

# TO THAT DEGREE THEY COULD SEE

by Rabbi Label Lam

*And they (the spies) returned from scouting the land at the end of forty days. And they went and they came to Moshe and Aaron and the entire assembly of Israel...(Bamidbar 13:25-26)*

They went and they came....Their going was with a negative agenda and therefore their returning was with a negative report. (Rashi)

What was so wicked about the report of the spies? They spoke factually about the Holy Land and its inhabitants. They were big! Why such a big punishment? Forty years?! Death in the desert!?

The famous Nazi hunter, Simon Weisenthal related the following about himself. During WWII, into one of the concentration camps, a particularly "religious" inmate managed to sneak a miniature siddur at the risk of death. Mr. Weisenthal at first admired his courage but later his attitude changed. He became aware that this fellow was renting the siddur for fifteen minutes at a time for the steep price of a quarter of one day's meager rations. He grew thick and corpulent while others languished from hunger.

After the war in a DP Camp, Rabbi Eliezer Silver approached him and inquired as to why he had not participated in the prayer services. Simon Weisenthal told the story of how this person had used the siddur, and how that had soured his taste for matters religious. Rabbi Silver bluntly pointed out his foolishness, "You chose to focus on the one person who made "business" with his siddur while you failed to recognize the dozens of others who were willing to forego a quarter of a day's rations just to hold the siddur in their hands for a few moments!"

The spies presented larger than life fruits demonstrating that "if you think the fruit is big, you should see the people". First they fed the fears of the masses with the idea of the extraordinary strength of the land and its inhabitants. Secondly they testified that "it is a land that consumes its enemies". Our sages tell us that everywhere they went there were funerals of important people. HASHEM had arranged these distractions so that they should remain undetected. They wrongly concluded that it is must be a toxic place, not worthy of inhabiting. Which is it? Is it an extraordinarily healthy land that produces gigantic human specimens or is it a dangerous and unhealthy place? There is an obvious contradiction in their report.

A prisoner once brutally assaulted the Torah describing it as a book filled with debauchery and murder. He gave a few well known examples. My colleague was quick to point out that it was

interesting that he in particular had noticed only those things, and how he had failed to pick up on his radar screen those mountain peaks of human devotion. He explained that Torah is a picture of reality and life is very much a self-portrait. What we tend to focus on speaks volumes about us.

What the spies perceived was not objectively true. It was more a reflection of their-own agenda. What the world accepts as factual news or history depends entirely upon "who" the reporter or historian is. It would help to understand "why" these items have been singled out as being news-worthy or history-making from all that occurs in the course of a day in a world or in a thousand years. "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest" or so the singer sings. Therefore the discouraging report they delivered said more about them and those who were willing to quickly accept it, than it said about the quality of the Holy Land that HASHEM had promised. For that we needed a forty year detour in the desert so a new generation could absorb Torah and so to that degree they could see. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.