

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Shelah-Lekha Part I

1. Introduction

With Israel on the threshold of entering the promised land, G-d instructs Moses, "Send you forth men to reconnoiter the land of Canaan...one man, one man for each tribe...each a chieftain" (Num. 13:2). The key word that defines the mission, here translated "reconnoiter," is וַיִּתְּרֵהוּ,* which has the sense of "go around," traverse and explore. The twelve selectees are described as כָּלֵם אֲנָשִׁים, ("all were men"), that is, all were men of competence and courage, a phrase that probably also connotes martial proficiency (see 1 Sam. 4:9; 26:15). Such characteristics would be helpful on the mission and would render their report influential. It should be noted that G-d did not indicate who the chieftains should be as He previously did in the case of the census (Num. 1:5 ff.) and as He later did in the case of dividing the land (34:16 ff.).

Since G-d had previously described the land as good and promised the Israelites success in conquering it, His intention with a scouting mission may have been to inspire the people with a glowing report to proceed toward it enthusiastically and with a full measure of trust in Him. They also would benefit from the military intelligence that they would garner since divine guidance does not exempt man from exerting his best efforts in accordance with the natural order of the world.

Moses instructed the scouts to inspect the land and the people that dwell in it, "are they strong or weak, few or many," is the land "good or bad," "fat or lean," does it have many trees and what is the nature of their cities, are they encampments or fortified? He also asked them to bring back samples of the land's produce. There is no hint that Moses received these instructions from G-d. Indeed, the reader is surprised by some of the questions he asked them to answer, for they could be misinterpreted as an expression of doubt on critical matters. Moses' formulation of instructions might have stemmed from overconfidence in the

trustworthiness of the scouts, or it perhaps reflected the requests of the Israelites.

Upon their return after forty days of traversing the land, ten of the scouts gave a negative report. The inhabitants of Canaan were fierce, the cities were greatly fortified, they saw giants there and various local nations were solidly entrenched throughout the land. When the Israelites heard this they lost trust in G-d's promise and feared to proceed. They complained bitterly, bemoaning their having left Egypt. Joshua and Caleb – two of the scouts – contradicted the other ten and expressed confidence in the enterprise, but the people were no longer receptive; the positive report merely provoked them to greater despair. In short order a major rebellion set in. G-d informed Moses that He was prepared to destroy the nation and start a new nation with him.

The lesson learned at the time of Israel's golden calf transgression is relevant here: Prayer could avert the decree. Moses immediately begins an impassioned plea on behalf of Israel. He raises the matter of how the neighboring nations would wrongly interpret the destruction of Israel and how it would diminish their respect for Hashem after He had accomplished so much for appreciation of His power and His providence over Israel. Moses also invokes G-d's characteristics of mercy that He Himself had revealed to Moses (Exod. 34:6-7) when He forgave Israel for the golden calf transgression.

G-d relents and decides on a different approach. The Israelites were to remain in the wilderness for forty years as retribution for the forty days of the scouts' mission, until the present generation passed away. At that time their children would enter the land. (Time already spent in the wilderness – a year and some months – would count toward the forty years.)

There are aspects of congruence between this case and that of the golden calf. In that episode, just as the

lawgiving was being finalized with Moses bringing down the tablets, the Israelites violated the covenant. Here, as the Exodus enterprise was on the verge of its conclusion with the Israelites preparing to enter the promised land, they violated another aspect of the covenant. In both cases G-d informs Moses of His intention to destroy Israel, Moses prays on behalf of the nation and G-d accepts his prayer, at least to a great degree. The prayers, although different, share many similarities.

2. On G-d's Intentions

The Rambam viewed the Israelites' failure as reflecting the natural human tendency of being unable to achieve a rapid transition from one mode of thinking and living to the opposite. A nation long mired in slavery cannot suddenly become a courageous entity prepared to battle for its independent nationhood. He understood G-d's decree of forty years in the wilderness as designed to provide the Israelites time for national maturing and a setting which would bring a necessary correction, allowing a new generation, unencumbered with slavish attitudes, to come of age. The long stint in the wilderness would also help discipline the nation to obey G-d (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:32).

A divine intention along these lines, although to a limited degree, had been manifest immediately after the Exodus. Then, "G-d did not lead them by the route of the land of the Philistines, although (or because) it was close, for G-d said 'lest the nation have a change of heart when they see war and return to Egypt'" (Exod. 13:17). The Israelites may not have been sufficiently mature to withstand military confrontation. That deferment was intended to last for a relatively short period of time.

S. D. Luzatto also saw the forty-year decree as a manifestation of divine wisdom in that it created the invaluable opportunity for the Israelites to remain under the extended guidance and influence of Moses. Had they entered Canaan promptly, they would have settled all over the land while still religiously immature and the revolutionary religion of Israel could not have taken permanent root.

We must be cautious with such interpretations. If there was such a great need for the Israelites to spend forty years in the wilderness, why did G-d not plan it

so from the beginning, independent of the transgression? And why was He so angry with the people to the point of considering to annihilate them if they possessed such a strong predilection against going to battle that they could not have been expected to proceed to the land at that time?

Luzatto defends his position by positing that G-d had basically intended from the beginning that the Israelites should spend forty years in the wilderness. However, in accordance with the free will He instilled in human beings, He granted the Israelites the opportunity to quickly mature spiritually under the influence of the wondrous divine intervention they witnessed and the extraordinary guidance they were provided with. In this way they could have proved themselves deserving and capable of entering the land in short order. They failed the test and the original plan was implemented.

It appears more faithful to the text to assume that after G-d's wondrous doings on behalf of the Israelites and the Mount Sinai experience, He did, indeed, expect them to have fully trusted in Him and proceed to enter the land. But once they sinned, it is possible that He chose to mete out retribution that embodied the sociological and educative benefits that these commentators pointed out.

Additionally, the retribution of the parents dying out over forty years provided the children the benefit of growing up in a normal family setting rather than be a generation of orphans, with all the problems that would have entailed.

3. On the Names

Except for Caleb and Joshua, the names of the men selected for this venture are not attested elsewhere in Scripture. Rabbi S. D. Sassoon suggested that these names possessed meanings relevant to the context, representative of special qualities required for such a mission. Of course, in metaphoric usage both the personal name and that of the father are relevant. Much of the following is taken from the rabbi's lectures.

The first scout mentioned, *Shamu'a* the son of *Zakur*, points to an individual who has the ability to "hear, and remember what he hears," a valuable trait for one who would bring back accurate information. The

names of three individuals translate as “secrecy” or “concealment” of one form or another, indicating the facility to operate clandestinely, namely: *Gadiel* the son of *Sodi*, *Setur* and *Nahabi*. In the case of the latter, his father’s name, *Wofsi* (װפֿסי), also appears to be associated with concealment. Scholars widely acknowledge that *Wofsi* is an anomalous name, unlike any of Semitic origin. It very likely is an anagram of *Yosef*. Thus, this name attributes concealment by employing the name of the one who had been the master of deception in dealing with his brothers.

Three scouts had names of animals, seemingly indicating that they possessed the characteristics typified by these animals. Caleb means dog. This animal possesses an extraordinary ability to sense sound and scent and follow a trail, valuable qualities on such a mission. That Caleb is “the son of *Yefuneh*” apparently refers to his knack of knowing which way to turn, a good description of the dog’s special ability. A dog also represents loyalty to his master and was employed as a metaphor for this characteristic in ancient Near Eastern literature. *Gadi* the son of *Soosi* denotes a horse or a swift runner. ‘*Ami’el* the son of *Gemali* invokes the characteristic of a camel and probably indicates the capability to persist for a lengthy period of time without need for fresh supplies of food or water. The dog, horse and camel are widely recognized as primary examples of the traits being represented.

The names of four scouts connote the hope of being “saved” or “rescued,” or of “escaping,” presumably from a dangerous situation: *Yig’al*, *Hoshe’a*, *Palti* and *Geu’el*.

One scout had a name that indicates he derived from Canaanite stock, or may himself have been a Canaanite absorbed in Israel, *Shafat* the son of *Hori*. He apparently stemmed from the Horite tribe (see Gen. 36:21), an inestimable advantage in such an enterprise. *Shafat* may be a comment on his possessing “judgment.” *Caleb* the son of *Yefuneh* also seemed to have stemmed from Canaanite stock, from the Kenizzite tribe, as he is sometimes referred to with the appellation “the Kenizzite” (Num. 32:12; Josh. 14:6, 14, all attestations that refer to an aspect or other of the case of the scouts). But he is not described as the Kenizzite in our passage.

4. A Most Significant Variation

Besides our Numbers narrative (Num. 13–14) there is one other detailed account of the reconnoitering of the promised land in the Torah – that related by Moses in his fortieth-year review (Deut. 1:22-45). The two accounts vary in so many ways that it is difficult to reconcile the two in a satisfactory manner without resorting to some form of higher midrashic interpretation. The principle that “Torah speaks in the language of man” is clearly relevant in a number of ways when interpreting G-d’s prophetic communication. Since antiquity, the tradition has acknowledged that a full understanding of certain aspects of the Torah requires some degree of esoteric explication or allegory. As an author may transmit a message through prodding the reader to think more deeply into what on the surface appear to be inconsistent accounts, so too does the Torah. When the interpretative key is discovered, bumps are smoothed and the full message shines through. That is what *peshat* refers to, the intended meaning, an understanding not always accessible at the surface.

The most salient difference between the two accounts is that in Numbers 13 Hashem explicitly instructs Moses to send the men, there being no hint whatsoever of a human role in the plan’s origination. In Deuteronomy 1, Moses recounts that “you approached me” (ׁוּתְקַרְבוּן אֵלַי בְּלָקֶם) with the proposal, “and the matter found favor in my eyes” (ׁוַיִּטַב בְּעֵינַי) (הִדְבַּר), which he promptly proceeded to implement. G-d’s involvement in the plan’s initiation is not there alluded to in any manner or form; neither is there a Deuteronomy counterpart to the Numbers statement that Moses sent the men “at Hashem’s behest” (עַל פִּי ה').

Although in Deuteronomy 1 Moses does not refer to G-d’s “sending” of the spies, some have seen an allusion to it later in that book. When Moses once again touched upon this subject, he said: “And when Hashem sent you from Kadesh-barnea...and you did not have faith in Him” (ׁוַיִּשְׁׁח ה' אֶתְכֶם מִקֶּדֶשׁ בַּרְנֵעַ... וְלֹא אִמַּנְתֶּם לּוֹ [Deut. 9:23]). This statement seems connected to the passage in Deuteronomy 1 and contains several literary affinities with it. Others view that “And when Hashem sent you” statement as referring to general instructions that G-d gave to the Israelites in sending them to the promised land, not to the detail of sending spies. However, this would be an unusual usage, as we do not think of Him “sending” the nation to the promised land but “bringing” or “leading” it there.

On the other hand, that וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' verse of 9:23 speaks of “go up and possess the land,” terminology surely directed to the nation, not apropos to the limited task of the spies, and contains no explicit mention of their mission. Perhaps it is a contraction, referring to the scouts in their capacity of being the vanguard of the nation, leading it into the land, to “go up and possess.” Or perhaps – considering his multiple audiences – Moses wanted to allude to G-d’s “sending” of the spies without dwelling on the point.

5. Attempts at Harmonization

Some sages translate Hashem’s opening words of Numbers 13 – וְלָךְ – as “send for yourself,” in the sense of “if you desire to send you may do so, but it is your project, not Mine” (*b. Sotah* 34b). Thus, Moses did not cite Hashem’s “command” in Deuteronomy since there was no command.

However, the *lekha* in *shelah-lekha* does not appear to denote “if you so choose,” but rather embellishes the second person case of the verb, leaving the phrase as a command. This would be similar to the cases of *‘aseh-lekha* (Gen. 6:14), *lekh-lekha* (Gen. 12:1), *qah-lekha* (Exod. 30:34), etc. Also, as Hashem follows his introductory clause with specifics, that the men to be sent should be one from each tribe and all chieftains, and as Moses sends them “at the command of Hashem,” this interpretation must be deemed aggadic, unacceptable as peshat.

A popular approach to what is considered a somewhat straightforward reconciliation of this matter (without resort to allegory) is to take the Deuteronomy suggestion by the people and Moses’ approval as preliminary to Hashem’s command recounted in Numbers. The latter account, beginning after Hashem accepts the plan, is then presented as the official narrative of the event. Omission of the idea’s origination may be based on the principle that once Hashem adopts an idea and incorporates it in His program, its history generally becomes irrelevant.

Advocates of this view assume that on occasion, for a suitable reason, the origination of an appropriated idea might be recalled while its subsequent history is omitted. They conjecture that Moses did that in Deuteronomy because he thought it would be counterproductive to his purpose to bring up Hashem’s involvement in a project that turned out to

be such an abject failure. He was speaking shortly before he was to pass away and he had just begun a historical-motivational discourse preparing the nation for a reaffirmation of the covenant on the threshold of their crossing into the promised land. It was not the moment to touch upon a sensitive issue that many of the new generation might misunderstand. It might stir resentment toward Hashem or diminish His glory in the eyes of some. It may be countered, of course, that not bringing up the point of Hashem having adopted the suggestion would make Moses vulnerable to the accusation of not being completely forthright but presenting a partial view. Many in his audience would remember the original event and hence undermine his credibility. But, it is maintained, that decision was Moses’ judgment call.

Such reconciliation between the accounts has been seen as an example of a feature of G-d’s relationship with man. Often, His intentions regarding a course of action for man are not revealed to the individual – perhaps not even determined – until that person has proved his desire or readiness for that particular course of action. Before Jacob was given the prophecy instructing him to depart for home from Laban, the text described circumstances that would naturally direct Jacob’s thoughts to recognize that the time had come to return home. He overheard Laban’s sons complaining about him and the assets he had accumulated and he detected an attitudinal change for the worse toward him on Laban’s part (Gen. 31:1-3). The situation was pointing in the direction for Jacob to identify with the subsequent divine call to leave.

Concerning Moses, it appears that subsequent to his theophany at the burning bush, but before he received Hashem’s specific instructions to return to Egypt, he had decided it was time to return there. It seems that when he received the actual call to depart he had already informed Jethro of his plans, received his blessings, and was preparing to depart (Exod. 4:18-19). Hashem’s instructions blend in with the indications of the situation as understood by the protagonists involved. Had the individual not thought out his situation and become prepared for a particular course of action, the prophetic instructions may not have come. But once the divine command is transmitted it defines the mission and preliminary considerations are irrelevant. As with an individual, so with a nation. Thus, it is maintained that had the people not proposed the idea of sending spies G-d

may not have commanded sending them, but once His command is given it is His project.

Continuing along these lines, some have understood the people's very initiation of the idea to reconnoiter the land to be sinful. They should have trusted in G-d's promises and advanced toward the promised land without further ado. They interpret His *shelah*□*lekha* command as a case of His having intervened to improve a bad situation. If the Israelites were going to send men, they should do it properly. The details of the Numbers prophecy corrected some of the shortcomings of the original plan, accounting for some of the variations, and was thus 'al pi Hashem.

Others have countered that sending spies is not only permissible, but an appropriate tactic of human enterprise, consistent with the demands of the Torah. Moses subsequently sent spies before battling Jazer (Num. 21:32) and Joshua did so before moving against Jericho (Josh. 2:1). The reason this particular mission went badly was not because of the decision to send spies. They note that there is no explicit reprimand to the people for the proposal. However, it appears that Moses may have alluded to Hashem's anger at him for having permitted the enterprise to proceed (Deut. 1:37), as we will point out shortly.

Regardless of whether the people did or did not err in requesting the spies, advocates of harmonization maintain that once Hashem appropriated the project many details did change. Thus, the key words describing the mission in the two accounts are very different. In Deuteronomy we read וַיִּקְפְּרוּ לָנוּ (Deut. 1:22), a term based on the word for "digging" and וַיִּרְגְּלוּ אֹתָהּ (Deut. 1:24), an expression that denotes "spying." Various forms of the *r-g-l* stem are the common biblical terms for spies and spying (see Gen. 42:9 ff.; Num. 21:32; Josh. 2:1; 7:2, 14:7; Judg. 18:2).

The Numbers account, on the other hand, consistently uses various forms of the root תּוּר, "go around" or "tour," hence "scout." Because of the significant number of attestations of this root in our narrative this cannot be thought to be unintentional.* In addition,

תּוּר is the identical word used for the ark traveling before the nation when searching for a proper resting station, לְתוּר לָהֶם מְנוּחָה (Num. 10:33). Revealingly, it is also the word employed by Moses in Deuteronomy several verses following his review of the episode we are discussing. There, he describes an aspect of Hashem's leadership of the nation in scouting an appropriate resting stop for them with לְתוּר לָכֶם מְקוֹם לְהִנְתַּכֵּם ("to scout for you a place for your encamping" [Deut. 1:33]). The Numbers account unflinchingly rejects use of words such as וַיִּקְפְּרוּ and וַיִּרְגְּלוּ.

It appears that Hashem omitted use of the word for spies or spying in the Numbers passage because He was commanding the mission and He stood behind it. He sanctioned traveling around to see the land, an activity consistent with making the land appealing to the people who would hear its praises and become more motivated and eager to proceed toward it. Nevertheless, the human dimension remained focused to a degree on spying and secrecy as seen from some of the details and from the names of the men.

Some have added that if the Numbers account followed the people's request, Moses' instructions to report on whether the land was "good or bad" and on the military condition of the inhabitants may be more understandable. It may not have been his idea but reflected the desire of the people, notwithstanding that in Deuteronomy he chose not to include those details in his review.

Endnote

* The root תּוּר is attested twelve times in the scout episode (13:2, 16, 17, 21, 25, 32a, 32b; 14:6, 7, 34, 36, 38) and a thirteenth time at the end of our *parasha* in Hashem's instructions regarding *s□is□it* (15:39). The latter passage is clearly linked to the scout narrative (see our study *On Parashat S□is□it*). Regarding significance of thirteen, see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.