

Send forth men, if you wish, and let them spy out the land...see the land - how is it? And the people that dwells in it - is it strong or weak? And how is the land in which it dwells - is it good or is it bad? And how are the cities - are they open or are they fortified? And how is the land - is it fertile or is it lean? Are there trees in it or not?...But the people that dwells in the land is very powerful...we cannot ascend to that people. (13:2, 18,19,20,28,31)

One of the most tragic incidents in Jewish history, the *cheit ha'meraglim*, the sin of the spies, played a prominent role in altering the course of history. The fact that the spies were virtuous men, leaders of the nation, when they left on their ill-fated mission magnified this tragedy. In the end, this incident effected ruin upon the entire nation. When all is said and done, a number of issues should be addressed regarding their sin. First, what really was their sin? They were sent on a mission to determine the land's strengths and weaknesses - which they did. They returned with a report detailing the land, the people and its vulnerability to war. If they were doing their job, why were they so harshly punished?

Targum Onkelos does not say that the *meraglim* spoke falsely regarding the land. He says that they spoke "evil". In other words, they utilized every opportunity to slant their reports, to convince the people that the land was unconquerable and that the people were undefeatable. They did not lie; they presented the truth with animus; They painted a picture full of hostility and fear in order to dishearten and dissuade *Bnei Yisrael* from continuing on to *Eretz Yisrael*. While this interpretation does shed light on the sin of the *meraglim*, it still does not account for the punishment, because they did not actually lie.

Second, Moshe did not have to defer to the people's request for spies. In fact, when he turned to Hashem for a solution, Hashem designated him to do as he saw fit. If Moshe was sending spies in response to pressure from the people, was it necessary to give them a specific list of instructions, including what to look for and what information to bring back? It would seem that Moshe was actually taking this mission seriously. Indeed, in *Sefer Devarim*, when Moshe speaks to the people who were on the verge of entering the land, he says that they are about to undertake a great battle with a nation more powerful than they. They will encounter large, fortified cities and a nation of giants and strong men. Is this portrayal so different than what the *meraglim* had reported? This brings us back to our original question: If they did not lie, why did they receive such harsh punishment?

Horav Eliyahu Schlesinger, Shlita, claims that indeed, saying the truth was not their sin. They

were supposed to recount what they had seen as they reconnoitered the land. What did they do wrong? Their attitude and the advice they rendered - unasked - constituted their mistake. They came back and said, "We cannot conquer the land!" Is that what they were sent to find out? Moshe clearly told them what to investigate and what to report back - nothing else! Who authorized them to determine Hashem's ability to lead His people into *Eretz Yisrael*? They sinned by saying, "We cannot do it." No person has a right to undermine the powers of Hashem. To do so is to cast aspersion on the Source of all existence. If Hashem could take them out of Egypt, split the Red Sea and sustain them miraculously in the desert, is the fear of giants dwelling in fortified cities realistic?

The litmus test for the spies was the manner in which they presented their findings. Had they simply responded to the actual questions asked of them, no one would have thought twice. These people were living miraculously, they had nothing to fear whatsoever. After the spies placed doubt in their minds by saying we could not defeat them, the people became overwhelmed and hysterical. A spy is assigned to relay his findings and leave the battle to the general.