

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The episode of the spies has rightly puzzled commentators throughout the centuries. How could they have got it so wrong? The land, they said, was as Moses had promised. It was indeed "flowing with milk and honey." But conquering it was impossible. "The people who live there are powerful, and the cities fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of the giant there... We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the titans there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we seemed in theirs" (Num. 13:28-33).

They were terrified of the inhabitants of the land, and entirely failed to realise that the inhabitants were terrified of them. Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, tells the spies sent by Joshua a generation later: "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you... our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:10-11).

The truth was the exact opposite of the spies' report. The inhabitants feared the Israelites more than the Israelites feared the inhabitants. We hear this at the start of the story of Bilaam: "Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites." Earlier the Israelites themselves had sung at the Red Sea: "The people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall on them" (Ex. 15:15-16).

How then did the spies err so egregiously? Did they misinterpret what they saw? Did they lack faith in God? Did they—more likely—lack faith in themselves? Or was it simply, as Maimonides argues in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that their fear was inevitable given their past history? They had spent most of their lives as slaves. Only recently had they acquired their freedom. They were not yet ready to fight a prolonged series of battles and establish themselves as a free people in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom. Humans change, but not that quickly (*Guide III*, 32).

Most of the commentators assume that the spies were guilty of a failure of nerve, or faith, or both. It is hard to read the text otherwise. However, in the Hassidic literature—from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (Sefat Emet) to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn—an entirely different line of interpretation emerged, reading the text against the grain to dramatic effect so that it remains relevant and powerful today. According to their interpretation, the spies were well-intentioned. They were, after all, "princes, chieftains, leaders" (Num. 13:2-3). They did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. They did not fear failure; they feared success. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilization and its discontents.

Here they were close to God, closer than any generation before or since. He was a palpable presence in the Sanctuary in their midst, and in the clouds of glory that surrounded them. Here His people ate manna from heaven and water from the rock and experienced miracles daily. So long as they stayed in the desert under God's sheltering canopy, they did not need to plough the earth, plant seeds, gather harvests, defend a country, run an economy, maintain a welfare system, or shoulder any of the other earthly burdens and distractions that take peoples' minds away from the Divine.

Here, in no-man's-land, in liminal space, suspended between past and future, they were able to live with a simplicity and directness of encounter they could not hope to find once they had re-entered the gravitational pull of everyday life in the material world. Paradoxically, since a desert is normally the exact opposite of a garden, the wilderness was the Israelites' Eden. Here they were as close to God as were the first humans before their loss of innocence.

If that comparison is too discordant, recall that Hosea and Jeremiah both compared the wilderness to a honeymoon. Hosea said in the name of God: "I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hos. 2:16), implying that in the future God would take the people back there to celebrate a second honeymoon. Jeremiah

said in God's name, "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2). For both prophets, the wilderness years were the time of the first love between God and the Israelites. That is what the spies did not want to leave.

Clearly this interpretation is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading, an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of childhood and enter the adult world. Sometimes it is hard for parents to let go of their children; at others it is the other way round. But there must be a measure of separation if children are to become responsible adults. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.

But that is what Torah is about. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is supremely a religion of engagement with the world. The Torah is a template for the construction of a society with all its gritty details: laws of warfare and welfare, harvests and livestock, loans and employer-employee relationships, the code of a nation in its land, part of the real world of politics and economics, yet somehow pointing to a better world where justice and compassion, love of the neighbour and stranger, are not remote ideals but part of the texture of everyday life. God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world, and that means that Israel must live in the world.

To be sure, the Jewish people were not without their desert-dwellers and ascetics. The Qumran sect known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a group. The Talmud speaks of R. Shimon bar Yochai in similar terms. Having lived for thirteen years in a cave, he could not bear to see people engaged in such earthly pursuits as ploughing a field. Maimonides speaks of people who live as hermits in the desert to escape the corruptions of society (Laws of ethical character, 6:1; Eight Chapters, ch. 4). But these were the exceptions, not the rule. This is not the destiny of Israel, to live outside time and space in ashrams or monasteries as the world's recluses. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is- according to both the Gerer and Lubavitcher Rebbe-the sin of the spies.

There is a voice within the tradition, most famously identified with R. Shimon bar Yochai, that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality. But the mainstream held otherwise. "Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin" (Avot 2:2). "One who makes his mind up to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives

himself of life hereafter" (Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 3:10).

The spies did not want to contaminate Judaism by bringing it into contact with the real world. They sought the eternal childhood of God's protection and the endless honeymoon of His all-embracing love. There is something noble about this desire, but also something profoundly irresponsible that demoralised the people and provoked God's anger. For the Jewish project- the Torah as the constitution of the Jewish nation under the sovereignty of God-is about building a society in the land of Israel that so honours human dignity and freedom that it will one day lead the world to say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4:6).

The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it. That is what the spies did not understand. Do we-Jews of faith- understand it even now? *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd they shall seek out [vayaturu] the Land of Canaan which I am giving to the children of Israel.” (Numbers 13:2) Of all the sins the children of Israel commit in the Bible, the most serious sin of all takes place in the portion of Shlach. The scouts' severe report is the direct cause of the death of the desert generation.

However, what is difficult to understand is that the suggestion to establish such an ill-fated reconnaissance team came directly from the Almighty Himself. We have considered the necessity of involving the nation in the decision to conquer the land; now we shall attempt to understand what God wanted the scouts to actually report.

Rabbi Elchanan Samet, in his excellent study of the weekly Torah portions, suggests an insight which at the same time provides a textual underpinning for a magnificent homiletic interpretation given by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. The secret to understanding lies in the verb form used in the charge given by the Almighty. “Send for yourselves men who will seek out [vayaturu] the land,” the verb *tur* appearing no less than twelve times in this very sequence, the very number of the members of the delegation itself. In fact, when Moses himself retells the story in his farewell address (Deut. 1:22, 24), he has the Israelites all coming to him and saying, “Let us send men before us that they may check out [vayachperu] the land...and spy [vayeraglu] it out,” using two verb forms very different from the *vayaturu* used by God in our portion.

A careful search reveals that in other biblical contexts the verb form *tur* is used similarly to the way it

is used in our biblical portion, as in, “the Lord God who walks before you, He will do battle for you...to seek out [latur] for you a place in which you may settle your encampment” (Deut. 1:23). Even the prophet Ezekiel (20:6) declares that “on that day I shall raise my hand for them to bring them out of the Land of Egypt to the land which I have sought out [tarti] for them. A land flowing with milk and honey, a most precious land for them among all the other lands.”

The power of the specific verb form *tur* used by God is even more clearly expressed in the very conclusion of this Torah reading, where we encounter that same verb form in a totally different but most revealing context.

Almost inexplicably, this Torah portion, which mainly deals with the scouts, concludes with the commandment to wear ritual fringes on the corners of our four-cornered garments: “and [the blue and white threads] shall be for you for a fringe so that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them; and so that you not seek out or lust [taturu] after your heart and after your eyes which lead you to commit acts of harlotry [zonim] after them” (Numbers 15:39). And when punishing the Israelites, God once again makes reference to the sin of the scouts as having been an act of harlotry (znut), “and your children shall be shepherds in the desert for forty years, thereby bearing [the sin] of your harlotry [znutekhem]” (Numbers 14:33).

The picture is becoming very clear. The Almighty was not at all interested in a reconnaissance mission to scout out the land or even in an intelligence delegation to assess the military practicability of engaging in an act of conquest. Perhaps that was what the Israelites had in mind when they asked Moses to send men before them to check out the land, which probably meant to see by which roads it would be best to enter and which cities ought to be attacked first (Deut. 1:22–23). The Almighty had a very different design in mind. God wanted to impress them with the uniqueness, the chosenness of the land which He Himself had picked for them, the land that would be their ultimate resting place, the land which was good and not bad, which produced luscious fruits and full-bodied animals, the land whose produce developed strong and capable men; God wanted them to conquer the land with great anticipation and desire (Numbers 13:1–2, Nahmanides ad loc.).

Rabbi Soloveitchik goes one step further. In the Bible, the Torah of Israel and the Land of Israel are both called *morasha*, which means heritage (Exodus 6:8; Deut. 33:4), but which our sages linked to *me’orasa*, which means betrothed and beloved. God understands that the conquest of the Torah of Israel as well as of the Land of Israel by the People of Israel will require strong feelings of love for each of these grand enterprises. And just as the rabbis of the Talmud

command us not to marry a woman unless we first see her and know that we love her (Kiddushin 41a), so did God ask Moses to send a group who would give the kind of visual description of the Land of Israel to the People of Israel which would inspire them to love the land and even lust after the land. God understood that such an emotional attachment was absolutely crucial if the Israelites were to overcome all of the obstacles involved in conquering the land, settling it, and forging within it a holy nation and kingdom of priests.

Alas, the people – especially the scouts – did not understand the divine command. Their sin was in misunderstanding the purpose of their journey; they took it to be a scouting enterprise rather than an inspirational foretaste of what waited in store for them after their conquest, a reconnaissance mission rather than an observer’s picture of a beautiful and luscious patrimony worthy of their love and sacrifice.

Our generation – so similar to the Israelites who went from the darkness of Egypt to the light of freedom and stood at the entrance to the Promised Land – must do whatever is necessary to recapture and strengthen the love of Israel if we are to succeed in properly settling it. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In the discussion of the commandment of *tzitzit*, which is the concluding subject matter in this week’s parsha, the Torah warns us not to follow the dictates of our hearts’ desires and the wants occasioned by our wandering eyes.

The rabbis (especially the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin of nineteenth century Volozhin) who commented on this verse stated that the ‘desires of our heart’ refers to people who perform mitzvot but without any faith in their worth or in their Giver, and that ‘after their wandering eyes’ refers to those who view mitzvot that they personally observe through the prism of their eyes and understanding alone.

They are always willing to substitute either their desires or their intellectual rationalizations for the pure belief in God and the subservience necessary to serve the Eternal. Man’s natural inclination to be independent of commands and orders of others, to do what man alone wishes to do irrespective of duty, tradition and ultimate consequences, always places man in opposition to this Jewish concept which stresses obedience and humility before our Creator. The Torah allows us desires and rational thinking. But like every other facet of human behavior, these desires need to

be channeled and disciplined. They are not meant to run wild and follow all the changing whims and vagaries of human society in all its ages and generations. Performance of the mitzvot faithfully and in acknowledgement of the One Who commands those mitzvot to be performed becomes the foundation and anchor for the necessary disciplines that enhance Jewish life and make it eternal.

Otherwise, our hearts and eyes, our uncontrolled desires and uninhibited intellect and thoughts, will allow us eventually to go astray. But why is the commandment of tzitzit the ultimate method for teaching us these lessons of obedience, probity and faith? After all, there are hundreds of other commandments that would seem to be proper to instruct us in the same fashion.

Here also the commentators to the Torah struggled to find a proper and meaningful explanation. The one that appeals most to me has to do with the form that the mitzvah takes. Even though the mitzvah applies only to four-cornered garments, a relative rarity in post-Talmudic times, Jews purposely wore such four-cornered garments to obligate themselves in the performance of the mitzvah of tzitzit. Thus, this is a mitzvah that was omnipresent in their lives – a garment that was constantly worn on their bodies. It was an item of self identity and a primary reminder of the yoke of mitzvot and Torah that the Jews accepted upon themselves and their generations at Mount Sinai. Tzitzit is a mitzvah that numerically (through gematria) and in its form (its knots and strings) constantly reminds us of the 613 mitzvot that are the basis of our existence and the responsibilities in our lives and in this world.

Tzitzit is the total of all the commandments – in fact of the very concept of commandments – that is the heart of Judaism and the nucleus of all Jewish life. Such is the methodology of Torah in all our behavior and thoughts. © 2025 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

A Minyan of Ten

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

A minyan, the presence of ten men, is required for those parts of the prayer service that are deemed *Devarim She-bikdushah* (literally, words of sanctifying). These include *Kaddish*, *Barchu*, *Kedushah*, the repetition of the *Amidah*, and (according to some) the reading of the Torah, the reading of the *Haftarah*, and the priestly blessing. This rule is derived from the verse, "I will be sanctified **among** the children of Israel" (*"Ve-nikdash be-toch Bnei Yisrael"*) (*Vayikra* 22:32). How do we know that the number referred to here is specifically ten, neither more nor less?

One way of arriving at ten is through a *gezeirah shavah*. (This is a method of rabbinic exegesis in which a similar word appearing in two different contexts is used to infer that the details of one context apply to the other.) The word "*toch*" ("among") appears in the verse about sanctifying G-d, and in the story of Korach's rebellion. Regarding the latter, the Torah states (*Bamidbar* 16:21), "Separate yourselves from **among** (*mi-tokh*) this community (*edah*).". However, there the Torah is referring to a group of 250 people. How is it useful for arriving at the number ten?

This involves a bit more exegesis. The word "*edah*," which is used in the story of Korach, is also used in reference to the ten spies who spoke badly of the Land of Israel, as we read (*Bamidbar* 14:27), "How much longer will that wicked community (*edah*) keep muttering against Me?" We see that the definition of a community is ten. Thus, the community within which we sanctify G-d's name must be similar to the spies (not in their sinfulness, of course, but in being free, adult males).

It should be noted that the above is not a combination of one *gezeirah shavah* with another (*toch-toch* and *edah-edah*), which would possibly break a rule of exegesis. Rather, we learn from the case of the spies in Parshat Shelach that the definition of the word "*edah*" is ten everywhere it appears. This includes the verse in Parshat Korach, where the word "*toch*" is associated with ten (through the word "*edah*"). And a *gezeirah shavah* (*toch-toch*) connects that verse with the verse about sanctifying G-d. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"But the nation is bold, and the cities are large and fortified..." (*Bamidbar* 13:28) On their return from spying the land, the *meraglim* came back with their report which would reverberate through history. They began by saying the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey, but then diverged into a litany of worries and complaints. They spoke ill of Canaan and the people followed their lead, resulting in a decree that the generation would die in the wilderness and not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel.

However, if we read through their complaints and negative observations, we find that they are conflicting. "The nation is bold." This implies the people are brave and mighty. Then they say the cities are large and fortified. This would imply the people are fearful, so they use walls and barricades to protect themselves, and they gather in large numbers, presumably also to be able to defend themselves together.

The spies continued by saying, "This is a land that eats its inhabitants," which Chazal teach was because Hashem made many people die so the

populace would be too busy to notice the spies. The very next words, though, say that the people they saw were giants. So, if even the giants and mighty warriors were susceptible to death, would it not stand to reason that they could be beaten by the Jews? Clearly, they were not invincible.

Despite the incongruities in their report, the Jews cried out, predicting their deaths and those of their families. This spiraled into a spirit of gloom and despair which spawned a movement to return to Egypt, where they had been brutally tortured and enslaved for decades. Hashem was so angered by this behavior that He expressed the desire to wipe the Jews out.

It would seem that the main sin, which led to the death of the generation that left Egypt, and the wandering in the Wilderness for forty years, was being negative and pessimistic. Had they been optimistic, buoyed by their trust in Hashem, the Jews would have seen the various clues that the nations in the land at that time were not so powerful. Instead, their anxiety and fear blinded them to the possibility that they could win.

In fact, the Meraglim unwittingly gave the Jews an insight into this. They said, "The nation is bold," meaning the inhabitants of Canaan were not going to break down and surrender so quickly. They would not be deterred by a failure or two. They would keep fighting.

If that is what made them unconquerable, then the Jews should have used their own brazenness, born of knowledge of Hashem's greatness and desire to protect them, to keep their spirits up and push forward. Even today, our success relies on trusting in Hashem to give us the strength to achieve, and not let the negativity invade our minds and hearts. That comes from the Yetzer Hara, and that pessimism is to be feared more than any human enemy.

In Czarist Russia, a man had to visit the capital city, but was afraid. The rampant anti-Semitism was even harsher in large cities and he feared for his life. Though he would wear a hat and not appear overtly Jewish, he feared he would be beaten, or worse.

He went to his Rebbe, and asked for protection.

"Hashem is with His children at all times, you need not be afraid," said the Rabbi. "But, Rebbe," pleaded the man, "I need extra protection, you must help me." The sage said nothing but rose and went into his private study, returning with a small velvet pouch. From it, he pulled a small, burnished gold disc, which looked like a small shield. "Carry this with you, and remember that Hashem is your protector."

The man was overjoyed and carefully put the pouch into his pocket. His trip to the capital was not only safe, but the extra confidence he had made it more successful than he had imagined. Upon his return, he thanked the Rebbe for the shield. "This worked so well," said the traveler, "where did you acquire it?"

"It was Hashem who protected you, my child," said the Rebbe. "As for this," he said, reattaching the disc to the front of his pocket watch, "I bought it from Mendel the watchmaker." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Who Wished to Send Spies?

Parashat Sh'lach is an extremely difficult parasha to understand. Our great Rabbis have argued about many different aspects of this mission and the reasons for its failure. On the one hand, before going into any battle, it is common to send spies to determine the size of the enemy, their weapons and fortifications, and the best routes of attack. Yet, our Rabbis point out that the answers brought by ten of the spies did not deal only with those factors.

The Torah states: "Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Send forth for yourself men, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the B'nei Yisrael; one man each from his father's tribe shall you send, every one a leader among them.' Moshe sent them forth from the wilderness of Paran by the word of Hashem; they were all [distinguished] men; heads of the B'nei Yisrael were they." In Parashat Devarim, a rehashing of this event tells us: "We journeyed from Choreiv (Mt. Sinai) and we went through that entire great and awesome Wilderness that you saw, by way of the Amorite Mountain, as Hashem, our Elokim, commanded us, and we came until Kadesh-Barnea. Then I said to you, 'You have come to the Amorite Mountain that Hashem, our Elokim, gives us. See – Hashem, your Elokim, has placed the Land before you; go up and possess, as Hashem, Elokim of your forefathers, has spoken to you. Do not fear and do not lose resolve.' All of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us and let them spy out the Land, and bring back word to us; the road on which we should ascend and the cities to which we should come.' The idea was good in my eyes, so I took from you twelve men, one man for each tribe."

The phrase, "the idea was good in my eyes," implies that Moshe wanted to send the spies into the land. The fact that Hashem spoke to Moshe and told him, "Sh'lach l'cha, send for yourself," implies that Hashem also approved of this mission. Part of the reasoning behind this understanding is that there are several times in the Torah where a command includes the word "l'cha, for yourself." Often this is understood to mean "for your own benefit," as in Hashem's command to Avraham, "lech l'cha, go for your benefit" to the land of Canaan, which he and his family after him would inherit. Rashi tells us that these words mean, "by your discretion. I do not command you to do so; if you wish, send forth." Rashi implies that it was

displeasing to Hashem that the people had requested to spy out the land.

But it was also not Moshe's idea to send in spies. As the quote from Parashat Devarim attests, "All of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us and let them spy out the Land.'" R' Yehudah Nachshoni explains that Moshe acquiesced to their request because he was confident that these great men would accept his willingness as a sign that they could trust his word and the spies would be unnecessary. Even if they did not accept his willingness and still wanted to spy out the land, all would report the truth about the land, and that it was as Hashem had described as "a land flowing with milk and honey."

The Ramban questions whether the sending of the spies was initiated by the people and approved by Moshe and whether they were instructed by Hashem to spy on the land. The Ramban says, "Now it appears to me from the language of Scripture that Moshe did not [in fact] consult the Divine Presence [as to whether he should send spies at all], but the meaning of 'Send forth for yourself men' is that they [the people] had decided [already] to send spies, and it was customary to send two spies secretly, saying ['Go view the Land'], and that they be taken [only] from some [tribes of the People]; but Hashem, Who knows the future, commanded Moshe [here] to send one man from each of the tribes of Yisrael, every one a prince among them." It appears from this that the Ramban believes that the people initiated the request, but that Hashem changed the nature of the request to include only righteous men, one from each tribe. The Ramban continues, "All this was because the Eternal was pleased, for His righteousness' sake, that the mission be at His command, and that it be with [the participation of] all their tribes and their great men, so that [the people] should be saved."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin also weighed in on this matter. According to HaRav Sorotzkin, the B'nei Yisrael initiated the sending of the spies, but Hashem agreed to this request only because it was the Will of the people. Hashem was concerned that if He did not send the spies, there would be a great panic in the camp. This was unusual for the B'nei Yisrael, as up to this time, they had followed Hashem and Moshe and never once had asked what they would have to eat or drink in this new land. In the wilderness, they had bread from Heaven (manna) and water from Miriam's Well. They were able to witness the Presence of Hashem in the Mishkan, and they were led by the Cloud of Hashem each day. Everything they needed was provided for them in a super-natural way. Yet now, the people sought to spy out the land, an indication that they no longer had Faith in the Cloud of Hashem to lead them and protect them.

The Ohr HaChaim explains the apparent

contradiction in Hashem's words and His actions. Hashem did not want the B'nei Yisrael to send in spies. He wanted them to accept His earlier promises that He was bringing them to a wonderful land that He was giving to them because of the promise made to their forefathers. The Ohr HaChaim quotes the Gemora Sotah (34b) that Hashem agreed to allow Moshe to send the spies "by the word of Hashem," meaning that the people should know that Hashem would be guiding them in this mission. Hashem believed that this would give them the incentive to call off spying out the land. That is why Hashem chose righteous men as spies. The Kli Yakar, however, cautions us that people may often wear the clothes of the righteous, but their righteousness does not extend to their actions.

It is clear from each of the arguments that Moshe and Hashem were concerned that the people had lost Faith in Hashem's promise to them. Whether their lack of Faith was a consequence of their feelings of unworthiness due to their sins in the desert (constant complaining or the Golden Calf), or whether they were frustrated by not being led immediately into the Land when they left Egypt, Hashem wished to test them once they had demanded to send in spies. We, too, have questioned our own worthiness at times. We must have faith in Hashem's forgiveness and refocus our actions on Hashem's Will. May we soon see the proof of Hashem's forgiveness with the building of the Third Temple in our time. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

In their declaration that the conquest of Cna'an will proceed successfully, Yehoshua and Calev employ an odd metaphor: The idolatrous residents of the land, they say, will be vanquished because "they are our bread" (Bamidbar 14:9).

What has always occurred to me about their use of that word is that a daily factor in the lives of Klal Yisrael in the desert was a "bread" of sorts: the mon. It is called bread in several places, including Shemos 16:4 and Tehillim 78:25.

The mon, of course, was an unprecedented and undeniable miracle, a heavenly intervention that nourished Klal Yisrael. So perhaps the metaphor was meant to reassure the people that, despite the fears expressed by the meraglim about the fearsome occupants of the land, the conquest would proceed apace, just as miraculously as the food that had fallen each day to nourish them.

It's a truistic idea but one worth focusing on these days: Wars are fought with manpower and weapons, but are won only with the help of Hashem.

The Chasam Sofer, I discovered, also saw the mon as the metaphor's reference, and he expounds on it more deeply (echoing the Ohr Hachaim). The produce of the Holy Land, he explains, contains not

only a physicality but also a special spiritual element. Ahead of the invasion of Can'an, that element was divinely withdrawn from the land's produce and transformed into the manna. It was that embodiment of holiness that sustained Klal Yisrael over all the desert years.

And its removal from Can'an's produce left only the raw physicality of the land's produce -- mere "bread," devoid of its erstwhile holiness -- for the Can'anites. And that, in turn, left them entirely vulnerable to being vanquished.

May we merit that all who threaten Klal Yisrael meet the same defeat. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Everyone is familiar with the braided breads of Shabbat known as "challah." In fact, "challah bread" has become well-known in much of the world and is typically available in mainstream bakeries. It is even featured as an ingredient in many common recipes (French toast, bread pudding, stuffing, etc.).

While we find the term *challot* (plural of *challah*) referring to both leavened and unleavened bread in numerous places in the Torah, it is not in connection to the loaves that are today part and parcel of every Shabbat meal.

One of the earliest mentions of having "challah" on Shabbat is by the great medieval sage Rabbi Yisroel Isserlein (1390-1460), the author of the important work on Jewish law known as the *Terumat Hadeshen*. In his book *Leket Yosher* he says that it is proper to usher in the Shabbat with "challot" set on the table.

Many may be surprised to learn that there is actually a mitzvah in the Torah known as "hafrashat challah -- the separation of challah," which has absolutely nothing to do with Shabbat. Briefly, in ancient Israel, any time a large bread dough was prepared using around 60 oz. or more of grain flour (around eight cups), a small piece of the dough was separated and given to the Cohanim -- the priestly caste of Jews who served in the Temple.

Today, we still separate a piece of dough from large batches of bread to burn before we eat the bread made from that batch. A special blessing is made at the time we separate this small piece of dough. As we shall soon see, the mitzvah of separating the dough is about prioritizing the spiritual components in our lives, even in the most mundane activities like making bread. Again, this has nothing to do with Shabbat, this mitzvah applies to all doughs prepared.

The mitzvah of separating challah applies to every Jew, man or woman. However, traditionally, this special mitzvah is designated to Jewish women. In her role of setting the tone of the Jewish home, the woman is entrusted with mitzvot (plural) such as this and

lighting the Shabbat candles. These activities nourish her family physically and spiritually.

Of course, this reminds me of one of my seven-year-old grandson's favorite jokes: "What kind of martial arts does a challah practice? Jew-dough." My apologies, sometimes it is hard to forget certain inanities -- and now you are stuck with it as well. You're welcome.

The mitzvah of separating challah is found in this week's Torah portion.

"When you enter the land where I bring you, it shall be that when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set aside a portion for God. From the first of your dough, you shall give to God an offering throughout your generations" (Numbers 15:18-22).

In order to fully understand the mitzvah of *hafrashat challah* it is important to view it in the context of this week's Torah portion, which recounts the tragic episode of the twelve spies sent by Moses and the Jewish people to reconnoiter the Land of Israel and to produce a report on the land and its inhabitants. The sages point out that ten of the twelve spies conspired as a group to slander the Land of Israel. According to some opinions, they were motivated to do so by the fear that they would lose their positions of leadership when the nation entered the Land of Israel.

Many of the facts were woven together to create a narrative that entering the Land of Israel was a suicide mission. The Jewish people reacted with horror and desperation and started wailing loudly -- and quite astonishingly -- that they were better off appointing a new leader and returning to Egypt!

Unsurprisingly, God was very displeased and decreed that the entirety of the nation would wander in the desert for forty years (one year for every day that the spies spent in the land) until the entire generation died out. This happened on the 9th of Av, and according to tradition God declared, "You cried on this night for no reason. I will give you a reason to cry forevermore on this day."

The 9th of Av is now the anniversary of some of the most horrible things that have happened in Jewish history including the destruction of BOTH Temples. Countless other tragic events also occurred on that day, such as on the 9th of Av in 1492 when all the Jews of Spain were designated to leave the country. There are many other aspects to the 9th of Av, and we will discuss them further in a few weeks, as the date draws nearer.

The story of the twelve spies is well-known, but there is an oft overlooked postscript to this calamitous story -- the incident of the "Ma'apilim -- Defiant Ones."

In brief, the morning after the terrible decree that the generation would perish and not enter the land, a large group decided that they would show the Almighty that they did desire to enter the land. Thus,

they began ascending the mountain and told Moses, "We are ready, we shall go up to the place of which God has spoken – we have sinned" (Numbers 14:40).

Upon hearing their plans, Moses warned them explicitly, "Do not ascend, it will not succeed. Do not ascend, for God is not in your midst [...] You have turned away from God and He will not be with you" (Numbers 14:41-43). So, the people listened to Moses, abandoned their plans and went back to their tents to spend some time reflecting on their misdeeds, right? Of course not. They defiantly attempted to enter the Land of Israel and were utterly wiped out by the Amalekite and Canaanite nations who dwelled in the surrounding mountains.

Almost immediately after these two stories, the Torah introduces the mitzvah of separating the dough. This is strange as this mitzvah only came into effect once the Jews entered the Land of Israel and God had just decreed that they would wander in the desert for the next forty years. So why would they even need to know about this mitzvah yet?

Additionally, according to the Talmud (Kiddushin 40b), "Torah is greater than challah, for the Torah was given forty years before challah." (This refers to the fact that the mitzvah of challah came into effect only after they entered the Land of Israel, whereas the Torah was given to them right after they left Egypt.)

But the statement itself is incredibly difficult to understand: What is the basis for making any comparison between the Torah and the mitzvah of challah? Why should it be necessary for the sages to identify Torah as being the greater of the two? It hardly seems logical to place them on the same spectrum!

There is another teaching from the sages that says that one of the purposes of creation was so that the Jews could fulfill the mitzvah of challah (Bereishis Rabbah 1:4). This is quite perplexing. Why is this mitzvah, more than any other precepts in the Torah, considered important enough to justify the very creation of the world?

The answer begins with understanding why this mitzvah takes place at the time of kneading the dough; why aren't we simply required to give a small loaf of bread to the Cohanim?

Bread is a staple of life – historically, the very definition and essence of human sustenance and survival. When a person cannot provide for himself there is a deep sense of shame. According to Jewish philosophy, the reason we have free will is so that we can earn reward and justify our existence by choosing to do good over evil. Of course, the Almighty could have simply given us the reward, but that would be charity, which is known as "nehama dikesufa – bread of shame." Thus, the very purpose of creation is to empower man to provide for himself and build his dignity by not feeling like a charity case.

The fourth chapter of the famous compendium of Jewish wisdom known as "Pirkei Avot – Ethics of Our Fathers" opens with "Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot." This is generally misunderstood as merely being happy with what you have. Which happens to be true. But to really understand the depth of this concept one needs to examine the verse that the sages learn this axiom from: "the labor of your hands is what you consume" (Psalms 128:2).

The sages are teaching us that ultimate satisfaction with what you have is only achieved when you have the ability to provide for yourself. If the mitzvah were to take challah after the bread was made, it could be understood as merely a means of giving thanks to the Almighty for providing us with bread. Instead, since the mitzvah is to take challah from dough, it is actually a way to thank God for giving us the ability to make bread. We are prioritizing the holy aspects of our lives by giving the first piece of dough to the Cohanim who are serving in the Holy Temple.

The real failure of the Jewish people in the story of the twelve spies was their desire to take the land by themselves. Of course, they had seen all of God's miracles in Egypt – they were very well aware that God could easily defeat all the inhabitants of the Land of Israel. But they sent the spies, not because they didn't trust God, but because they wanted to conquer it themselves and make it their own land.

They did not fully appreciate that Israel was holy, belonging to God, and that the Almighty was inviting them to live in His land. They didn't appreciate the holiness of the land. As the sages teach us, once in the land they didn't observe the laws of shemittah – leaving the land fallow every seven years – which ultimately led to them being cast out of Israel at the time of the destruction of the first Holy Temple.

They are given the mitzvah of challah after the incident of the spies to emphasize that even when we provide for ourselves it has to be within the context of ever striving to be connected to holiness. Even today, when we are blessed to have the country of Israel, we should never forget that our real right to the land comes not merely because we reconquered our ancestral home but due to our connection to God through His land. © 2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

