

Parashat Shelach

Parsha Summary

Moshe sends twelve spies to scout out the land that God promised Israel, and they return with giant fruits but tell the people that they should not try to go to the land. The people cry that they want to return to Egypt, but Kalev and Yehoshua, two of the spies, insist that the land is very good. God tells Moshe that He would destroy the nation for this complaint, but Moshe begs God to save them for the sake of His name. God agrees but says that the ten spies will die and the nation will have to stay in the desert for 40 years and only their children will be able to go and inherit the land. Upon hearing this, some members of the nation regret their actions and attempt to go to the land on their own, but they are killed by Amalek and Canaan.

The second half of the Parsha teaches several mitzvot, with another story in the mix:

- ❑ *Nesachim*: animal sacrifices should be accompanied with flour-oil offerings, and wine
- ❑ *Challah*: when making bread, a portion of the dough should be separated and given as a gift to God [i.e. to the Kohen]
- ❑ *Shigegas Avodah Zarah*: if the entire congregation sins “regarding all of the mitzvot” [i.e. idolatry] by mistake, they must bring a cow as an olah and goat as a chatas; an individual must bring a kid-goat as a chatas; but a wanton sinner will be cut off
- ❑ Story of the *mekoshesh*: a man was found gathering sticks on Shabbat, and God told Moshe to put him to death by stoning
- ❑ *Tzitzis*: to remember to do the mitzvot, strings with blue must be tied to one’s garment

Classic Questions

Why did God tell Moshe to send spies, and what did they do wrong if they were sent by Moshe?

- **Rashi**: God and Moshe were hoping that their willingness to have spies be sent should be enough to assure the people that the land is good. Nevertheless, they insisted upon sending spies anyways, who lied to them about the land’s quality
- **Ramban**: the purpose of sending scouts was to gather intelligence for their impending military conquest, a worthwhile and positive mission. However, the spies stressed that conquering the land would be impossible (ignoring God’s promises), and later spread lies throughout the camp, saying that it was unfit for habitation by regular humans
 - **Netziv**: after seeing how, when God is in their midst performing open miracles, even “minor” sins would be dealt with severely (as in last week’s parsha), the nation chose to conquer the land in a less miraculous way, necessitating spies
- **Abarbanel**: the populace wanted to send spies on their own, to find out what the land would be like, but God insisted that Moshe be the one to send them, for military intelligence. In the end, they ignored God/Moshe’s mission and took on their own
- **R. Yaakov Medan**: besides for gathering information, the “spies” also went to express a form of conquering the land, to show that Israel expected it to soon be theirs

What motivated the spies and the nation to complain about Canaan?

- **Abarbanel**: they didn’t believe that God would help them, and even after the decree, those people who attempted to conquer the land on their own forgot that they need God
- **Akeidas Yitzchak**: the spies were not interested in the spiritual life that they’d live there
- **Chasam Sofer** (intro to *Shut, Yoreh Deah*): the spies wanted to remain in the desert where all their needs were being taken care of without having to expend earthly efforts

What is the connection between the story of the spies and the mitzvot taught afterwards?

- **Rashi, Ibn Ezra:** the mitzvot of *nesachim* [and *challah*] are tied to the land, as if to reassure the nation that they shouldn't despair of ever making it there
- **Ramban:** the Torah here is completing the laws relating to the Mishkan that it started in Sefer Vayikra, and "mistaken idolatry" is taught here because of the recent national sin
 - **Tur:** the spies thought that they could undo God's promise, a mistake like idolatry
 - **Chizkuni:** the Torah here is noting that there is a sacrifice for an honest mistake, but a congregation or individual who deliberately sins--as the nation did here with the sin of the spies--cannot be forgiven with a sacrifice
- **Seforno:** now that the nation further distanced themselves from God with the sin of the spies, these mitzvos are necessary to repair that relationship
- **Sefas Emes:** the nation wanted to stay in the desert where they have the *man*-bread, the miraculous *be'er* for water, and the clouds of glory, so God ensured them that in the land, they would have the mitzvot of *challah* (for their bread), *nesachim* (corresponding to the water well), and be surrounded by *tzitzis* (like the clouds that surrounded them)

Why is the story of the wood-gatherer taught here?

- **Ramban:** this event simply happened at this point in time; after the sin of the spies
- **Tur** (and others): the wood-gatherer is an example of a sinner who acted wantonly
- **R. Samson Rafael Hirsch:** this shows spiritual progress. In the beginning of the Parsha, the nation violated God's word, but now they kept vigilant to ensure that every member of the community keep Shabbat [as the Torah here emphasizes the "congregation"]

Important "Chazal"s or "Rashi"s

- By providing "Yehoshua" with his name (changed from "Hoshea"), Moshe was praying that he not be caught up with the sin of the other spies (*Sotah* 34b)
- Kalev went to Chevron on his own to the graves of the forefathers to pray that he not be swept up in the plan of the other spies (*Sotah* 34b)
- From the fact that God referred to the ten sinful spies as a "congregation," ('*eidah*) we learn that ten people are needed for a congregation's quorum for holy matters (*Sanhedrin* 2a)
- Because Israel cried on this night [the ninth of Av] for no reason, God decreed that this should be a night to cry for future generations [by destroying the Temple] (*Taanis* 29a)

A Short Vort

In the passage of *tzitzis*, we are told not to "stray after our heart and eyes." This seems to be out of order; first we see something, and then we want it (and if the Torah is referring to something one would want before seeing it in front of him, then the eyes should matter at all). The verb, "to stray," *לתור*, is the same verb used in the beginning of the Parsha to refer to the activity of the spies, *לתור את ארץ כנען*, they were to scout out the land of Canaan. The spies put their hearts before their eyes: instead of seeing the good of the land, their hearts motivated them to put a negative spin on whatever they saw. *Tzitzis* is there to remind us that we should not let our base desires color how we look at the world, but instead see the world as it truly is, as Hashem wants us to see it, as being full of opportunities to do His mitzvot (R. Elchanan Samet, R. Amnon Bazak)