

A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Shelach: The Land that Reflects the Tree of Life Why Did Hashem Make the Fruit of the Land of Israel So Extraordinary?

What Did Returning to Israel Teach Me About the Sin of the Spies?

Parashat Shelach celebrates our return to Israel in 1992 after having been separated from the Land for four years. At first, it was quite a challenge to see beyond the exterior balagan we encountered compared with the very organized and clean Memphis, Tennessee – where we had lived – with its mowed green grass and neatly trimmed hedges. During our first Shabbat back in Israel, I found myself gradually shedding layers of external perceptions and comfort habits until I was able to connect with the innate holiness of the Land concealed beneath exposed lightbulbs with missing lampshades, peeling paint on the walls, and the absence of the comforts to which I had become accustomed.

Through this inner process, I felt as though I was moving beyond the perspective of the spies and beginning to connect with the inner dimension of the Land of Israel. Looking back, I see that my struggle mirrored, in a small way, the challenge faced by the spies. Would I focus on the external conditions before my eyes, or would I learn to recognize the holiness and Divine Presence flowing through the Land?

Rabbi Menachem Recanati’s commentary on the underlying spiritual mission of the spies, which I quote and explain later in this article, deepened my understanding of what I experienced on that Shabbat Shelach Lecha thirty-two years ago.

What Was So Special About the Fruit of the Land?

When the spies returned from scouting the Land of Israel, they did not come back empty-handed. They carried with them tangible evidence of the Land’s extraordinary abundance – a cluster of grapes so enormous that it required eight men to carry it on two poles – along with pomegranates and figs of unusual size, each carried by one man (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 13:23).

ספר במדבר פרק יג פסוק כג

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד נַחַל אֶשְׁכּוֹל וַיַּכְרִתוּ מִשָּׁם זְמוּרָה וְאֶשְׁכּוֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׂאֶהוּ בַּמוֹט בְּשָׁנִים וּמִן הָרְמָנִים וּמִן הַתְּאֵנִים:

They came to the Valley of Eshkol and they cut a branch with a cluster of grapes. They carried it on a pole between two [people] and [they also took] some pomegranates and figs (*Bamidbar* 13:23).

Why did Hashem arrange for the spies to encounter such extraordinary produce? The Torah could have simply told us that the Land was fertile. Instead, it draws our attention to fruit so unusually large that it was impossible to ignore. According to Rashi, the spies intended to use this fruit as part of their slanderous report. Just as the fruit was unnaturally large, they argued, so too were the inhabitants unnaturally powerful and intimidating (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 13:23).

Yet the very evidence they used to discourage the nation could just as easily have inspired confidence. Their report confirmed that the Land was indeed “flowing with milk and honey.” The fruit served as more than proof of agricultural abundance. The immense cluster of grapes testified to the remarkable vitality flowing through the Land. Before the Jewish people ever planted a vineyard or harvested a field, Hashem showed them that the Land awaiting them possessed a unique capacity to nourish. The fruit was not merely food but a glimpse of the Divine blessing embedded within the Land itself. The remarkable size and quality of its produce testified that this was no ordinary land; it was a place prepared to sustain a holy nation. But you need to have good eyes to perceive the blessing hidden within the fruits of the Land.

Why Could the Land's Blessing Not Be Contained?

The enormous cluster of grapes carried by the spies was not an isolated phenomenon. The Land's produce is repeatedly portrayed as an expression of Divine blessing flowing into the physical world. The Sages describe the produce of the Land of Israel as regularly exceeding ordinary proportions. Commenting on the verse, "I gave you a desirable land" (Yirmiyahu 3:19), Rabbi Chisda compares the Land of Israel to the skin of a deer. Just as a deer's hide shrinks after being removed and can no longer contain the flesh it once covered, so too the Land of Israel cannot contain its fruits. Its blessing overflows beyond normal boundaries (*Pesikta Zutarta, Bamidbar 13:23*).

Rabbi Yose recounts a mustard plant whose yield measured far beyond what would normally be expected, while Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta describes climbing a cabbage stalk with a ladder (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 112a*). Whether understood literally, symbolically, or as a combination of both, these descriptions convey a consistent message: the Land of Israel possesses an exceptional capacity to produce nourishment.

The Land of Israel is sustained differently from all other lands. It is a land upon which Hashem's eyes rest continually (*Devarim 11:12*). This unique Divine attention affects not only the spiritual atmosphere of the Land but also the nourishment emerging from its soil. The fruit of the Land is the physical expression of a deeper flow of blessing that permeates the Land itself. When Israel fulfills the Torah, the Land cannot contain its fruits, as its blessing overflows beyond ordinary boundaries (*Sifrei, Eikev 37*).

How Can We Learn to Perceive the Blessings of the Land?

I have often reflected on the unique quality of the produce that grows here, especially at B'erot Bat Ayin. There is something deeply satisfying about eating fruit ripened beneath the warm sun of the Land of Israel. Many people who move here notice that the fruits and vegetables seem richer, fresher, and more vibrant than those they were accustomed to elsewhere. Yet, much like the spies, some Jews still remain outside Israel due to their fears. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehuda HaLevi explains that the spies intentionally used the fruit to support their negative report (*Pa'aneach Raza, Bamidbar 13:23*). They turned the very produce that was meant to inspire gratitude into evidence against the Land. Rather than viewing the fruit as a promise of abundant nourishment, they used it to magnify their fears.

Rather than inspiring confidence, the abundant fruit strengthened the Israelites' opposition to entering the Land. Faced with evidence of extraordinary abundance, they focused on the difficulties that lay ahead. Rather than seeing the fruit as a sign that Hashem would provide for them, they viewed it as proof that the challenges awaiting them were equally immense.

Yehoshua and Kalev looked at the same fruit and reached the opposite conclusion. They understood that if Hashem had prepared such abundance for His people, He would also provide the strength necessary to inherit the Land. Where the spies saw obstacles and danger, Yehoshua and Kalev saw nourishment and opportunities. This teaches us that our ability to receive blessings depends on our perception.

What Was the Underlying Spiritual Mission of the Spies?

The unusual size of the fruit was not merely a miracle designed to impress the spies. Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen explains, citing the Zohar, that Moshe instructed the spies to examine the trees and fruits of the Land carefully. If they found produce similar to that of other lands, there would be little evidence of the Land's unique spiritual status. But if they encountered fruits and trees unlike anything they had seen elsewhere, they would recognize that the Land was sustained directly from a higher source.

Although Moshe had instructed them to bring fruit, the spies also brought back a vine branch. The branch itself revealed something remarkable. Growing beside a stream, it should have been soft and easily cut. Instead, it was so massive and sturdy that it had to be chopped down like a cedar tree. Thus, the spies returned not only with extraordinary fruit but with evidence that the Land itself was unlike any they had

encountered before (*Siftei Kohen, Bamidbar 13:23*).

Rabbi Menachem Recanati develops this idea. He explains that Moshe could not have been asking whether the Land was physically good or bad, for Hashem had already promised that it was “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (*Shemot 3:8*). Rather, the spies were sent to investigate the deeper spiritual reality hidden within the Land and thereby prepare the Land for Israel’s future conquest. As Recanati writes: “Moshe sent the spies so that the Land would be prepared to be conquered by Israel. This is the reason for ‘one man from each tribe,’ so that each tribe would merit its portion.”

The Recanati connects the spies’ mission to Moshe’s instruction to investigate, “Is there a tree in it or not?” (*Bamidbar 13:20*), and then alludes to the sin of Adam and Chava. Perhaps he is hinting that the spies were confronting a test similar to the one humanity faced in Gan Eden. Just as Adam and Chava stood before the Tree and were challenged to perceive reality correctly, the tribal leaders stood before that same Tree with an opportunity to rectify their sin. The question was not merely whether there was a tree in the Land, but how they would perceive the “Tree” of the Land. Would they recognize the Land as a reflection of the Tree of Life, perceiving the Divine unity and blessing flowing through it? Or would they perceive it through the consciousness of the Tree of Knowledge, becoming fixated on external appearances and physical calculations? All twelve spies saw the same tree, yet it generated two entirely different conclusions: those of Yehoshua and Kalev versus those of the other tribal leaders.

“The spies introduced impurity into it and cut from the place known as the vine branch and the cluster of grapes” (Recanati, *Parashat Shelach*). Much like Chava, they became absorbed in the fruit’s visible qualities rather than allowing it to elevate their perception toward the spiritual reality it reflected.

Recanati’s allusion to Adam and Chava may also be understood in light of the teaching of Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla that Adam was not initially barred from the Tree of Life. Rather, after “cutting the plantings” and creating separation, he could no longer access it (*Sha’arei Orah, Gate 5*). Likewise, the spies encountered fruit that was meant to direct them toward the deeper spiritual reality of the Land. Instead, they became fixated on the map rather than the territory. Perhaps this too reflects a form of “cutting the plantings” – separating the blessing from the Source from which it flowed.

Had the spies perceived the Land through the lens of the Tree of Life, they might have fulfilled their mission of spiritually preparing the Land for the conquest of their tribes. Yehoshua and Kalev perceived Hashem’s promise unfolding before them, while the other tribal leaders were consumed by their fear of danger. All twelve leaders saw the same Land; what differed was the consciousness through which they interpreted it. Their perception shaped the reality of an entire nation.