

5 ways

to heed the lessons of the 'spies'

The story of the 'spies' ('scouts') presents sobering lessons (see overleaf). The critical mistakes made were not those of the community's 'least' members but of its 'greatest': tribal chieftans chosen for their leadership strengths. In our own path of faith, what can each of us learn about taking personal responsibility as a member of our faith community?

1. Hope. Confronted by a challenging situation, the scouts allowed negativity to overcome hope. *Is my outlook fundamentally one of hope or skepticism?*

2. Self-esteem. The scouts allowed a frightening situation to feed their personal insecurities. *Do I foster a positive self-image, made as I am in the image of my Creator? Or do I harbor attitudes of 'false humility'?*

3. Faith. Unlike Caleb and Joshua, the scouts excluded the power of God from their assessment of their ability to enter the promised land.

Do I discern with God or do I make decisions based purely on earthly criteria?

4. Leadership. The scouts allowed personal doubts to undermine their responsibility to show strength and courage for the sake of those in their charge. *Do I consider how my attitudes and actions affect others?*

5. Memory. The scouts lost touch with the story of their people. They forgot the promises made to Abraham and the miracles God had done. *Do I remember the miracles and promises of salvation history?*



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



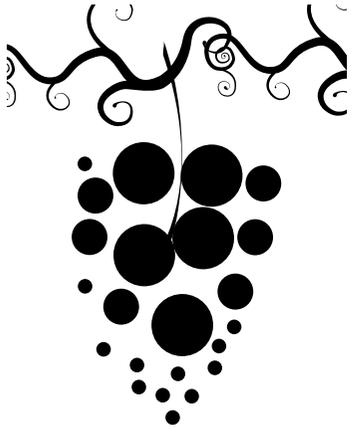
Numbers 13:1—15:41

Shelach Lekha:
'Send'

Why reflect on Torah?

Have you ever faced a critical moment of decision in which the way forward was unclear, risky, and the stakes high? Yet everything in your life had brought you to this moment. What did you do? Forge ahead or turn back? This is the scene that confronts the Israelites in today's Torah portion as they stand at the edge of Canaan, ready to re-enter the promised land after centuries of Egyptian slavery. Moses, Joshua and Caleb—convinced that God is with them—are ready to go forward. But the people are not, swayed by the warnings of the anxious scouts. Like Caleb and Joshua the other scouts have just returned from a reconnaissance mission in Canaan; yet their assessment of the evidence is very different.

In Jewish tradition the behavior of these scouts comes under tough scrutiny for their failure in moral leadership. To appreciate this strong judgement we need to be attuned to the Jewish way of reading Torah, attentive to the details of the text such as apparently extraneous inclusions, use of particular names, and other details of the text. Join us as we explore this fascinating biblical narrative through the eyes of the sages.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 13:1—15:41

In this week's Torah portion the Israelites are ready to re-enter the promised land. But something goes terribly wrong. The tragic result is that the Israelites will continue their wanderings for forty years and the current adult generation will die in the wilderness. Their children will eventually enter the promised land forty years later.

Read the story in Numbers chapters 13-14. Read also the front page of this leaflet. Then let's explore some of the details which the Jewish sages have interpreted.

Tasting Torah

Note the amount of space (vv.3-15) given to identifying the names and tribes of the scouts sent to observe the land. Is this listing really necessary to the story? Couldn't it be omitted? But as the Jewish sages teach us, everything in the Torah is there for a divine reason. How would you interpret the inclusion of vv.3-15?

Perhaps you notice how these verses underscore a fact already mentioned in v.2, that the men chosen for the task are not just ordinary scouts, they are important tribal leaders. Their task is not simply to collect data but to make sound judgments based on the evidence. This is why their unfavorable report is so distressing. Their preoccupation with negativity and the chance of failure means that their people are left without hope. Unlike Caleb and Joshua their assessment ignores any role for God. At a critical moment, they fail in their leadership responsibilities.

Touching Torah

Note too the significance of the name Hebron (13:22). It is the place associated with the story of Abraham. It is where the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried. Hebron offers a powerful symbol of the Israelites' return home. Yet, absorbed by their own fears, the scouts misread a sign vital to the salvation story of their people. Rather than stirring their sense of purpose as the place to begin a new life, Hebron becomes a reason to retreat to slavery.

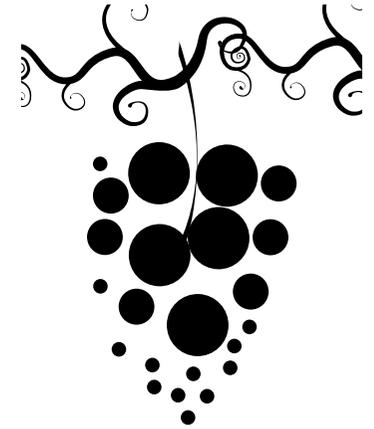
Depthing Torah

Before a fragile audience the scouts describe the land's inhabitants as 'giants' and themselves as grasshoppers "*in their eyes*" (13:33). To this latter point a rabbinic observer makes the ironic comment, "*And how would they know this?*" [TB Sotah 35a]. Their fraudulent report is not based on measurable evidence but the result of a faithless insecurity complex.

The people are inconsolable. Read how they complain to Moses and Aaron in 14:2-4: "*If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or in this wilderness, if only we had died!*" Their negativity spirals out of control. What might have begun as understandable fear becomes regret for the Exodus, for the signs and wonders performed in the desert, for the divine revelation... all these had not been worth it. Now their whining moves to a critical stage of no return: "*Let's appoint a chief and go back to Egypt!*" (14:4). In their active preparedness to turn their back on the promised land and head for a place of slavery and false gods, the sages detect not only a loss of heart but a practical plan that is nothing less than the path to idolatry.

Doing Torah

Rabbinic interpretations highlight how small steps can lead to increasingly grave choices and life orientations. Reflect on this in the light of important 'crossroad' moments in your own life and in the life of the Church.



Faith & Life

A young couple describes a 'crossroad' moment in their lives:

Through a mix of joy and trials we are only just reaching a (reasonably) contented pattern of sharing the parenting of our first child. My husband and I have come to understand how crucial it is to have time each week to be alone together. Even brief moments are precious – to just hold hands, look at one another and talk about 'us'. These moments affect our whole approach to life. The real and imagined stresses can be faced with courage and humour again. We are learning to parent our son *together*, not hold him between us.

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 2011); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda).
Scripture: Friedman.