived *Eretz Yisrael*:

Moses regarded the land not only in a political or physical light, but also as an exalted everlasting union. A singular *segulah* people, special to G-d, was being joined to a singular land, from which G-d’s attention is never withdrawn. Destinies were being joined...

Moses expected the scouts to note the *segulah* singularity of the land, to perceive its worthiness in terms of Abraham’s covenant with G-d.

Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that the *Meraglim* acted in total contradistinction to Moshe’s perception of Eretz Yisrael:

They explored the area from the desert of Zin to Rehob, leading to Hamath, but they viewed the land as one would appraise property. Their report was that of spies, not that of scouts; they balanced debits against credits and declared the entire enterprise hopeless. With grandeur looking down on them, all they could see was the mundane. (*Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. I, pages 122-123)

The *Meraglim* had the opportunity and obligation to discover and identify the singular nature of the Land, and to view it as an everlasting covenant between Hashem and our people. Tragically, however, they perceived it in purely naturalistic and militaristic terms. Thus they failed in their ultimate mandate - to recognize the *kedushah* (holiness) and G-d given nature of *Eretz Yisrael*.

As Jews, it continues to be our task to hear the Voice emanating from Mount Sinai. We are very fortunate to be members of the most democratic societies in the history of

mankind. This, however, is a double-edged sword. The secular world calls out to us in siren-like fashion and proudly proclaims that it possesses truth and authentic moral values. Yet, they are relativistic in nature, i.e. they change with the times and blow with the wind. In stark contrast, our holy Torah provides us with a permanent and divine moral and ethical code that is the very Voice of the Almighty. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us, as well, to recognize the “grandeur looking down” upon us, and repudiate that which is false and mundane. With G-d’s help, if we focus upon this great spiritual task, we can reject the path of the *Meraglim*, and embrace the role and obligations of true *anshai Hashem* (people of Hashem). May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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