



Around the Shabbat Table

Shabbat Shelach 5762

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Introduction

The *parasha* tells us the story of the spies that Moses sent to investigate the land of Canaan in preparation for its conquest. For this assignment, he chose 12 men, each one a leader of one of the tribes of Israel.

The spies were given very specific instruction by Moses as to what information to bring back. The main content of the *parasha* is the spies' mission report and the consequences of that report.

The 12 men toured the land for 40 days. Upon their return at the end of the 40 days, the men returned with a sample of Canaan's large fruit, and a negative report, given ten of the twelve gave, frightening and discouraging the Israelites. As a result, the people rebelled against Moses and Aaron. They rejected the land of Canaan, asked to return to Egypt and, in a way, rejected God. The two spies who did not share the negative view were Joshua (the future leader) and Caleb. The two of them tried to calm the people and inject hope and faith into them, but to no avail. Instead, the Israelites attacked and stoned both Joshua and Caleb. God then threatened to wipe out the Israelites and instead make Moses' descendents into a great nation. Moses urged God, as he did earlier after the sin of the Golden Calf, to forgive and save the people. He told God that if the Israelites were destroyed, the Egyptians would say that God was powerless to bring them into the land of Canaan. God relented, deciding not to destroy the nation. The punishment given instead was that the spies, who bad-mouthed the land and instigated the people were to die. The generation that came out of Egypt was to die in the desert, and it was only the next generation that would be able to enter the land of Israel.

The central question that emerges as we study the *parasha* is: were the Israelites ready for the challenge of the conquest of the land? After all, they had only been out of slavery barely two years!

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

1. Why did Moses send so many men on this mission and why heads of the tribes?
2. Here is what Moses asked the spies to investigate. What information were they supposed to bring back?

"...Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land."... (Numbers 13:17-20)

And this is the spies' report:

"We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan."

"We cannot attack that people for it is stronger than we."

"The country that we traversed and scoured is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them." (Numbers 13:25-33)

A. Were the spies lying? What was the problem with their report? (Can you separate fact from opinion in their report?)

B. What did the spies really do wrong?

3. What did you think made the people think that there were *Nephilim* - giants - in the land?

4. The spies reported the following: "We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them." What lesson might we learn from the way the spies viewed themselves? Is there a connection between their feelings of inadequacy and their negative report? What would have helped them overcome it? Why didn't it?

5. Joshua and Caleb were courageous men. How did they show their courage? Do you think it was easy for them? Why did they do it? How would you have reacted in a similar situation?

6. Do you know people who speak up against evil even if it is not popular but who believe that they must speak up for what is just and correct? Discuss examples of such individuals.

7. Our parasha in 13:2 states that God instructed Moses to send the spies. But in Deuteronomy, the 5th book of the Torah, we read that it was at the people's urging that the spies were sent. Rashi, the best-known commentator from the 12th century, harmonized the two accounts by explaining that in our parasha, God gave Moses *permission* to send the spies.

A. Why might the people want to send spies to the Promised Land?

B. In what ways did this generation of the Israelites show that they are not worthy to enter the Promised Land?

C. How do we show that we are ready to accept responsibilities?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

The parasha ends with God commanding the Israelites the mitzvah of wearing tzitzit.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the generations; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each

corner. *That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; the Lord your God.”*

The fringes are a reminder of all the commandments in the Torah. The Midrash illustrates this with a story: *A person is thrown from a boat into water. The captain stretches out a rope and tells him to take hold of it, for his life depends on it. The rope, says the Midrash is like tzitzit, the drowning person is like the Jewish people and the captain is God. The tzitzit provides a lifeline, because adherence to the commandments is life itself.* (From *Teaching Torah*, ARE Publications)

1. Is there a connection between the story of the spies and tzitzit? What is it?
2. What are your lifelines to Judaism?
3. According to the rabbis, the decree that *“none of the men who have seen my presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness...shall see the land”*, was spoken on the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av. God’s judgment against the slave generation of the Israelites became the first of the tragic events associated with that date. Others include the destruction of the first and second temples.

Do you know other dates in the Jewish or the secular calendar which are associated with bad occurrences and disasters? What are they?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. Follow a current news story. See how the story is reported by different reporters on radio, newspapers and magazines. Do the reporters separate fact from opinions? What is the problem when they don't? Write a letter to the editor pointing to this problem.
2. Look for the motif of the spies, carrying giant clusters of grapes, on Israeli stamps and posters. Create your own poster or sculpture of these figures (or another motif) from the story of the spies. You can also put the design you choose on a Hallah cover or Sabbath tablecloth,

3. Create a board game based on the spy story. You may make it in the form of a maze.
4. Design two posters or travel brochures or take turns describing: one of the land of Canaan as seen by Caleb, and one of the land as seen by Joshua.
5. Learn more about the "blue thread" of the tzitzit. There are scientists in Israel who now believe that this discontinued part of the mitzva can now be restored. To learn more, see: <http://www.tekhelet.co.il/>

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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