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Hanging by a Thread

Shelach

Numbers 13:1–15:41

Joshua 2:1–24

Two missions with the same purpose, but opposite results. The earlier venture ends in disaster, with the Children of Israel condemned to wander in the wilderness for thirty-eight years; immediately after the later one, the Children of Israel enter the Promised Land.

In the parsha, Moses dispatches twelve men to explore the Land and report back; returning after forty days, the majority reports that the Children of Israel would not succeed in ousting the current inhabitants. In the haftarah, Joshua sends only two men; after spending only four days just across the border and most of that time hidden in mountain caves, they report that the Children of Israel would surely succeed. Several things might account for the difference between the two reports.

According to the parsha, the spies sent by Moses traversed the entire land of Canaan—from the wilderness of Zin in the south to as far north as the “expanse” at the approach to Hamath in the northwest.¹ In the haftarah, Joshua’s spies go only to Jericho, where they speak to only one person, a woman named Rahav. As it happens, the Hebrew words for “expanse” and “Rahav” share the same letter root which hints at a comparison between the two journeys. Joshua’s spies learned more by

1 *Rashi*, Numbers 13:21.

traveling only as far as Jericho, the closest city across the Jordan River, than the majority of Moses' spies learned from their longer travels.

Jericho was a walled city, and Moses had especially asked the spies to report whether the cities in Canaan had walls. To Moses, a wall around a city indicated weakness; if the inhabitants had confidence in their own strength, they wouldn't feel the need for a wall.² The majority of the spies misunderstood; to them, walls indicated invulnerability (Numbers 13:28). Joshua's spies recognized that if the king of Jericho had felt secure within his walls, he would have allowed enemies free access to his city's defenses, knowing that they would despair of success; instead, the king sought to apprehend them as spies.³

At the time of the first expedition, there were thirty-one kings in Canaan; the majority of Moses' spies thought that although the Children of Israel had been able to escape from one king, Pharaoh, they stood no chance against so many kings.⁴ Because of the walls around Jericho, Joshua's spies knew that the Children of Israel would be able defeat the other Canaanite kings as readily as they would soon defeat the king of Jericho.

Or, perhaps, the Canaanites' morale was different at these two times. Rahav told Joshua's spies that the hearts of the people of Jericho had melted because of the Children of Israel. This would have been natural considering that they had just defeated Sihon and Og, two powerful kings on the other side of the Jordan (*ibid.* 21:21–35). But, according to Rahav, the drying up of the waters of the Sea of Reeds when the Children of Israel left Egypt had already melted the hearts of her people (Joshua 2:10). If the people of Jericho knew of and remembered this event forty years later, the rest of the people of Canaan must have also known of it and were similarly affected when Moses' spies traveled through the Land shortly after the event. Moses' spies completely missed the Canaanites' demoralization.

2 *Ibid.*, v. 18.

3 *Malbim*, Joshua 2:24.

4 *Rashi*, Numbers 14:16.

Because of all of this, the spies Moses sent had every opportunity to report the truth, but they did not. We must look for the origin of the different outcomes elsewhere. In the parsha, every one of the twelve spies is named, and each one is a distinguished tribal leader (Numbers 13:2–3). Each one had been righteous at the time of his appointment.⁵ The haftarah doesn't even tell us the names or tribes of Joshua's two spies.

According to the Talmud, there is an identity between an agent and the person he represents.⁶ Thus, we may regard each of the two sets of spies as representative of their generations, and the difference between these two generations explains the different outcomes of the two missions.

Just before this parsha begins, the Children of Israel and Moses' own brother and sister had revolted against God's and Moses' leadership.⁷ Given this immediate background, it is not surprising that a majority of Moses' spies left with evil counsel and returned with evil counsel.⁸ Joshua's spies, on the other hand, represented a people who were confident of their success.⁹

An event recorded toward the end of the haftarah may account for the difference between these two generations. Rahav hangs a red cord from her window, which was on the exterior of the city wall; the spies use this cord to escape at night without being seen by the authorities or the neighbors. In return for her assistance, Rahav asks the Children of Israel to spare her and her family when they conquer Jericho. The spies agree and designate the red cord as a sign to the Israelites that they should protect everyone within Rahav's house (Joshua 2:17–21).

The red cord echoes the parsha's closing verses, which command the Children of Israel to wear fringes of twined thread (*tzitzis*) on the four corners of their garments (Numbers 15:37–41). The purpose of these fringes is to remind the wearer of God's commandments and to deter

5 Ibid., 13:3.

6 *Berachos* 34a.

7 Numbers 11:1–12:16.

8 *Rashi*, Numbers. 13:25.

9 *Malbim*, Joshua 2:23.

them from exploring after their own hearts and eyes (ibid. 15:39). The Hebrew word for “exploring” in this verse is the same word the parsha had used earlier when it says that Moses sent the spies to “explore” the Promised Land (ibid. 13:13). If they had worn the fringes during their travels, perhaps, the ten spies who drew the wrong conclusions might have recognized that they were exploring after their own hearts and not the reality that was before them.

Of course, the two among Moses’ spies who reported favorably, Joshua himself and Caleb, would not have been wearing the fringes either, since the commandment to wear them had not yet been given, and Rahav would not have worn them since she was not even an Israelite at the time and the commandment does not apply to women anyway. So, each individual must decide how confident he is of being like Joshua, Caleb, and Rahav rather than like the ten spies. Taken together, the parsha and haftarah counsel against relying on our unaided strength.

There is one more link between the parsha and haftarah that should be mentioned before this discussion ends. The parsha repeatedly decrees that the native-born and the proselyte obey the same commandments, enjoy the same rewards, and are to be treated identically (ibid. 15:14–16, 29–30). Rahav lived among idolaters and had no one to teach her about Israel’s God but her own heart and mind, yet she married Joshua and became the ancestress of nine prophets.¹⁰ Her example demonstrates the wisdom of the parsha’s commandment to welcome proselytes.

10 *Megillah* 14b.