

Crossroads

Have you ever faced a critical decision where the way forward was unclear, risky, and the stakes high? Yet everything in your life had brought you to this moment. What did you do? Forge ahead or turn back? This is the scene that confronts the Israelites in Num. 13 as they stand at the edge of Canaan, ready to re-enter the promised land after centuries of slavery. Moses, Joshua and Caleb—convinced that God is with them—are ready to go forward. But the people are not, swayed by the warnings of the anxious scouts. Like Caleb and Joshua the other scouts have just returned from a reconnaissance mission in Canaan; yet their assessment of the evidence is very different.

In Jewish tradition the behaviour of these scouts comes under tough scrutiny for their failure in moral leadership. To appreciate this strong judgement we need to be attuned to the Jewish way of reading Torah, attentive to the details of the text such as apparently extraneous inclusions, use of particular names, and other details. Read the story in Numbers chapters 13-14. Then let's explore some of the details which the Jewish sages have interpreted.

Note the amount of space (vv.3-15) given to identifying the names and tribes of the scouts sent to observe the land. Is this listing really necessary to the story? Couldn't it be omitted? But as the Jewish sages teach us, everything in the Torah is there for a divine reason. How would you interpret the inclusion of vv.3-15?

Perhaps you notice how these verses underscore a fact already mentioned in v.2, that the men chosen for the task are not just ordinary scouts, they are important tribal leaders. Their task is not simply to collect data but to make sound judgments based on the evidence. This is why their unfavourable report is so distressing. Their preoccupation with negativity and the chance of failure means that their people are left without hope. Unlike Caleb and Joshua their assessment ignores any role for God. At a critical moment they fail to act as responsible leaders.

Note, too, the significance of the name Hebron (13:22). It is the place associated with the story of Abraham. It is where the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried. Hebron offers a powerful symbol of the Israelites' return home. Yet, absorbed by their own fears, the scouts misread a sign vital to the salvation story of their people. Rather than seeing a place to begin a new life, Hebron becomes a reason to retreat to slavery.

Before a fragile audience the scouts describe the land's inhabitants as 'giants' and themselves as grasshoppers "*in their eyes*" (13:33). To this latter point a rabbinic observer makes the ironic comment, "And how would they know this?" [TB Sotah 35a]. Their fraudulent report is not based on measurable evidence but the result of a faithless insecurity complex.

The people are inconsolable. Read how they complain to Moses and Aaron in 14:2-4: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or in this wilderness, if only we had died!" Their negativity spirals out of control. What might have begun as understandable fear becomes regret for the Exodus, for the signs and wonders performed in the desert, for the divine revelation... all these had not been worth it. Their whining moves to a critical stage of no return: "Let's appoint a chief and go back to Egypt!" (14:4). In their readiness to turn their back on the promised land and head for a place of slavery and false gods, the sages detect not only a loss of heart but a practical plan that is nothing less than the path to idolatry.

Rabbinic interpretations highlight how small steps can lead to increasingly grave choices and life orientations. Reflect on this in the light of important 'crossroad' moments in your own life and in the life of the Church.

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 2011); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lambda, n.p.d.). Scripture: Friedman.

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