

What was the sin of the spies?

The story of the spies (or ‘scouts’) in the book of Numbers (13:1-14:45) provides intriguing insights into the workings of community, of leadership and the challenges of faith. 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?

Let’s begin our reflection 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?

It made a difference for the Jewish sages who have pondered this text over the centuries.¹ 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?

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

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 reads: ‘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 very 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 rumours in the community, undermining confidence, inciting fear. Note how they liken their own people to ‘grasshoppers’ (13:33). What is it like to be called a ‘grasshopper’?! Also, 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’?

Continue to explore the text, attuned to its details, creatively and prayerfully engaging with the story. For instance, one might say that what we see on the edge of the Promised Land is a failure of nerve. Do you agree? Have you ever faced a challenging ‘crossroads’ situation where negativity threatened to overcome hope, where fear of the unknown played into personal insecurities; where your trust in God was tested? How was the situation resolved? •

1. Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lambda, n.p.d.); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah. Vol 4 Bamidbar* (New York: Mesorah, 2001).

© Teresa Pirola, 2012. lightoftorah.net. Reproduction for non-commercial use permitted with acknowledgement of website.