



## 5 ways

to view the story of the spies

With which character do you most identify in this story of the spies? At a meal with family/friends, read aloud Numbers 13:1-14:45 and invite your table guests to place themselves in the story. Let each present a viewpoint through the eyes of a biblical character. For example:

**1. Caleb.** He was sent as one of the spies but he 'goes against the crowd' and speaks up in support of Moses. Do you consider him to be courageous? Have you ever met a 'Caleb' in a situation in your own life?

**2. Joshua.** We know him to be on Moses' side, but why is he so silent at the time of the spies' reporting? We don't hear him speaking out like Caleb. And what is the significance of his name change in 13:16?

**3. Moses.** How would you assess Moses' leadership in this situation? Would you have acted differently?

How would you sum up the challenge he faced? Have you ever been tried in a similar way?

**4. Miriam.** We can't help but wonder how her conflict with Moses, immediately before the story of the spies (ch.12), impacts upon the rebellion in chapter 13. But why is Miriam not mentioned in this story?

**5. God.** After the rebellious events in Numbers 12, by the time we come to chapter 13 God is already in a bad mood! If you were to survey the scene from the divine perspective, what would you see?



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 13:1—15:41

*Shelah Lekha:*  
'send for yourself'

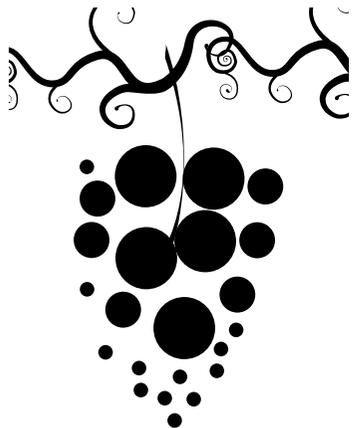
## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham."*

- Nostra Aetate, 4

'Torah' (in its specific usage) refers to the first five books of the bible. These books form part of the sacred story of the Jewish people and, since Christianity grew out of Judaism, they are foundational to our sacred story also. Without the Torah, the Gospels would be like a plant deprived of its roots; they would dry up and wither.

What is the theme common to both Testaments? It is a love story; a story of salvation; a story of a loving God who forms a people and draws that people ever more closely. A love for Torah is a love for one's faith family. The Torah draws us deeply into the story of our spiritual ancestors. It gives us a sense of their gifts and weaknesses, their opportunities and obstacles, their growth points and setbacks. It teaches us that their story is entwined with our story. By journeying through the Torah we journey into the heart of God. Through the Jewish people, we learn what it means to live as God's people.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 13:1—15:41

Our focus for discussion is the story of the spies (Numbers 13:1-14:45). Having drawn near to the promised land, twelve of the Israelites are sent on a reconnaissance mission; they are to 'check out' the land ahead and report back to Moses. A disastrous conflict follows involving Moses and his supporters, their opponents, and God. We are left with a question as to what could have caused such a breakdown in order and leadership among the Israelites, so close to their destiny?

## Tasting Torah

We begin with two translations of God's command to Moses to send the spies:

*'Shelach lecha anashim...'*

*'Send men...'* (13:1; *NRSV*)

*'Send for yourself men...'* (13:1; *Fox*)

Fox's translation retains a subtlety in the Hebrew text: 'Send for yourself,' or 'Send for you,' or 'Send if you please.'

Do you think this subtle addition makes a difference to the story?

## Touching Torah

It has certainly made a difference for the Jewish sages of old who have pondered this text over the centuries. They argue that the 'you/yourself' indicates that it was Moses and the Israelites who insisted on sending out spies and that God went along with their plan. (This is how the story is remembered in Deuteronomy 1:20-2:1.) After all, reasoned the sages, why would there be a need to send out spies in the first place? God had already assured his people that they would be led to a land of milk and honey. Isn't God's promise enough?

Thus they concluded that the Israelites showed a lack of trust in divine providence. Nonetheless, out of respect for their free will, God worked with and through the designs of his people.

Pause to discuss this point of view with your *havrutah* partner.

## Depthing Torah

Exactly what is the sin of the spies? Why are they rebuked? Where do they go wrong? After all, aren't they simply reporting back?

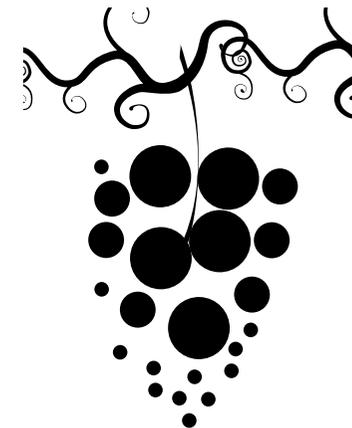
*'We are not able to go up against the population, for it is stronger than we!'* (13:31)

In Hebrew the latter part of this sentence can be read as 'stronger than we,' but it can also be read as 'stronger than *him*.' The plain meaning would suggest 'we,' but in their prayerful play with the text, the Jewish sages developed an interpretation by translating it as 'than Him,' meaning that the foreign population is 'stronger than our God.' In this way, the distrust and rebellion of the people is conveyed.

Their rebellion becomes clear in the next sentence: *'So they gave out a (false) report of the land that they had scouted to the Children of Israel'* (13:32). Until now, the spies have been reporting back to Moses. But at this point they spread rumors among the community, undermining confidence and inciting fear. Note how they liken their own people to 'grasshoppers' (13:33). What is it like to be called a 'grasshopper'?! The contradictions in their story suggest a lack of truthfulness. E.g., if the land 'devours its inhabitants' how could all its people be 'of great stature'?

## Doing Torah

Continue to explore the text, attuned to its details and prayerfully engaging with the story. For example, how might the use of names (of people, places) affect your interpretation?



## Faith and Life

*In Numbers 13, what we see on the edge of the promised land is a failure of nerve. Do you agree? What do you make of the people's apparent loss of morale so close to their destiny? Have you ever faced a challenging 'crossroads' situation where negativity threatened to overcome hope, where fear of the unknown played into personal insecurities; where trust in God was tested? How was the situation resolved?*

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah. Vol 4 Bamidbar* (NY: Mesorah, 2001); the assistance of notes by Br Jack Driscoll is also gratefully acknowledged.