

From Scouts to Spies by Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda

The men sent by Moshe to survey the land are described by the Torah as scouts [*Tarim*; verb, *latur*]. They are never called *meraglim* [spies]; their actions are not referred to as 'spying'. Numbers 13:2: Moses sent men '*latur*' to survey [or, *scout*] the land... Numbers 13:16-17: 'They went up and *scouted* the land'. Numbers 13:21: 'they returned from *scouting* the land', to mention a few examples.

As for the *meraglim* [spies] of Yehoshua, the Torah depicts them as such. Devarim 1:24: 'They went to the hill, came to the valley of Eshkol, and '*spied*' it out'. What is the difference between touring and spying?

The action of scouting (Heb. *la-tur*)¹ in relationship to the exodus from Egypt is associated with the Holy Ark: 'They marched from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord traveled in front of them on that three days' journey to 'find' (*la-tur*) a resting place for them. (*ibid.* 10:33). (*ibid.* 10:34-35) When the *Aron* [so called in Christianity, inaccurately, '*Ark*'] was about to be moved, Moshe would say' ... The role of the people that Moshe sent was to continue this action of scouting.

What caused these scouts, who were supposed to find the Israelites' fixed resting place in the land, to turn into spies? After all, the Holy One, blessed be He, had commanded Moses to send scouts (Numbers 13:2-3)?

'Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, all chieftains'.

'By *Hashem's* command' indicates that this was to be according to the mission designed for them by *Hashem*. The verses that follow specify additional tasks assigned them on their mission (*ibid.* 13:17-20):

When Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, he said to them, 'Go up there into the Negev [dry land; *naguv*] and proceed into the hill

¹ For further reading on the meaning of the Hebrew verb *t-u-r* in this week's reading, see Dr. Yair Barkai, Parashat Ha-Shavua Study Center, "Seeing with the Heart," *Parashat Shelah*, 2006.

country, and see what kind of country it is. Are the natives strong or weak, few or many? Is the country good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And strengthen yourselves and bring with you some of the fruit of the land'.

— Now it happened to be the season of the first ripe grapes.

Moshes' words can be further clarified according to what we are told in Devarim [Deuteronomy 1:22-24]:

Then all of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter [*survey*] the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to'. I approved of the plan, and so I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe. They reached the hill country, came to *wadi Eshcol*, and spied it out.

Hashem instructed the people who were selected to go and scout the land, but an additional request came from the people: that this opportunity be used to reconnoiter the land, to check out the routes leading to it and the nature of the cities in which they were soon to dwell. 'I approved of the plan' — for on the face of it this seemed a perfectly reasonable and logical request; *Hashem's* mission could also be used to serve natural human needs, for ultimately they would have to enter the land and dwell in it. The men were requested to bring back factual information: 'the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to'. Moshe further expanded on this, requesting additional details about the land: the nature of the people living there, and more; but all this was solely for the purpose of knowing how to prepare themselves and not to pose the question of whether or not it was worthwhile entering the land. The men were not asked to give their assessment of whether or not *Hashem's* command of entering the land could be fulfilled.

Moshes' words, 'Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country, and see,' could be interpreted as giving geographic instructions, for from where they were situated the route towards the Negev and the hill country went up northward; but one could also view these words as exhorting them to take a spiritual direction: not to fall because of what they see and not to fear, but to go up spiritually, too, and

constantly bear in mind the higher objective of their mission. 'Strengthen yourselves and bring back' — bringing some of the fruit of the land back to the Israelite encampment is not in itself difficult, yet Moshe used the expression, 'strengthen yourselves... and bring back [fruit]'.

'We shall surely overcome it' or 'We cannot attack that people'?

The intermingling of a divine, heavenly, scheme and a human mission is almost always problematic.

Calev's remarks confirm Moshe's message: 'Go up... and gather yourselves strength'. The situation is described thus: 'Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it' (*ibid.* 13:30). 'Before Moshe — in line with what Moshe had said: go up and gather yourselves strength in the land. But the other men sent on the mission rejected this: 'But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We cannot attack that people, for they are stronger than we' (*ibid.* 13:31). Indeed, they went up and came to the land, but the message they conveyed to the Israelites was that they would not be able to go up, because the peoples dwelling in the land were too strong.

Calev emphasized the ability to establish a hold on the land whereas the others spoke of their ability to overcome the people there. They were not speaking of the same thing. The discussion shifted to assessing the feasibility and advisability of entering the land. The action of scouting, their mission, was to find a fixed resting place. It was then that 'they spread calumnies about the land... one that devours its settlers' (*ibid.* 13:32); 'The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night' (*ibid.* 14:1). The reconnoitering, which should have been secondary (taking advantage of the fact that men had been sent to scout the land), became the more important and more highly considered action, thus leading to the people's great calamity. The reconnaissance, in and of itself, does not come under criticism, for it was proper and laudable, as Nahmanides comments (*ibid.* 13:2):

The Israelites, like anyone who sets out to conquer foreign realms, thought to send men ahead to get to know the roads and approaches to the cities, and after they returned they would lead the army and show

them the way... This is a proper recommendation for any conqueror, and even Moshe himself did so, for it says, 'Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer' (*ibid.* 21:32), and likewise, 'Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies' (Joshua 2:2). Therefore Moses approved of the plan.

However, when spying, one must know the boundaries of the task. Spies are to provide data and information, and even an assessment of the chances and dangers, but not to mix in their own political or moral world view, whose objective is to steer in a different direction, and certainly not when that direction goes against the *Hashem's* directives.