

## Unpacking the Sin of the Spies

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### Introduction: The Main Sources

#### 1. Bamidbar 13

(2) "Send for yourself men, that they may scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one man each for his father's tribe; each one shall be a chieftain among them." (3) Moshe sent them from the Wilderness of Paran according to God's word; all of them were leaders of the children of Israel.

(17) Moshe sent them to scout the land of Canaan, and said to them: "Go up this way in the south and climb the mountain. (18) See the land, what it is; and the people who dwell in it, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. (19) And what is the land in which they dwell, whether it is good or bad; and what are the cities in which they dwell, whether in camps or in fortresses. (20) And what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood in it or not. Strengthen yourselves and take of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

(26) They went and came to Moshe, Aharon, and the entire congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to the entire congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. (27) They told him and said: "We came to the land to which you sent us, and it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. (28) However, the people who dwell in the land are powerful, and the cities are very greatly fortified; moreover, we saw the children of the giant there. (29) Amalek dwells in the south land, the Hittite, the Jebusite, and the Amorite dwell in the

#### 1. במדבר יג

(ב) שִׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטֵּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלַחוּ כָּל נָשִׂיא בָהֶם: (ג) וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּאָרָן עַל פִּי ה' כָּלֶם אַנְשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה:

(יז) וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים עָלוּ זֶה בְּנֹגֵב וְעֲלִיתֶם אֶת הָהָר: (יח) וַרְאִיתֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ מֵהָרְפָה הַמַּעֲט הוּא אִם רַב: (יט) וּמֵהָ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא יֹשֵׁב בָּהּ הַטּוֹבָה הוּא אִם רָעָה וּמֵהָ הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר הוּא יֹשֵׁב בָּהֶנָּה הַבְּמַחְנִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים: (כ) וּמֵהָ הָאָרֶץ הַשְּׂמֵנָה הוּא אִם רְזָה הִישׁ בָּהּ עֵץ אִם אֵין וְהִתְחַזַּקְתֶּם וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהִימִים יְמֵי בְכוּרֵי עֲנָבִים:

(כו) וַיָּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶל כָּל עֵדֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל מִדְבַּר פָּאָרָן קְדֻשָּׁה וַיִּשְׁבּוּ אוֹתָם דְּבַר וְאֵת כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת פְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ: (כז) וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בָּאֲנֹנוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתֵּנוּ וְגַם זָבַת חֶלֶב דָּבַשׁ הוּא זֶה פְּרִיָּהּ: (כח) אֲפֹס כִּי עַז הָעָם הִישָׁב בָּאָרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלֹת מְאֹד וְגַם יְלָדֵי הָעֵנָק רָאִינוּ שָׁם: (כט) עַמְלֹק יֹשֵׁב בָּאָרֶץ הַנֹּגֵב וְהַחֲתִי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי יֹשֵׁב בְּהָר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יֹשֵׁב עַל הַיָּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן: (ל) וַיִּהְיֶה כָּלֵב אֶת הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלֵה וַיִּרְשְׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי יָכוֹל נוֹכַל לָהּ: (לא) וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוֹכַל לַעֲלוֹת אֶל הָעָם כִּי חָזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: (לב) וַיּוֹצִיאוּ דְבַת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אֶרֶץ אֲכָלֹת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא וְכָל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מְדוּת: (לג) וְשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֵנָק מִן הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחַגְבִּים וְכֹן הִינּוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם:

<p><u>mountains, and the Canaanite dwells by the sea and by the Jordan.</u>" (30) Calev silenced the people toward Moshe and said: "We shall surely go up and take possession of it, for we can certainly do it!" (31) But the men who had gone up with him said: "We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." (32) <u>They brought forth to the children of Israel an evil report on the land which they had scouted, saying: "The land through which we passed to scout is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of great stature. (33) There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants; we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes."</u></p>	
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<p><b>2. Devarim 1</b>  <u>(22) Then all of you approached me and said: "Let us send men ahead of us that they may scout the land for us, and bring back word to us of the road by which we should go up and the cities we shall come to."</u> (23) The plan pleased me, and I took from you twelve men, one man for each tribe.</p>	<p><b>2. דברים א</b>  (כב) ותקרבו אלי כלכם ותאמרו נשלחה אנשים לפנינו ויחפרו לנו את הארץ וישבו אתנו דבר את הדרך אשר נעלה בה ואת הערים אשר נבא אליהן:  (כג) וייתב בעיני הדבר ואקח מכם שנים עשר אנשים איש אחד לשבט:</p>
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- Why was the sin of the spies so severe that it led to an entire generation dying in the desert and never entering Israel?
- What was the spies' actual sin?
- What lessons are we meant to learn from this story?

### Option 1: Lack of Faith

<p><b>3. Rashi on Bamidbar 13:2</b>  "Send for yourself": <u>For your own benefit, as you see fit. I do not command you; if you wish, send.</u> Since Israel came and said, "Let us send men before us," as it says in Devarim (1:22),</p>	<p><b>3. רש"י על במדבר י"ג:ב</b>  שלח לך: לדעתך. אני איני מצווה לך. אם תרצה שלח. לפי שבאו ישראל ואמרו נשלחה אנשים לפנינו, כמו שנאמר בדברים, נמלך משה במקום. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אני אמרתי להם שהיא טובה, חיייהם</p>
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Moshe took counsel with God. God said: I told them it is good [the land]. By their lives, I will give them the opportunity to err through the words of the spies, so that they will not inherit it.

שאני נותן להם מקום לטעות על פי המרגלים כדי שלא יירשנה.

#### 4. Bamidbar Rabbah 16:7

To what is this comparable? To a king who said to his son: "Go and take yourself a wife." The son replied: "I want to see her first." The king thought: If I refuse, he will say she must be ugly and I am hiding it. He said: "Go and see." But he swore to himself: He will not benefit from her. So too, God said to Israel: "The land is good." They said: We want to see it first. God said: By your lives, you will not enter it.

#### 4. במדבר רבה ט"ז:ז

למה הדבר דומה? למלך שאמר לבנו לך וקח לך אשה. אמר לו הבן רוצה אני לראותה תחלה. אמר המלך בלבו אם אמנע ממנו יאמר מכערת היא ואתה מסתירה. אמר לו לך וראה. ונשבע בלבו שלא יהנה ממנה. כך הקדוש ברוך הוא אמר לישראל טובה הארץ. אמרו רוצים אנו לראותה תחלה. אמר חייכם שלא תכנסו לה.

#### 5. Ramban on Bamidbar 13

**13:2** But the explanation of this subject is as follows: The Israelites wanted [to act] in the way that all those who come to wage war in a foreign country do, namely to send out men to become acquainted with the roads and entrances to the cities; so that when they return [from their mission], the scouts will go at the head of the army, to show them the way...

Now this is the correct guidance [to give] to anyone who [plans to] conquer a country. And so did Moses himself do, as it is said, *And Moses sent to spy out Jazer*, and Joshua the son of Nun also [sent] *two spies*. It was for this reason that [the people's request to send out scouts] pleased Moses, for Scripture does not [allow man] to rely on a miracle in any of its affairs. Instead, it commands those who go out to battle to arm themselves, to take [all necessary] precautions...

#### רמב"ן על במדבר י"ג

**י"ג:ב** אבל ישוּב הענין בזה, כי ישראל אמרו כדרך כל הבאים להלחם בארץ נכריה, ששולחים לפניהם אנשים לדעת הדרכים ומבוא הערים, ובשובם ילכו התרים בראש הצבא להורות לפניהם הדרכים...

וזו עצה הגונה בכל כובשי ארצות, וכן עשה עוד משה עצמו שנאמר: "וישלח משה לרגל את יעזר" (במדבר כ"א:ל"ב), וכן ביהושע בן נון: "שנים אנשים מרגלים" (יהושע ב א). ועל כן היה טוב בעיני משה, כי הכתוב לא יסמך בכל מעשיו על הנס, אבל יצוה בנלחמים להחלץ ולהשמר...

אז נמלך משה בשכינה ונתן לו השם רשות ואמר לו, "שלח לך אנשים ויתורו את ארץ כנען" וידעוה ויגידו לכם, ועל פיהם תתיעצו בענין הכבוש.

Then Moses consulted the Divine Presence and G-d gave him permission, saying, "Send thee men, that they may spy out the land of Canaan and become acquainted with it, and bring back a report to you, and according to their information you should take counsel regarding the conquest."

**13:27** Now in all this they said the truth, and gave a report about those matters which they had been commanded [to find out], therefore they should [indeed] have said [as in fact they did] that *the people that dwell in the Land are fierce and the cities are fortified... But the wickedness of the spies consisted in saying the word ephes* ["nevertheless" – 'Nevertheless'], which signifies something negative and beyond human capability, something impossible of achievement... Thus the spies told Moses that the Land is fertile and surely it floweth with milk and honey and the fruits are good, but it is impossible to fight against the people because they are fierce, and the cities are fortified, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there.

**י"ג:כז** והנה בכל זה אמרו אמת והשיבו על מה שנצטוו, והיה להם לאמר שהעם היושב עליה עז והערים בצורות... אבל רשעם במלת אפס, שהיא מורה על דבר אפס ונמנע מן האדם שאי אפשר בשום ענין... והנה אמרו לו הארץ שמנה וגם זבת חלב ודבש והפרי טוב, אבל אי אפשר לבא אליהם כי עז העם והערים בצורות גדלות מאד, וגם ילידי הענק ראינו שם:

## Option 2: Not Understanding the Assignment

### 6. Yehoshua 2

(1) Yehoshua bin Nun secretly sent two men from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, inspect the land and Jericho." They went and came to the house of a prostitute named Rachav, and lay there. (2) The king of Jericho was told: "Some men have come here tonight, Israelites, to spy on the country." (3) The king of Jericho sent orders to Rachav: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, for they have come to spy out the entire country."

### 6. יהושע ב

(א) וישלח יהושע בן נון מן השטים שנים אנשים מרגלים חרש לאמר לכו ראו את הארץ ואת יריחו ויכלו ויבאו בית אשה זונה ושמה רחב וישכבו שמה: (ב) ויאמר למלך יריחו לאמר הנה אנשים באו הנה הלילה מבני ישראל לחפר את הארץ: (ג) וישלח מלך יריחו אל רחב לאמר הוציאי האנשים הבאים אליך אשר באו לביתך כי לחפר את כל הארץ באו:

Yehoshua 1	Bamidbar 13
2 soldiers	12 tribal chiefs
Secret: report only to Yehoshua	Public: Report to people and Moshe
Uses word לרגל	Uses word לתור

<p><b>7. Bereishit 42</b></p> <p>(9) Yosef remembered the dreams he had dreamed about them. He said to them: "<u>You are spies</u>; you have come to see the nakedness of the land."</p>	<p><b>7. בראשית מב</b></p> <p>(ט) ויזכר יוסף את החלמות אשר חלם להם ויאמר אלהם <u>מרגלים אתם לראות את ערות הארץ באתם:</u></p>
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<p><b>8. Yehoshua 18</b></p> <p>(2) Seven tribes still remained among the Israelites who had not yet received their portions. (3) Yehoshua said to the Israelites: "How long will you neglect to go and take possession of the land which God, the God of your ancestors, has assigned to you? <u>Designate three men from each tribe; I will send them to go and traverse the land and write a description of it for the purposes of their inheritance.</u> Then they shall come back to me."</p>	<p><b>8. יהושע יח</b></p> <p>(ב) ויותרו בבני ישראל אשר לא חלקו את נחלתם שבעה שבטים: (ג) ויאמר יהושע אל בני ישראל עד אנה אתם מתרפים לבוא לרשת את הארץ אשר נתן לכם ה' אלהי אבותיכם: <u>הבו לכם שלשה אנשים לשבט ואשלחם ויקומו ויתהלכו בארץ ויכתבו אותה לפי נחלתם ויבאו אלי:</u></p>
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<p><b>9. Bereishit 13</b></p> <p>(17) <u>Rise, walk through the land, its length and its breadth, for I will give it to you.</u></p>	<p><b>9. בראשית יג</b></p> <p>(יז) <u>קום התהלך בארץ לארצה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה:</u></p>
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<p><b>10. Reflections of the Rav, Vol. One, Lessons in Jewish thought adapted from the lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik by Abraham R. Besdin:</b></p> <p><u>The union of the people of Israel with the land of Israel is comparable to a marriage. The crossing of the Jordan River involved more than geographical movement; it represented a marriage between the people and the land,</u> a union of rocky hills and sandy trails with a people whose future destiny is to this day bound up with the state and welfare of the land...</p>
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... This, we suggest, was the reason Moses was told to send scouts into the land - not to gather intelligence, but to have the distinguished heads of each tribe explore the land and bring back reports of its singular character... by entering the land, the people were being wedded to it and, despite Divine assurances of its quality, they had to experience it through their princes before the commitment could be deeply rooted and irrevocably assumed. (p. 121-122)

### Option 3: Merging Two Separate Missions

#### 11. Rav Yaakov Medan, Yeshivat Har Etzion, "[The Mission of the Spies](#)":

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)...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.

#### 12. Devarim 1:37

(37) God was also incensed with me on your account, saying: "You too shall not enter there."

#### 12. דברים א

(לז) גם בי התאנף ה' בגללכם לאמר גם אתה לא תבא שם:

### Option 4: Inability to See the Good

#### 13. Sins in Bamidbar:

- Complaint and punishment of Mitonanim (11:1-3)
- Asafsuf/people crying for meat and Egypt (11:4-10)
- Miriam and Aharon's lashon hara against Moshe (12:1-16)

**14. Rashi on Bamidbar 13:2**

Why is the section of the spies juxtaposed with the section of Miriam? Because Miriam was punished on account of the slanderous speech she uttered against her brother, and these wicked ones saw it but did not take a lesson from it.

14. רש"י על במדבר י"ג:ב – למה נסמכה פרשת מרגלים לפרשת מרים? לפי שלקתה מרים על עסקי דבה שספרה באחיה, ורשעים הללו ראו ולא לקחו מוסר.

**15. Rabbi Michael Hattin, Yeshivat Har Etzion, “[Of Spy Stories and Heroic Measures](#)”:**

The mission constitutes an attempt to resolve the spiritual and political crisis of the trek through Midbar Paran and to save the journey. By seeing and speaking good, the spies would have resolved the political crisis of the failing journey, freed the people from the grips of their spiritual malaise and brought the Children of Israel out of the shadows of death cast in Midbar Paran.

**16. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l , Covenant & Conversation, Lessons in Leadership, Parshat [Shelach Lecha](#), 5774, 5781:**

I prefer the word “hope” to “optimism.” Optimism is the belief that things will get better; hope is the belief that together we can make things better. No Jew, knowing Jewish history, can be an optimist, but no Jew worthy of the name abandons hope. The most pessimistic of the Prophets, from Amos to Jeremiah, were still voices of hope. By their defeatism, the spies failed as leaders and as Jews. To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope.