

## ***The Ten Holy Spies*** ***Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer***

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### *Parshat Sh'lach L'cha*

We read this week that Moses, at G\*d's instruction, sent out a team of twelve spies to scout out the Land of Canaan. Two of the spies – Joshua and Caleb – reported that the land could be taken, and there is a wealth of commentary extolling their insight. Little, however, has been written about the ten spies who brought back a negative report, who said that the Canaanites were too strong, and most of that commentary criticizes them severely for their lack of faith. But perhaps there is another way of looking at it.

How could it be that the people even listened to the report that the Canaanites were too strong to be conquered? We had been in the wilderness, in the desert, for forty years, sustained miraculously by G\*d. Even before we entered the wilderness, we had experienced G\*d's miraculously delivering us from Mitzrayim. How could we even suspect that G\*d would not continue to be with us, sustaining us and supporting us, as we entered the land which G\*d had promised to us? How could the ten spies, carefully chosen by Moses, even offer such a suggestion? Where was their faith?

Well, the simple plain-text meaning of the text certainly raises those questions, but there are always deeper meanings and understandings; holy writings cannot be confined to a single level of meaning.

The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menahem Mendel Schneerson, suggests that the ten spies did not wish to enter Canaan and preferred rather to remain in the wilderness precisely because of the way in which G\*d had sustained us during the forty years. In the wilderness, we were completely cut off from the material world. Our food was provided miraculously; a well of water accompanied us; even our

clothing, a midrash tells, grew along with us. In the Land of Canaan/Israel, however, the manna would cease, and we would have to eat ordinary food. Miriam's well would no longer accompany us, and we would have to drink ordinary water. In fact, we would have to take care of all our needs and devote ourselves to our physical needs and survival.

The ten spies, with their seemingly negative report, may actually have been urging us to stay in the spiritual and miraculous world of being sustained, directly and openly, by G\*d.

The people, however, as revealed by the text, accepted the spies' report for quite a different reason. In response to the spies' report, they wanted to return to Mitzrayim. The spies may have wanted to remain wholly in the spiritual world; the people, it seems, just wanted to be sure that all their needs would be provided, even at the cost of returning to Mitzrayimic oppression.

Joshua and Caleb – and Moses as well – understood far better than either the ten spies or the masses of the people. They understood that, holy as it may be to devote ourselves entirely to the spiritual, G\*d has made us physical beings as well, and we cannot deny either for the sake of the other, except temporarily. Our master and teacher, Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz (1760-1827) says, “The path to Eden leads through the world of action.” In our own time, Dag Hammarskjöld, (*Markings*, p. 122), almost precisely echoes Rebbe Naftali when he says, “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

Unlike the ten spies, who were on too holy a level to be aware of the *gestalt* of our existence, Moses, Joshua, and Caleb understood the need, in this world in which G\*d has placed us, to balance the spiritual and the material.

Shabbat Shalom.