

But as for the men whom Moshe sent to spy out the Land, and who returned and provoked the entire assembly to complain against him by spreading a report against the Land. (14:36)...The men, the ones spreading an evil report about the Land died in a plague before Hashem. (14:37)

The preceding *pasuk* already mentioned that the spies had spread an evil report about the Land. Why does the next *pasuk*, which relates their punishment, reiterate their slander of the Land? The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* attributes this to their slandering *Eretz Yisrael*. “How can one declare a completely beautiful Land to be bad? How can a human being be so brazen?... As a result of this insurrection, Hashem’s anger flared against them, and He killed them immediately.” We derive from here that speaking negatively of *Eretz Yisrael* is a grave sin. It is unnatural because it is contrary to the truth. One cannot transform good into bad.

Throughout the generations, our *gedolim*, Torah giants, were circumspect concerning *Eretz Yisrael*, giving it the greatest honor. Not only were they never negative concerning anything related to the Land, they made a point to correct and admonish anyone who crossed the line from laudatory to disapproval. A *chassid* once complained to the *Imrei Emes, Gerrer Rebbe, zl*, about the suffocating heat of summer, claiming that, in *Eretz Yisrael*, it was so stifling. The *Rebbe* immediately explained his comment as a compliment. “In *Eretz Yisrael*, a Jew’s spiritual connection with Hashem warms him up. “*Horav Chaim Zev Finkel, zl* (*Rosh Yeshivas, Heichal HaTalmud, Tel Aviv*), would admonish his students during the hot days of the summer not to complain about *Eretz Yisrael*’s hot climate. When it gets too hot, go into the shade, but do not say anything negative concerning *Eretz Yisrael*. Indeed, during the hot summer days when many people would walk through the streets carrying their folded jackets, he would be meticulous to wear his jacket, so that no one would conjecture that he had a problem with the heat.

Horav Dov Sokolovsky, zl, son-in-law of *Horav Avraham Tzvi Kamai, zl, Rav of Mir* and founder of the *Yeshivah*, related the following frightening story. A wealthy Jew once made his home in Mir, Poland. He was an honorable man who contributed towards every *davar she'b'kedushah*, holy endeavor. He did so happily, and he did not wait to be asked. It was during that period that the movements to emigrate to the Holy Land were in vogue. This man became impassioned by the fervor to move, and he decided to join the Jews who were prepared to build up the Holy Land. He sold all his assets, transformed them into liquid assets, and prepared to leave.

It was a difficult journey, one which took its toll on the ship’s passengers. He survived the trip and, before long, his ship came into port. He loaded up his baggage and left for Yerushalayim. Months passed and suddenly, as if out of nowhere, he appeared on the streets of Mir. The city was in an uproar. What catalyzed his return? He had been so excited about settling in the Holy Land, only to return a few months later. It was unreal. “Why are you here? What made you come back?” he was

asked by anyone whom he met. Finally, he said, "Fine, I will address the entire community on Thursday night."

The following Thursday night, the *shul*, which was the city's largest venue, was filled to capacity. The wealthy man walked in, and a hush settled on the room as he rose to the lectern.

He began by extolling the holy sites which he had visited. He was spiritually infused with the Land's sacredness. How fortunate he was to have walked on the same roads that had been visited by the great *Tannaim*, *Amoraim*, *Rishonim* and *Achronim*. Then he stopped and said, "But this all pales in comparison with the travail which is a daily experience for the Jewish community. The poverty and deprivation to which they are subjected is unreal. I have never seen such poverty, such adversity. The food they eat is fit for animals." He stopped for a moment, as if preparing for the knockout punch that would define his entire speech: "Believe me, my friends, it is far better to be a *shepselah*, sheep, in Mir, than a person in *Eretz Yisrael*!"

The moment that he finished his slanderous speech, a cry emanated from his mouth, accompanied by his body shaking uncontrollably. He began to make movements like a sheep, with the only sound emanating from his mouth being, "Bah, bah!" just like a sheep. At first, the congregation thought that he was acting out his "sheep" speech, but, a while later, it became sadly evident that he had incurred a terrible Heavenly punishment. One does not slander *Eretz Yisrael*; one does not speak negatively of Hashem's Land.