

THE LAND IS VERY, VERY GOOD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Land is Very, Very Good¹

Just what were they thinking? This preoccupation with spying out the land, so appealing that an entire people clamored to Moshe to make it happen - how did it make any sense to those for whom miracles were commonplace? The mind-bending miracles in Egypt, the crossing of the Sea, the constant representation of the presence of the *Shechinah* in their midst through the cloud leading them by day and the pillar of fire by night, all the while protected from the elements by the Clouds of Glory - was there anything in their immediate experience that was not miraculous? The impact of G-d's wonders upon each and every one of them was as close as the last meal - and the one before that, and before that. Water flowed in a wilderness from a rock; their bread arrived each day from Heaven. Surely they needed no convincing and no reminder of G-d's ability and willingness to lead them with no regard to the limitations of natural rules and laws. What information could spies give them? What understanding did they seek?

The words they used to explain what they were looking for does not seem to help our understanding of what was on their minds. They said they wished to find out whether the "land was good or bad."² Hashem had already described it as "flowing with milk and honey!"³ Did they not trust Him? Of what consequence was it to them if the "people that dwells in it is strong or weak?"⁴ Why did Moshe concur with the request, declaring it "good in my eyes?"⁵

The last question is the easiest one to answer. Chazal interpret the command *Shlach lecha*⁶ as "send according to your own understanding." This does not mean that Moshe was to take responsibility for the initiative, but that he should send the spies according to his own understanding of the need to spy out the land, not the mindset of the rest of the people.

Moshe saw no need to assess the physical parameters of the Land. He grasped the incredible holiness of the Land, and therefore realized that *Eretz Yisrael* would also be plagued by formidable forces of *tumah*. (This is one of the most basic laws of the spiritual makeup of the universe. Parity must always be maintained between the strengths of available good and its opposite.) Knowing the enemy - the spiritual enemy - is always appropriate. Moshe found it incumbent to learn "where" the forces of *tumah* in Israel would be found. Would they be strong and concentrated in a given location, or diffuse? Is a given area "good," in the sense of tending to produce people with good

character? If so, they would be forewarned about the kind of spiritual challenges waiting for them there. Such an area would demand a different spiritual struggle than an area that naturally produced people of bad character, whose *avodah* would need to start with the repair of their own inner qualities. It would take people of great spiritual sensitivity to pick up on the subtle cues necessary to make this determination. Therefore, Moshe chose only "distinguished men"⁷ for the mission.

The rest of the people did not understand the purpose of spying out the land in the same way. In their minds, the mission would be a conventional one. As accustomed as they were to miracles, they nonetheless assumed that this period of miraculous assistance would of necessity come to an end with their entry into the land of Israel. There, they would be governed by the same laws of nature that govern all other human beings. Gathering intelligence for the future military campaign - to be waged under very down to earth conditions - made complete sense.

Their error, in a word, was to deny the transcendent nature of *Eretz Yisrael*. They failed to grasp that this land was outside the parameters of nature. Without this appreciation, they could not take possession of it. That would have to await the next generation, the "young children of whom you said they will be taken captive."⁸ They would have full belief and confidence in a Providence connected to the land that is not limited by the natural and the ordinary.⁹ With that belief, they could enter the land and possess it.

The spies are described as having "despised the desirable land."¹⁰ At first, this seems puzzling. Their report about the land was quite good, and quite accurate. They were positively impressed with it being a land of milk and honey, just as promised. What frightened them were the people, the inhabitants, not the land itself. We can now understand, however, that what they despised and rejected was the special quality of *Eretz Yisrael* as primarily a spiritual space, a place that transcends nature. Believing Israel to be a land like others is to despise it, to repudiate its most salient aspect.

To drive home this message, the waters of the Jordan split for them just as they crossed over into the land. It was a powerful indicator that the land they were about to enter was not restricted by nature but transcended it. This point remains as true today as back then. A Jew makes his place in the land through his *emunah*. We open ourselves up to the special *kedushah* of the land by first believing in its standing outside the boundaries of the natural order.

Rav Yehudah HaLevi explains in the *Kuzari* that there shines in Israel and Israel alone a Divine light that illuminates through Torah, *avodah*, and all lofty levels of spirituality. He likens Israel to a vineyard, whose grapes grow best on an elevated hillside. We Jews as well are best nurtured at the spiritual heights of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Following inexorably from this remarkable aspect of Israel is the parallel strengths of the *kelipah*, the forces of *tumah* that counterbalance its *kedushah*. These forces, however, are extrinsic to the land. They can be overcome. (Thus, Yehoshua and Calev urged the people on, "The land is very, very

good."¹¹ They saw the land while the forces of *tumah* were still fully resident, before Klal Yisrael could work to banish them. They still understood that the land was intrinsically good!) When the Torah warns against impropriety, so that "the land should not spit you out in your contaminating it,"¹² it does not mean that the land will become changed in the process. It means that the land must and will maintain its essential holiness, and will expel those who introduce contamination to its borders.

To succeed in the struggle against the forces of *tumah* once again takes *emunah* - belief in the ability of a Jew to overpower and shatter those forces. To the degree that a person has ingrained in himself this faith, this can-do attitude, to that degree he is able to take from the holiness of the land.

Conquering the prodigious quantities of *tumah* associated with the land takes great people. This explains why Moshe chose distinguished leaders as the spies, rather than ordinary soldiers, as is usually the case. Moshe understood that a breakthrough on the spiritual level had to come through great people. (Even they could not do it alone. Yehoshua and Calev were successful, but only after securing Divine assistance - Yehoshua through Moshe's special *berachah*, and Calev through his *davening* at the tomb of the Patriarchs.) Moshe also wanted to be armed with the merit of all twelve of the *shevatim*. He therefore insisted on twelve spies, one per *shevet*.

The seven peoples who inhabited the land, and who ultimately engaged us in combat, are simply the physical manifestation of the forces of *tumah* which must counterbalance the extreme *kedushah* of the land. (The *Meor Einayim* saw this relationship as a general truth. We sometimes sense ourselves hounded or persecuted by people around us. At those times, the real cause of our discomfort is not the evil in their hearts. The ultimate reason is that we have been engaged by some aspects of Judgment, making us vulnerable to attack. Those *dinim* from Above then take substantive shape in the form of our persecutors! It is the forces of *tumah* we really have to contend with, not their agents in human form.)

Most of the spies were unable to complete their mission. Two succeeded. Yehoshua and Calev made use of a technique spurned by the others. They latched on to the merit of a great *tzadik*. Both Calev and Yehoshua bonded significantly with Moshe. In fact, both attached themselves so thoroughly that each nullified his own sense of self in favor of an association with the *tzadik*.

This, too, is included in the opening Divine command, *Shlach lecha* - send according to your own understanding. Your wisdom and insight should shape the minds of those you send.

To succeed in overcoming the forces of *tumah* that are deliberately placed in our way, we need to be able to eschew our own inner voices, and align ourselves perfectly with the *tzadik* who is available to us.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 62-65

² Bamidbar 13:19

³ Shemos 3:8

⁴ Bamidbar 13:18

⁵ Devarim 1:23

⁶ Bamidbar 13:2

⁷ Bamidbar 13:3

⁸ Bamidbar 14:31

⁹ Recently, a non-observant spokesperson for the IDF told journalists, "We don't rely on miracles here in Israel. But we are not surprised when they happen."

¹⁰ Tehilim 106:24

¹¹ Bamidbar 14:7

¹² Vayikra 18:28

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