

Torah Table Talk

The Incident of the Spies:

Was it a Failure of Confidence or Faith?



Parshat Shelach - Numbers 13:1 – 15:41

As the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies to check out the land and report what they saw. The Parshah begins “Shelach Lecha, “Send (scouts) for your self.” The commentators take this expression to imply that the desire to send spies was the peoples and not God’s.

When ten of the spies would returned with a negative report a rebellion broke out in the Israelite Camp. As a result of their failure of nerve, the people were condemned to remain in the wilderness until the entire generation that left Egypt had passed away. The people were not morally or spiritually fit to conquer the land.

Numbers 13:31-33

But the men who went up with him said: We cannot attack the people for they are stronger than we (*mimenu*). And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had spied to the people of Israel, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy, is a land that eats its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw giants, the sons of Anak, who come from the giants; and *we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so were we in their sight.*”

1. What motivated the scouts to return with an evil report to the people? What did they stand to gain by frightening the people?
2. What do these verses imply about the spies’ motivation? How did the spies see themselves? Why did they presume that the people of Canaan would see them that way as well?
3. If you had been with the spies how would you have responded to the spies?

Sotah 35a

"And we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes:" The Holy One said to the scouts: You don't know what you have just let your mouths utter. I am ready to put up with your saying, "We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers." But I do take offense at your asserting, "And so were we in their eyes." Could you possibly know how I made you appear in their eyes? How do you know but that in their eyes you were like angels?

R. Mesharsheya said: The scouts were liars. As to "We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers"--sure enough [being cowards, they knew it]; but how did they know that "so we were in their eyes"?

1. The punishment for worshipping the golden calf was not nearly as severe as the punishment for rebelling after the spies' report. According to the Talmud why do you think that is the case?
2. Do you think the spies were lying when they said the people of the land were giants? What else might have motivated them to say this?

Sotah 35a

Rabbi Hananiah ben Papa said: At that time the spies made a grievous statement. "Because they are mighty than us (mimenu)" The word mimenu can also be mean "Than Him." The spies said, "We cannot attack them because they are mightier than Him (than God)!"

1. According to Rabbi Hananiah why were the spies fearful of the Canaanites?
2. How is this statement different from the previous one? What is the connection between faith and self-confidence?

According to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

This is the great sin of the spies. It is understandable that they might say that they were like grasshoppers in their own eyes (out of a sense of humility.) But why should they say "And thus were we in their eyes." What should it matter to them how the Canaanites perceived them.

1. Should we be concerned with how other people perceive us? Why or why not? What point is the Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel trying to make?
2. Compare Menachem Mendel's statement with the two statements above. Which one does it support?

Glossary

Sotah – A tractate of the Talmud which deals with the ordeal of a woman who is suspected of infidelity.

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk – 1787- 1859; He was a Hasidic master in Poland.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***