

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXXVII: Shelach (Num. 13:1–15:41)

Essay 2. The incorrect conclusion of the spies

Numbers 13:25-31 describes that the spies returned from the Land of Israel and reported what they saw. Caleb urged entry into the land and taking possession of it, after which the other spies spoke against the plan.

"וַיֹּצִיאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ" וְכוּ' "הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתֶּה אֶרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא" וְכוּ'. קִשְׁיָה דְהָא כָּל פְּנוּנְתָם הִיטָה לְהוֹצִיא שֵׁם רַע עַל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלָמָּה לֹא אָמְרוּ זֶה מִתְחִלָּה וְהִמְתִּינוּ עַד אַחַר דְּבַרֵי כָּלֵב?

“And they spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out unto the children of Israel, saying: ‘The land, through which we have passed to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature’ ” (Num. 13:32). It is difficult to understand, as their sole intent was to bring an evil report about the Land of Israel; why didn’t they say this initially? Why did they wait until after the words of Caleb?

וְגַם לומר דאיתא בספר הזוהר שמשה מסר למרגלים פנונת שם הקדוש שאם יבאו הפנענים להרע להם יכוננו בזה השם ולא יהיו מתיראים, מסורת שמה קדישא מסר לון משה, ובגיגיה אישתזיבו מינייהו.

It can be said that it’s brought in the Book of Zohar (part III, page 160b) that Moses gave the spies the meaning of the Holy Name, such that if the Canaanites would approach to harm them, they could focus on this Name and would not need to fear. The Zohar states, “Rabbi Yehuda said, ‘Moses gave them the tradition of the Holy Name, and thanks to that they were saved from them.’”

ומעתה פאשר שמעו שפלב אמר "עלה נעלה ונרשנו אתה כייכול" וכו' שסופי תיבות הוא שם הוי"ה, פלומר בזכות שם הקדוש ניצול ונוכל להם. אז תקף ומיד "והאנשים אשר-עלו עמו אמרו" אדרבא "כייחזק הוא ממנו", אפילו בעל הבית אינו יכול להוציא פליו משם.

Now, after they returned from the Land of Israel, they heard Caleb say, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it” (Num. 13:30).

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein.

The ending letters of Caleb's words "נַעֲלָה וְנִרְשָׁנוּ אֶתְּהָ כִּי" can be rearranged to constitute the Four-lettered Name, i.e., the Tetragrammaton, as if to say, by the merit of the Holy Name, we will be saved and overcome [the Canaanites]. After hearing Caleb's words, then, immediately, "the men who had gone up with him said" (Num. 13:31), to the contrary, " 'We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we are' " (Ibid.). That is, the other spies withheld their evil report until Caleb spoke and invoked the Name of G-d, the same Name which Moses had taught to them before their trip. Why did the spies speak at that point?

In tractate Arakhin 15a, Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa said that, "The spies uttered a great statement [of blasphemy] . . . Do not read Num. 13:31 as 'for [that people] is stronger than we are [mimenu],' but rather as '[for it is stronger] than He is [mimeno] [i.e., stronger than G-d is].' [They were saying, as it were, that] even the owner of the house [i.e., G-d], cannot remove his utensils [i.e., the inhabitants of the Land of Israel] from there." So the spies were not just speaking evil about the Land of Israel, but they spoke evil about G-d!

דאם איתא שהשם יש לו יכולת, למה בכל מקום שהיינו הולכים, הנה מת נשיאם כדי שיהיו טרודים באבאם ולא ירגישו בהם? תפוק ליה דבלאו הכי הנה להם אותו השם לעזרתם, אלא נדאי וכו'.

Sotah 35a quotes Rava that when the spies entered the Land of Israel, the Canaanite princes died, so that the inhabitants were busy with funerals and did not notice the spies.¹

The spies were thinking that if it's so that the [Holy] Name had the ability to protect them from harm, as Moses instructed, why in any case was it, when they were traveling in the Land of Israel, that the [Canaanite] princes died, so that [the Canaanite people] would be occupied with mourning and would not perceive their presence? I.e., why did G-d have to distract the Canaanites, instead of protecting the Israelites directly? Even without this death of the Canaanites, [the spies] would have had the same [Holy] Name to assist them, rather, [the spies] derived, it is certain that G-d did not have the ability to directly protect them from the full might of the Canaanites, and He had to resort to distracting the Canaanites by killing a smaller number, i.e., their princes!

ואם איתא אומר שלעולם יש לו פה ולא מתו בשביל כך אלא שהגיע זמנם למות, אם כן "אֶרֶץ אֲכָלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הוּא" וכו'.

If, on the other hand, they reasoned, you say that [the Name] always has power but [the Canaanites] didn't die because of [a distracting action by G-d], but because [the Canaanite princes'] time arrived to die, if so, then it "is a land that devours its inhabitants." Thus, when Caleb invoked G-d's name, as if to say that G-d would be with the Israelites and they could successfully take the Land, the flawed thinking of the other spies compelled them to argue against

¹ Sotah 35a: "Rava taught: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I intended [the land to appear to consume its inhabitants] for [their own] good, but they considered [this proof that the land was] bad. I intended it for [their] good [by causing many people to die there so] that anywhere that [the spies] arrived, the most important of them died, so that [the Canaanites] would be preoccupied [with mourning] and would not inquire about them. . . . [However, the spies] considered [this proof that the land was] bad [and said]: 'It is a land that consumes its inhabitants.' "

this. They were thinking that either G-d was too weak to allow them to defeat all the armies that would be arrayed against them, or, if that the Land was so dangerous that it wasn't worth having.

ולפי האמת השם הקדוש עשה כך כדי לעשות ניסים יותר קרובים אל הטבע.

The truth is that the Holy G-d² accomplished this killing of the Canaanite princes **in order to produce miracles** that would appear to be **closer to nature**, so as to give man free choice whether to recognize the Hand of G-d or whether to deny that. Tragically, the spies failed in their interpretation of what had occurred.

* * *

² The word HaShem [השם] literally means “The Name,” and depending upon context could refer to G-d or to His name. Zera Shimshon frequently uses the term “the Holy One, Blessed be He” to refer to G-d, and to use “HaShem” to refer to the Name of G-d. In this essay, it is not always obvious what Rabbi Nachmani intended when he wrote “HaShem.” The translator has rendered “HaShem” as the Name in most instances in this essay, but has rendered it as “G-d” in this final instance, as it does not seem that the Canaanite princes were dying because the spies invoked “the Name,” but because G-d was acting in advance of any such action by the spies.