

PARASHA #109
Torah: Numbers 13:1–33
Haftarah: Joshua 2:1–24
Apostolic Scriptures: Ephesians 6:10–18

THE GREAT SPY DISASTER

Israel's history has several turning points. The parasha before us gives an account of one of those. This parasha has everything! It has geography, history, spies, uprisings, drama, trouble, and much more! It is one of the most famous stories in the Torah. It is also one of the most tragic. In this parasha, we find Israel on the threshold of the Promised Land. God had seemingly completed all the necessary preparations for them to enter. It was all going to be so great! Spies were sent to help make the necessary military preparations and to get the people excited about taking possession of their Land. Then disaster strikes. Sin! Unbelief! Rebellion! The result: 38 years of wandering in the wilderness, watching their parents and grandparents die alongside of them. This is *Parashat Shelach*. We will approach our study of this parasha using the following outline:

- I. The Caper
- II. The Culprits
- III. The Conclusions
- IV. The Cluster

I. THE CAPER

A. The Task

What specifically were the spies to do in the Land? Moshe instructed them to gather information in six different categories:

- 1) What does the land look like?
- 2) What about the people in the land?
- 3) Is the land suitable for agriculture?
- 4) What kind of vegetation is in the land?
- 5) What about the cities?
- 6) Bring back some samples of the produce.

Based on these instructions we can assume that the spy mission was not merely for military purposes. Otherwise, why would Moshe want to know about the vegetation, for example? Conquering the Land was only one aspect of their goal. The Israelites had to know if, after defeating the enemy, they could realistically survive there.

Because of this, we can now suggest an alternative meaning to the term usually translated “to spy” in **13:2**, *yaturu* (יתורו). It is from a verb that can easily be translated “to seek out” or “discover” rather than “to spy.”¹ If we adopt this translation then we can better explain why other information was sought than exclusively military intelligence. Interestingly enough, the modern Hebrew word for tourist is based on this verb. In fact, the logo for the Ministry of Tourism in Israel is two men carrying the cluster of grapes! The question is, were the spies tourists, or are modern tourists, spies?!

¹ HALOT, 1707.

B. The Territory

The explorers searched out the land “from the Wilderness of Zin to the expanse at the approach to Hamat” (13:21). Instead of the phrase “approach or entrance to Hamat”, the NASB says “Lebo Hamath”. They also went to Hebron, to the Valley of Eshcol, to the Negev (13:22–24), to the seacoast, as well as to the Jordan Valley (13:29).

Most scholars agree that the Wilderness of Zin is the area southwest of the Dead Sea. This was in the south of Israel. This location is fairly clear. The northern arena of exploration is a little more complicated. The place in the north is described in Hebrew in 13:21 approach to Hamat.” In Hebrew *chmat* (עד-רחוב לבא חמת).

Scholars debate about whether these words should be translated or transliterated, they names. Thus, the spies went to Hamat. If they are to be transliterated, they could mean that the spies went from in the south to “the expanse at Hamat” in the north.

No matter which way we choose to render this Hebrew phrase, the text seems to be talking about a Canaanite location in the north.

One biblical geographer notes that Hamat is probably equivalent to modern Hama in Syria, not far from modern southwest Syria and northeast Lebanon. This would put it north of the “pan-handle” region of modern Israel.

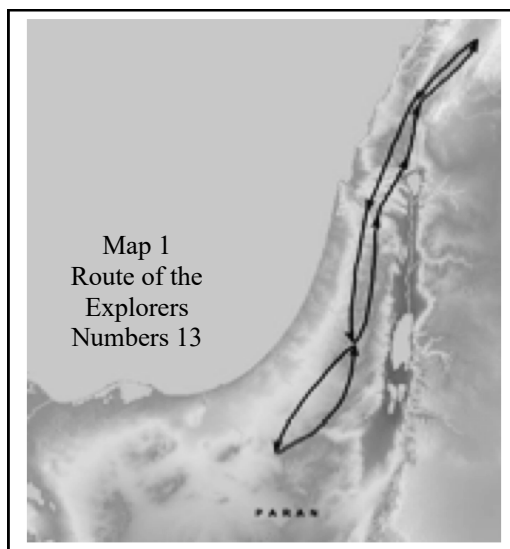
Elsewhere, Numbers 34:7–9, this is listed as part of the northern border of Israel.

The Israelites never successfully settled these northern regions, which include all of modern Lebanon and territory more than 60 miles [about 97km] north of Damascus. Only David (2 Samuel 8:5–6), Solomon, (2 Chronicles 7:8), and Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25) had some success in subduing these northern regions. In the northeast the Promised Land extended to “the great River Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 1:7; and 2 Samuel 8:3). This refers to the north-western tributaries of the Euphrates River in modern Syria, not the Euphrates in modern Iraq.²

The text says in 13:22–24 that they went to Hebron. Hebron is located 18 miles (about 30km) south of Jerusalem. Actually, all one had to do was to follow the ridge road that travelled along the “spine” of Israel, the central mountain ridge, that goes from near Shechem in the centre, to past Hebron in the south, even to Be’er Sheva in the Negev. This is essentially modern Israeli highway 60. Undoubtedly, this is also one of the routes the explorers took, as well.

The Valley of Eschol is *nahal eschol* (נַחַל אֶשְׁכּוֹל), or “valley of a cluster”. The Hebrew word *nahal* (נַחַל) is really a wadi or a small valley where a seasonal stream flows. Harrison suggests that it could be identified as the modern Arab village of Burj Haskeh, about two miles north of Hebron.³

When they came to Hebron, the Hebrew in 13:22 changes from a plural pronoun to a singular pronoun, “he came to Hebron.” This change speaks volumes. Most commentators, including myself, think that it was Caleb who went to Hebron. This interpretation is strengthened by Judges 1:20, where it says that Hebron was given to Caleb.



it reads: *ad rehov levo*

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² William Schlegel, *Satellite Bible Atlas* (“SBA”), notes to Map 3–4.

³ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries), 206.

Why is this significant? It is important perhaps because Hebron was the tomb of the Patriarchs, their forefathers. Since he was part of this nation, Caleb, in other words, went home! Being in the Land was home to him. He would be willing to claim it no matter what the cost, whereas the others (except Joshua) did not think of themselves as going “home” to Hebron. Perhaps if they had thought like Caleb, and had done what he had, they might not have rebelled against the gift the Lord was giving to them — the Land, their home.

Furthermore, the mission began in “the season for the first ripe grapes” (13:20). In Israel, this meant that the time period was mid-July to mid-August.

Please note the map above, Map 1. It shows the approximate routes that the explorers followed as they checked-out the Land. They also encountered the main inhabitants of the Land. According to 13:19, they are: “Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites.”

Amalekites — These were always considered strong foes of Israel. They lived in the Negev.

Hittites — There is a scholarly debate as to how the Hittites, who were from modern Turkey and non-Semitic, could live in Canaan at this period of history and also possess Semitic names, i.e. Ephron the Hittite in Hebron. The Hittites had a powerful empire, but it was mainly in the north. Perhaps further archaeology may help solve the riddle. They seem to have vied with Egypt much of the time during the second millennia BCE for control of Canaan. However, scholars have demonstrated that the so-called Hittite, Ephron, who sold the burial cave to Abraham was not a Hittite, but rather a descendant of one name Het, spelled differently than the word “Hittite.”

Jebusites — This Semitic group lived in the environs of Jerusalem, which was considered a Jebusite city. It was the Jebusites who brought the Gihon Spring within the city of Jerusalem by digging underground tunnels, before the spies were there.

Amorites — It is hard to be precise in our definition and analysis of the Amorites, “which is hardly surprising in view of their nomadic heritage.”⁴ This was a term used in the Mesopotamian cuneiform sources as early as the second half of the third millennium, to designate the Semitic herdsmen and their territory in the Syrian steppe west of the Euphrates.⁵

Canaanites — The Canaanites were a very loose collection of tribes, who were not Semitic but spoke a Semitic language very close to Hebrew. They lived mostly in the lowland regions of Israel. We know much about them through the discovery of Ugarit in present day Ras Shamra in Lebanon. They were not very united but dwelt in city-states and united to fight common enemies.

II. THE CULPRITS

A. Special Men

The names of the explorers are specifically given to us in 13:4–15. The text provides a few noteworthy comments about these people that draws our attention.

First, the spies are called “heads or leaders among them”. The Hebrew translated “leader” is the term “*nasi* (נָשִׂיא). It is difficult to determine from this word the specific nature of their position within the tribes, except that they were some kind of respected leaders. At different times in history the word *nasi* has been rendered “prince” or even “president,” as it is today. However, they were not necessarily tribal heads, but rather “men of importance, capable of grappling with so trying a task.”⁶ The import of all of this is to suggest that these spies were not just ordinary men.

⁴ Harrison, *op. cit.*, 208.

⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers (JPS Torah Commentary)*, 105.

⁶ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 623.

Their peers regarded them as men who possessed special qualities and abilities that enabled them to be trusted to perform this critically important task of gathering necessary information.

B. Their Identity

We wish we knew more about each man. However, R. Isaac said, "It is a tradition in our possession from our forefathers that the spies were named after their actions."⁷ This argument carries more weight when we realize that often a Semitic name was sometimes intended to tell us something about the person. We might be able to take educated guesses at the messages some of the names might carry.⁸ Perhaps it looks like this:

The Names of Infamy

Shammua (שמוע) — Associated with the word, שמועה, meaning "a report".

Shaphat (שפט) — Associated with the word שפט, meaning "to judge."

Caleb (כלב) — Associated with the words: לב and כ, meaning, "according to the mind."

Yigal (יגאל) — Associated with the word גאל and in the form that means, "he redeems".

Hoshea (Later, Joshua) (הושע) — Associated with the word ישע and means, salvation.

Palti (פלטי) — Associated with the word פלט, meaning "my escape" or "my deliverance".

Gaddiel (גדיאל) — Associated with the words אל and גדי, meaning, "my fortune is God"

Gadi (גדי) — from the word גדי, meaning, "my fortune".

Ammiel (עמיאל) — Associated with the words אל and עמי, meaning, "my kinsman is God."

Setur (סתור) — Associated with the word סתר, meaning, "to hide" or "to conceal."

Nakhvi (נחבי) — Associated with the word חבה, meaning "faint-hearted."

Geuel (גאואל) — Associated with the words גאווה + אל, meaning "the majesty of God."

We leave it to the students to put this all together in a meaningful way to see what lessons there might be in this list for us — and how God might have been speaking to that generation of Israelites of which they were a part. Verses 4–15

Note that in the listing of the spies, no one from the tribe of Levi is represented

C. The Two Heroes

The most famous names in the list are Joshua and Caleb. We know them because they turn out to be the two heroes of the group. Caleb might actually have been born a non-Israelite. According to Numbers 13:6 and 32:12, he is the son of Yephunneh, Kenizzite, and father-in-law of Othniel, one of the first judges of Israel (Joshua 15:17). Originally an Edomite clan (See Genesis 36:15, Kenaz) that settled in southern Canaan, the Kenizzites are listed among the people of Canaan who are to be dispossessed by the descendants of Abraham.

When Moses requested each tribe to designate a man to explore the land of Canaan, Caleb was selected because he was one of the leaders of Judah (Numbers 13:3). This means that, although he was from a non-Israelite family, he chose to be associated with the tribe of Judah. Hence, he was sent as one of the 12 spies to scout the land of Canaan and bring a report to the people of Israel. While the other 10 spies brought a pessimistic report, Caleb and Joshua encouraged the people to

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Sotah 34b

⁸ Naturally, we cannot be dogmatic about these meanings. All of the translations of the names are based on information gleaned from BDB and HALOT.

trust in Adonai and take possession of the land. Because of their faithfulness, Caleb and Joshua were allowed to enter the land and take part in the conquest of Canaan (13:22).

“Hebron” — The Hebrew verb changes from plural to singular where it says, “they came”. It should read, “he came”. This change speaks volumes. Most commentators, including myself, think that it was Caleb who went to Hebron. This interpretation is strengthened by Judges 1:20, where it says that Hebron was given to Caleb. Why is this significant? It is important perhaps because Hebron was the tomb of the Patriarchs, their forefathers. Caleb, in other words, went home! Being in the Land was home to him. He would be willing to claim it no matter what the cost, whereas the others (except Joshua) did not go “home” to Hebron. Perhaps if they had thought like Caleb, and had done what he had, they might not have rebelled against the gift the Lord was giving to them — the Land, their home.

We are more familiar with Joshua. To this point in the Torah, Joshua functioned as the general of Israel’s army, personal aid and disciple of Moshe. In this passage, we learn that Moshe changed his name slightly. First, he was called Hoshea. In **13:16**, “Moshe gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.” Rabbi Hertz, perhaps, best explains the nature of this name change when he writes, “The change had already been made at the time of the victory over Amalek. . . Hoshea signifies, ‘He has helped.’ Moses, by prefixing to it a letter of the Divine Name, changed it to Joshua, Hebrew: ‘Yehoshua,’ i.e. ‘He [the Lord] will help,’ at the same time indicating the Source of salvation.”⁹

The addition of the Hebrew letter (י) to the front of his name also changes the tense to the future tense. Hence, we can say that his name means, “The Lord will save/help/deliver”. The Talmud says that this, in essence, reflects a prayer from Moshe. “As for Joshua, Moses had already prayed on his behalf as it is said, ‘And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun Joshua, may Yah save you from the plan of the spies’.”¹⁰ Commentator Samson Raphael Hirsch states this name change so beautifully when he writes, “He who has always helped us in the past [Hoshea, הוֹשֵׁעַ] is also [Yehoshua] יְהוֹשֻׁעַ. He who will bring about in the future.”¹¹

Another Joshua

Because of the difficulty of rendering Hebrew words into English, we often overlook an important feature of the name “Jesus”. Jesus is from the Greek word *Iasous* (Ἰησοῦς). This is the usual way to render the name Joshua into Greek. Over the period of time, the Hebrew “Joshua,” *Yehoshua* (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ), was sometimes shortened to *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ). Most of the examples of this appear in writings from the Second Temple Period. An exception of this is in 1 Chronicles 24:11 where we learn that Yeshua was the name of the head of one of the classes of priests. Other examples from Second Temple Period writings are found in Ezra 2:40; 3:9; Nehemiah 3:19; and Nehemiah 7:11, among others.¹²

As we have seen, Joshua means, “The Lord will save/rescue/help/deliver”. Hence, by calling the incarnated Messiah “Joshua”, God was teaching us that it would be by this “Joshua” that He will save His people. Matthew (1:21) explicitly indicates that the salvation He came to affect was one from sin. Accordingly, His name was a prophecy of what He would accomplish and in whose power and strength He would accomplish it.

Today many simply refer to Him by His given Hebrew name, Yeshua (remember, this is a form of Joshua or Yehoshua). His parents would have called Him Yeshua, not Yehoshua and not Jesus.

⁹ Hertz, *op. cit.*, 624.

¹⁰ B Sotah 34b

¹¹ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, 560.

¹² BDB, 221.

Even though we do not know much about the personal qualities of these explorers, we do know one thing: we know that they were highly qualified for this mission, and that they were in the company of extremely spiritual men (Joshua and Caleb). Sadly, the names of these spies will forever go down into history as the men who “gave a bad report” about the Land of Promise and were, therefore, instrumental in leading Israel in rebellion against the command of God to go in and take possession of His Land. What a reputation!

III. THE CONCLUSIONS

This parasha is famous for the explorers giving the wrong report of their mission to the rest of their countrymen.¹³ Israeli commentator Nechama Leibowitz notes “The spies unburdened themselves on three occasions.” Each, she contends, “combine to culminate in sin and rebellion against the Lord.”¹⁴ Let us examine each of these three occasions.

A. Subtlety to Moshe 13:25–29

The first report was with Moshe. Here they superficially seem to give only a factual report, as good spies ought. For the most part, they described what they saw. However, after their initial description in **13:27**, the text uses the Hebrew words in **13:28**, *efes ki-'az* (אִפֶּס כִּי-עַז). According to BDB, this phrase is spoken to, “qualify a previous statement.” The words can therefore be rendered “save that”, or “howbeit”.¹⁵ A strong “but” would also do. In other words, by inserting this little phrase, the spies turned their faithful objective report into a subjective analysis. This subtle denunciation was done in the presence of their sage, Moshe.

B. Protest to Caleb 13:30–31

The second report was in response to Caleb. This time the negative feelings in their report were not so subtle. In **13:30**, Caleb publicly and forthrightly takes issue with the negative analysis of the rest of the spies.

We are told that as he spoke, he had to “silence” the people. The word “silence” usually is used as an interjection, e.g., “Silence!” Here it is a verb used in the Hebrew imperfect tense. This tells us at least two things. First, the spies' report that was given to Moshe was also in earshot of the people. It was negative enough to cause a verbal stir among them. Hence, this is the need for Caleb to attempt to silence the spies. Secondly, it tells us that the report evoked such a response that Caleb had to attempt to keep them quiet enough for him to speak. Interestingly enough, it says that Caleb had to silence the people “toward Moshe”. This indicates that already there was another rebellion brewing against Moshe.

Caleb tried hard to encourage the people to go into the Land, but the spies responded even more strongly to him. To Caleb, they were not as subtle as they pretended to be to Moshe. Their response to Caleb is in **13:31**. On the surface, it is merely a repudiation of what he had just said. However, Leibowitz sees, in their retort to Caleb, a deeper and far more serious argument, one that was specifically fashioned against this man of God, Caleb.

Leibowitz hints that, perhaps, the most serious of the spies' response was to Caleb's encouraging words. She talks about the last Hebrew word in **13:31**, *mimenu* (מִמֶּנּוּ). She says rightly that this can be translated either as “than we” or “than him”. On the one hand, it seems that the plain meaning of the text is obviously “they are stronger than we”. However, the Midrash, cited by Rashi states: “they meant it in reference to Him that is Above”.¹⁶ In other words, they implied

¹³ Timothy Ashley, *Numbers (New International Commentary) op. cit.*, 245.

¹⁴ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies on Bamidbar*, 137–138.

¹⁵ BDB, 67. H 7777h effr

¹⁶ Rashi, *op. cit.*, 157.

that the people of the Land were stronger than Him, than God, interpreting *mimeno* in the third person.¹⁷ Whether or not they actually meant “mimeno” literally to refer to God, the fact is that in the end that is really what they were saying.

C. An Evil Report to the People 13:32

The final occasion in which they gave their report was in the next verse, **13:32**. Here they turn from Moshe and Caleb and speak directly to the people. “On the third occasion, the spies make no bones about the matter, and unrestrainedly reveal their feelings, casting to the winds all pretence of objectivity!”¹⁸ Let us see what they say.

The text in **13:32** describes their report as a “bad report”. Timothy Ashley clarifies what this means when he states “It is called an evil report (*davah*, דבֵּה). This term contains within it the idea of negativity, falsehood, and strife. When **14:27** adds the word evil (רָע), it is merely clarifying what is already implicit.”¹⁹

Their report was therefore false, negative, and designed to produce strife. A good example of a falsehood in their report is in **13:32** when they related that the “land devours its inhabitants”. It is hard to know exactly what this means. Those of us living here, in Israel, today can testify to a certain aspect of this in that survival here is difficult at every point. However, whatever it means, the spies tell us that there were at least some people whom the Land did not devour — the giants! So, their report is not entirely correct. The truth of the matter is that if the giants were able to survive, how much more could those who were made powerful by the strength of the Lord! This, the explorers (except for Joshua and Caleb) did not say.

It seems that from the start the whole intent of the spies was to present a negative picture and a false report to the people of Israel. The text does not tell us why they brought back such a negative report. The sages assert that they were negative from the start. If so, then they had a good plan to discourage the people. The rabbis say, “Any piece of slander which has not some truth in the beginning, will not endure in the end.”²⁰ In other words, if they intended to give a false report of their mission, the best way was to have it based at least partly on some piece of true information, which they tried to do. This is the worst kind of slander, and, as the Talmud indicates, its poison will frequently endure.

IV. THE CLUSTER 13:23–24

Sometimes in a trial, one piece of evidence, if it is critical enough, can be sufficient to convince the jurors to render their decision. This is true for our story in this parasha. What was the evidence that Joshua and Caleb brought forth? It was the cluster of grapes! (**13:23**) God's sovereign hand was in this event. He had the explorers bring back with them concrete evidence from the Land which would shoot holes all through their story, although their minds were too bent on lying to notice it. What did the cluster of grapes prove?

A. They had a choice to make.

No one forced the scouts to bring back the large cluster of grapes. We do not know what motivated them to do so. Perhaps it was both Joshua and Caleb to do so. Whatever the circumstances, one thing is certain. The scouts had a choice, and the choice was clear. To them would it be the Anakim or the *anavim* (Hebrew for grapes) that would influence their decision to take the land?

¹⁷ Leibowitz, *op. cit.*, 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ashley, *op. cit.*, 242.

²⁰ B. Sotah 35a

B. The Magnificent Produce

The cluster of grapes showed, first of all, the magnificent produce the Land was capable of growing. They cut the grapes in July, in the dead heat of the summer. For the grapes to be as large as the story hints at, large enough to need two men to carry them on poles, it would have meant that there were sufficient rains in the winter and abundant dew in the rainless season to produce them. They also brought back pomegranates and figs in addition to the grapes (13:23–24). The Land, indeed, was a land that would have been good to live in. It was a land flowing with milk and honey. They may have thought that the Land devoured its inhabitants, but in reality, the Land produces beautiful grapes (and other produce.)

Moreover, grapes are rather difficult to grow. There is a lot that goes into the entire process before we can enjoy the product. The Lord was showing them that the Land can produce such fruit which is difficult to make, imagine how much more can they enjoy whatever else the Land produces which is much easier to grow.

C. Joy from the Lord

Something else about the grapes stands out. The text seems to centre on the cluster, mentioning it twice. Was the Lord trying to speak something to them through the grapes besides how conducive the land was to produce fruit? Consider this: The Jewish people have always looked upon grapes and grape products as a symbol of joy. We do not know how ancient this attitude was, but we do know from Numbers 6, that grape products were one of the things from which people drew earthly pleasures, or joy.

If so, then we are suggesting God was communicating an important message to them through the cluster of grapes. He was telling them that this was not only a land which would give them lots of food, but it was also one that would give them an abundance of joy and happiness — if, and only if — they would enter it, possess it, live by the Torah, and devote themselves wholly to the Lord their God. “The good land would provide for them the good life.”²¹ The explorers, then, may have intended to use the evidence of the grapes for their own devious purposes but the Lord would use it to stand as a perpetual testimony against them. They were to focus on the joy of being in the Land.

D. This is Our Home

I think we can see one last reason why the cluster of grapes is important. The valley where the cluster of grapes was taken is in the vicinity of Hebron. That is not an accident. The narrative seems to devote so much attention to Hebron. It was near Hebron that God first promised Abraham that worshipped the lord after receiving the promise of the Land (Genesis 13:14–18). It was from that area that he set out to defeat the coalition of kings (Genesis 14:13ff.). It was in Hebron that Abraham acquired his first and only piece of real estate for the burial of his wife, and where he and the other patriarchs were buried (Genesis 23; 25:9; 35:27–29; 50:13). The narrator knew these traditions, and he assumes the spies did also, and that the reader does. It is essential that they be borne in mind as the rest of the story unfolds.²² In essence when the Israelites thought about this lone cluster of grapes and where it was found, it was supposed to remind them of Abraham and the promises of the Land that God gave to our forefather. This makes the rejection of the Land all that more sorrowful. They were rejecting the very home that God gave to them through our forefathers.

²¹ Ronald. B. Allen, *Numbers (Expositor’s Bible Commentary)*, comments on Numbers 13:23–25.

²² Gordon Wenham, *Numbers (Tyndale Commentaries)*, 133.