

"Send forth for you men and let them spy out the land of Canaan." (13:2)

The narrative of the *meraglim*, spies, and the ensuing reaction of *Klal Yisrael* to the unfounded slander against *Eretz Yisrael*, constitute one of the saddest moments in Jewish history. Twelve great men left for a mission, but only two return with their faith in the Almighty intact. The other ten returned with an account of the land that was, at best, sufficiently ambiguous to dishearten the people. This led to a night of weeping whose sin is still commemorated on *Tishah b'Av*, our national day of mourning. Why did the scouting mission to Canaan fail so miserably? After all, the *meraglim* themselves were noble and dignified people, whose position of importance was commensurate with their outstanding spiritual achievements.

The various commentators, each in their own manner, explain what went wrong. One thing is clear; this was no ordinary transgression. Whenever we consider the shortcomings of our ancestors, especially the generation of the *midbar* who received the *Torah*, it is essential that we view their actions in the context of their lofty spiritual level.

There is a dimension of the "sin of the spies" which is accepted in the concept of *Chassidus*. In the *Likutei Torah*, the *Baal Ha'Tanya* gives a new explanation to this remarkable episode. The spies were truly great men whose original intentions were simply misguided. They were not concerned with physical defeat. Instead they feared a form of spiritual defeat. In the desert, each Jew was privy to an idyllic life which was a direct gift from the Almighty. His physical needs were attended to by Hashem! He had an abundance of food provided courtesy of the manna; water flowed freely from the well of Miriam. His clothes did not wear out. Due to this unparalleled situation, he was able to immerse himself totally in spiritual pursuit without the slightest material concerns. Can one ask for a more remarkable lifestyle?

The entry of *Bnei Yisrael* into *Eretz Yisrael* would bring all of this to an end. The people would now have to commit to a new way of life. There would no longer be manna. Bread would now be obtained as the result of toil: preparing the soil, planting the seeds, harvesting the crops, and preparing the wheat for human consumption. Entering *Eretz Yisrael* would not create an improvement in their lives. On the contrary, they would now be compelled to involve themselves in material pursuits, which in their minds, would preclude their spiritual advancement. They complained, "It is a land that eats up its inhabitants;" They meant that the labor expended on work would deplete all of their energies. *Bnei Yisrael* perceived that spirituality flourishes in a life of seclusion, devoid of material responsibility, withdrawn from society and its mundane pressures.

They were, however, wrong. Jewish life does not focus on elevating the *neshamah*, soul, but rather on sanctifying the mundane and consecrating the world to a life of holiness and purity. By acceding to their negative views, they failed to recognize the importance and value of a life of action, of *mitzvah* observance, especially those connected with the soil of *Eretz Yisrael*. Every

mitzvah serves a purpose in sanctifying Hashem's Name in the world and in bringing the *Shechinah* into every area of human endeavor. The miracles which sustained *Bnei Yisrael* in the desert were not the zenith of spiritual experience. They served only as a preparation for *Bnei Yisrael's* entry into the reality of life and consecrating mundane activity.

The *meraglim's* fear was, of course, unfounded. True, they would have to work at maintaining their spiritual identity, but is that not what life is all about ? Perhaps, they had been accustomed to living with miracles. They feared the struggle against "everyday" materialism. This is a friction we all face, especially those of us who live in communities in which *yiddishkeit* does not flourish. These individuals, however, have the advantage of being challenged to develop a faith tempered in hardship, which may ultimately have greater endurance.