

Parashat Shelach שלח

Torah: Numbers 13:1–15:41

Haftarah: Joshua 2:1–24

The Great Spy Disaster

General Overview

There are several turning points in Israel's history. The parasha before us gives an account of one of these. It is one of the most famous stories in the Torah. It is also one of the most tragic. In this parasha, we find Israel on the threshold of the Promised Land. God had seemingly completed all the necessary preparations for them to enter. It was all going to be so great! Spies were sent to help make the necessary military preparations and to get the people excited about taking possession of their Land. Then disaster strikes. Sin! Unbelief! Rebellion! The result: 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, watching their parents and grandparents die alongside of them.

Exposition

We will approach our study of this sidra using the following outline:

- I. The Caper
- II. The Culprits
- III. The Conclusions
- IV. The Consequences
- V. The Cure

In this excerpt from Parashat Shelach, we will focus on section I, The Caper.

I. The Caper

A. *The Command*

The text tells us that the Holy One told Moshe to send out people to spy out or explore the Land. However, was this really a command from the Lord? Whose caper was this anyway? We are raising this question because there are some differences among commentators about the validity of the very act of sending spies.

Rashi, following the sages of the Talmud, maintains that Israel sinned through the very act of sending spies. Rashi's reasoning is based on his understanding of Deuteronomy 1:22 where it states,

Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to."

From this, Rashi reasons that the spies were sent, "by His permission, not by His command."¹ The part of the text which prompts this kind of reasoning are the words in 13:1 in the Hebrew, "Send for yourself," *shelakh lekchah* (שלח לך). In

other words, the decision, it is suggested, was up to Moshe. Since rebellious people were pressuring him, he decided to send the spies.

However, there is a different way to understand 13:1. Perhaps when God said to Moshe, “send for yourself,” He did not mean that the decision was up to him. Rather, He meant that instead of sending Moshe himself to search out the land, God was commanding him to send out qualified men in his place. In addition, this gives the imperative mood of the verb, “send,” its fullest import.

Thus, the plain reading of the text seems to support the thought that it was God commanding Moshe to send the men. What about the passage in Deuteronomy? There, the text only tells us that people came to Moshe asking him to send spies. We can only assume that Moshe acted (as was his custom to do so) by going to the Lord to seek His wisdom. The answer to his request to the Holy One was the command in Numbers 13:1.

B. The Mission

What specifically were the spies to do in the Land? Moshe instructed them to gather information in six different categories:

- 1) What does the land look like?
- 2) What about the people in the land?
- 3) Is the land suitable for agriculture?
- 4) What kind of vegetation is in the land?
- 5) What about the cities?
- 6) Bring back some samples of the produce.

Based on these instructions we can assume that the spy mission was not merely for military purposes. Otherwise, why would Moshe want to know about the vegetation, for example? Conquering the Land was only one aspect of their goal. The Israelites had to know if, after defeating the enemy, they could realistically survive there.

Because of this, we can now suggest an alternative meaning to the term usually translated “to spy” in 13:2, *yaturu* (יתורו). It is from a verb that can easily be translated “to seek out” or “discover” rather than “to spy.”² If we adopt this translation then we can better explain why other information was sought than exclusively military intelligence.

C. The Territory

Note: In the following paragraphs we will not use a standard Bible translation. For the most part unless we indicate otherwise we will work from the Hebrew text.

The explorers searched out the land “from the Wilderness of Zin to the expanse at the approach to Hamat” (13:21). Instead of the phrase “approach to Hamat,” the NIV says “Lebo Hamath.” They also went to Hebron, to the Valley of Eshcol, to the Negev (13:22–24) and to the seacoast, as well as to the Jordan Valley (13:29).

Most scholars agree that the Wilderness of Zin is the area southwest of the Dead Sea. This was in the south of Israel. They also went north. The place in the north that they went to is described in Hebrew in 13:21 “the expanse at the approach to Hamat.” In Hebrew it reads:

ad rehov levo khmat

(עד-רחוב לבא תמה)

Scholars debate about whether these words should be translated or transliterated. If they are to be transliterated, they would signify place names. Thus, the spies went to Rehov, near Lebo Hamat. If they are to be translated, they could mean that the spies went from the Wilderness of Zin, in the south to “the expanse at the approach to Hamat” in the north. No matter which way we choose to render this Hebrew phrase, the text seems to be talking about a Canaanite location in the north, not far from Syria and Lebanon. This would put it in the “pan-handle” region of modern Israel.

The text says in 13:22–24 that they went to Hebron. Hebron is located about 18 miles south west of Jerusalem. Actually, all one had to do was to follow the ridge road that traveled along the “spine” of Israel, the central mountain ridge that goes from near Shechem in the center, to past Hebron in the south.

The Valley of Eschol is *nahal eschol* (אשכל נחל), or “valley of a cluster.” The Hebrew word *nahal* (נחל) is really a wadi or a small valley where a seasonal stream flows. Harrison suggests that it could be identified as the modern Arab village of Burj Haskeh, about two miles north of Hebron.³

Finally, the spy mission began in “the season for the first ripe grapes” (13:20). In Israel, this meant that the time period was mid to late June.

¹ *Rashi: Bamidbar*, ArtScroll Edition, 148.

² תור in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands. Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc., Version 2.5.

³ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (TOTC), 206.