

MISSING THE POINT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot ascend to that people, for it is too strong for us." They brought forth to the Bnei Yisrael an evil report on the Land that they had spied out, saying, "The Land through which we have passed...devours its inhabitants. All the people that we saw in it were of midos/ great measurement...We were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes."

Be'er Yosef: Rashi, citing the gemara^[2] expands upon the arguments of the ten spies, but leaves us with even more questions! In claiming that the inhabitants of the Land were "Too strong for us," says the gemara, they really meant that even Hashem himself could not dislodge them. Since the spies encountered funeral processions wherever they went, they concluded that the Land "devoured its inhabitants."

Shelah HaKadosh sees a common thread in all their arguments. The spies believed that they would hold on to their positions of authority so long as the people did not pass into the Land. Their goal was to delay the entry as long as possible, allowing them to continue their appointments. They therefore referred to the native inhabitants as "people of midos," meaning good character. Their point was that the Bnei Yisrael could not hope to take possession of the Land until the previous occupants became so thoroughly evil, that the Land would no longer abide their presence. This, claimed the spies, was just not the case. Hashem had told Avrohom centuries before that his descendents would not become masters of the Land until the iniquity of the earlier residents reached a threshold of evil. That had not taken place, said the spies. While it was the nature of the Land to "devour its inhabitants" when they behaved evilly, this had not happened to the people whom the spies encountered, who should be seen as people of *midos*, i.e. refined character. Not being evil enough to be ejected from the Land, the would-be next occupants would just have to wait.

We could add that the report of the spies that they observed funeral processions throughout the Land can be understood similarly. They argued that the citizens were upstanding people, who routinely ceased their activities to be able to provide the final show of *chesed* to the deceased, by accompanying them on their final journey.

Similarly, this Shelah helps us understand why the spies argued that not even G-d could dislodge the people from the Land – an argument that resides someplace between the blasphemous and the ludicrous. They did not mean that He was incapable of overpowering them. Rather, they argued that by the rules of justice that He Himself had established, the Canaanites could not be dispossessed,

because they were not guilty enough to deserve such a fate. In fact, in the eyes of the inhabitants of the Land, the Bnei Yisroel were like "grasshoppers" which swarm and plunder the crops laboriously tended by the rightful owners of property. Should the Bnei Yisroel attempt to take the Land by force, they would be seen as no more rightful and just than marauding grasshoppers.

The spies, of course, had twisted the meaning of what they observed for their own purposes. The unusual numbers of funeral processions they observed did not point to a society of chesed-oriented, sensitive people. Rather, HKBH caused a spike in deaths in order to provide cover for the spies who could then move about without being detected by a populace preoccupied with their grief.

Yet in some of their report, the spies seem to us to be faultless. "The people that dwells in the Land is powerful. The cities are fortified and very great. We also saw there the offspring of the giants."^[3] This was all entirely accurate, observe the commentators. Why do they seem to be criticized for this part of the report as well?

Here, too, the Shelah helps out. Hashem's purpose in sending the spies, he writes, was for them to report back that it would be impossible to conquer the Land through conventional tactics. Hashem wanted the people to understand that only through Divine assistance could they enter the Land. The spies were meant to increase the level of *bitachon*/ trust in Hashem of the *Bnei Yisroel*!

This provides us with a different way of understanding the "grasshopper" reference. Rashi at the beginning of Bereishis cites the famous question: Why begin a Torah which is first and foremost a book of law, with the story of Creation? R. Yitzchok's answer is that the nations of the world would point an accusing finger at us. "You are thieves who stole the land of the seven nations that rightfully possessed it." The Creation story shows G-d as Creator Who has the right to do with His creation as He sees fit, and Who chooses repeatedly to reward the good and punish the guilty – including by expelling evildoers from the Land.

The argument is troubling. Can it not be extended to mitigate every human theft? The thief will claim that his very success proves that he is the intended successor to a previous owner who is being punished for his sins by losing his right to ownership! We must conclude that the argument is specious – except under one set of circumstances. If it can be shown that the successor came to the property only through miraculous circumstances, then there is substance to the argument. Where the change in ownership could only come about through miraculous Divine intervention, we can conclude that it is with Divine approval.

The Canaanites indeed looked at the spies as grasshoppers – as unwanted pests ready to steal that to which they had no right. But just as G-d gave us the Creation story to equip us with the moral fiber to resist the accusations of the world community, so too did He give the generation of the Exodus the argument with which to defuse the charge that they were thieving pests, like grasshoppers. By learning of the great strength of the Canaanites and their cities – by understanding that the conquest

would take place through direct and miraculous Divine assistance - the Bnei Yisroel were meant to comprehend that Heaven itself was reassuring them of the Divine justice in their possession of the Land.

They missed the point, hearing only the voice of their accusers, but not the reassuring voice of their Divine protector.

[1] Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 13: 31-33

[2] Sotah 35A

[3] Bamidbar 13:28
