

LESSON 3 THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND: WERE THE PEOPLE READY FOR THE LAND?

I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to show the biases and distortions in the report of the scouts regarding the Land and the negative reaction that their report generated among the People which led to a delay of the entry into the Land for an additional 40 years.

II. Why is this lesson important?

It is difficult to find a biblical story that has greater contemporary relevance. The story of the Scouts deals with biased, as well as blatantly false, reporting about Israel, which is one of the central problems facing the Jewish community today in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, it deals with the effects such reporting has on the Jewish People and on their commitment to Israel, and it provides guidance for leaders on ways to correct these distortions and to help reverse their deleterious effects. Finally, it touches upon the question of the role of Israel in Jewish life with which world Jewry is currently grappling.

III. Texts, Questions and Central Ideas of the Lesson:

Introduction

In our first lesson we discussed the promise of the Land of Israel and the fundamental connection between the Land and the People. In the following lesson we explained that the promise of the Land was deferred several hundred years until the People inhabiting the Land at the time had forfeited their moral claim to it. In this lesson we wish to move forward in biblical history to the time in which the Land was ready for the People and to examine to what extent the People were ready for the Land.

In order to move forward in history, however, it is first necessary to trace some of the key developments that occurred in the interim, according to the biblical account.

Background

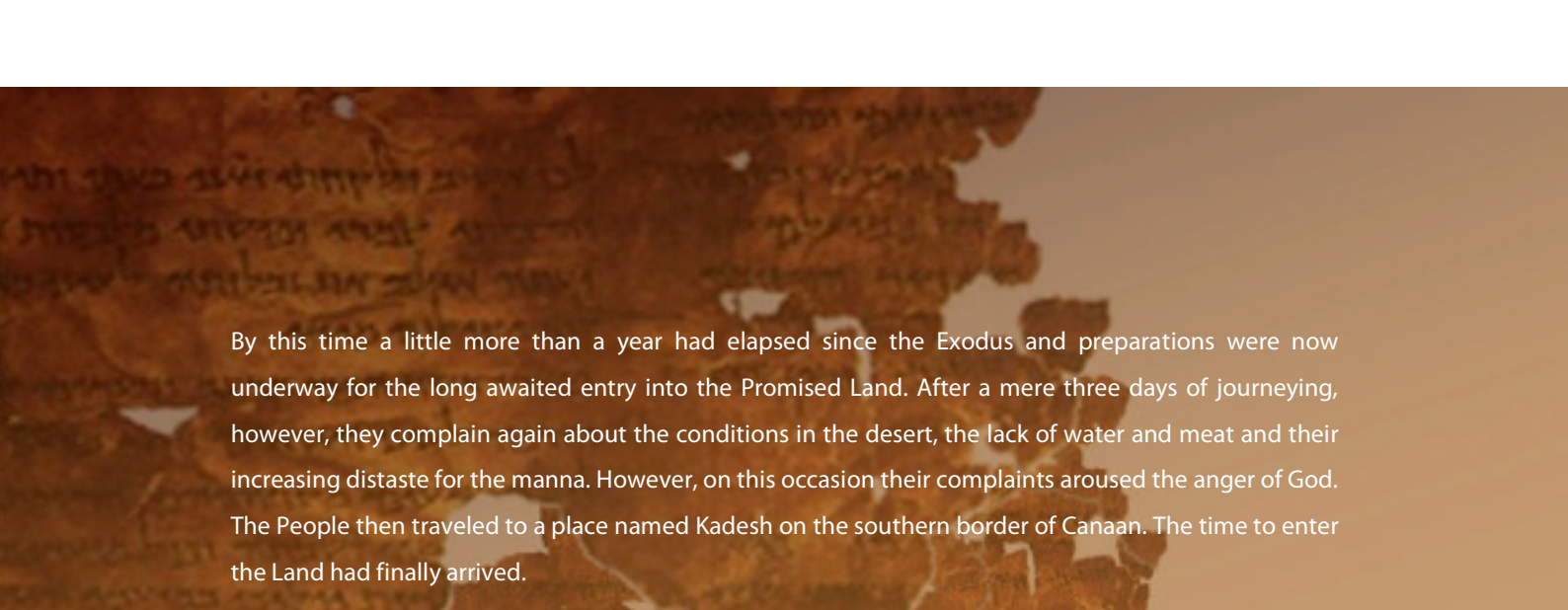
After Abraham – who is believed to have lived around 1750 BCE - to whom the Land was first promised, came Isaac. After Isaac, came Jacob - later named *Yisrael*–Israel - who had twelve sons – known later as the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. One of his sons, Joseph, was despised and then sold by his brothers to the Egyptians. Later, when there was a famine in the Land, Jacob sent his sons down to

Egypt to obtain some food. In Egypt they met with the vizier of the land who was also in charge of dispensing food. Soon thereafter, the vizier revealed in dramatic fashion his true identity as their long lost brother Joseph and he proceeded to take special care of them. He invited their father Jacob/Israel to join them and arranged for them to settle in the region of Goshen in northeast Egypt, where they acquired holdings and increased greatly in number.

Later, however, conditions in Egypt took a radical turn for the worse. A new king arose who was disturbed by the rapid growth and proliferation of the People of Israel. He oppressed them with forced labor and decreed that all male children be put to death. After suffering for many years under these harsh conditions, the People cried out in anguish. God heard their cry and decided that the time had come to bring them to the Land that He had promised to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God sends Moses to Pharaoh to demand that he let the People of Israel go free. When Pharaoh refuses to comply, God punishes him with a series of plagues. After ten plagues Pharaoh finally relents and instructs the People to depart from Egypt. The Exodus from Egypt is believed to have occurred around the year 1250 BCE. After the People depart from Egypt, however, Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues them in the wilderness. When the People reach the Sea of Reeds, and as the Egyptians are advancing with their vast armed forces, the People cry out to God. Moses tells the People not to be afraid because God will fight for them. God then splits the sea enabling the People of Israel to cross through while the waters come crashing down on the Egyptians, thus putting an end to the Egyptian threat.

The People of Israel praise God for this miraculous deliverance and they proceed through the desert in their journey toward the Promised Land. In the desert, however, they repeatedly complain about the shortage of water and food. God responds by providing them with water and manna - a delicacy that rained down from heaven on a daily basis (except for the Sabbath). Later, they were attacked by the Amalekites - a nation of nomads in the Negev and in the Sinai desert - but, with the help of a few fighting men and the staff of God, they successfully overcame the enemy.

In the third month after their Exodus from Egypt, the People entered the wilderness of Sinai. There, God revealed Himself to the entire nation and gave them the Ten Commandments and the Law. He then gave them instructions for the erection of the Tabernacle the implementation of which was delayed because of the sin of the Golden Calf which occurred while Moses was on Mount Sinai. Moses interceded in behalf of the People which allowed them to resume their journey toward the Promised Land. Prior to their departure from Sinai, however, they built the Tabernacle which was going to accompany them on their journey and were given a detailed list of the priestly laws governing the service within it.



By this time a little more than a year had elapsed since the Exodus and preparations were now underway for the long awaited entry into the Promised Land. After a mere three days of journeying, however, they complain again about the conditions in the desert, the lack of water and meat and their increasing distaste for the manna. However, on this occasion their complaints aroused the anger of God. The People then traveled to a place named Kadesh on the southern border of Canaan. The time to enter the Land had finally arrived.

On the eve of their entry into the Land, God instructs Moses to select men to go on a scouting mission to investigate certain aspects of the Land (This is the way the account is recorded in the Book of Numbers. There is a different account in the Book of Deuteronomy. See our questions at the end of the lesson.) Apparently, God recognized the difficulty that a nation of slaves - accustomed to relying on miraculous divine intervention since the Exodus - would have with entering a Land about which they knew little other than His divine assurance that it was “flowing with milk and honey” and that the nations living there were strong. Furthermore, God was all too aware of the People’s propensity to complain at every opportunity. He therefore initiated a mission in which they would send their own representatives to scout the land, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of its inhabitants, so that their fears would be dispelled and all that God had told them about the Land and their ability to possess it would be confirmed.

This is where our lesson begins.

Text 1 – Numbers 13:21-29 - The Mission and the Report

Look at the map (map 51). What route did the scouts take?

A look at the map will reveal that they traversed the land of Canaan from south to north. In covering the length of the Land they were in a good position to provide a thorough and complete report about the various features of the Land in accordance with the stated purpose of their mission.

Compare their report to the mission that they were assigned in verses 18-20. Did they follow their instructions? Did they report the facts?

It would appear at first glance that the scouts followed their instructions and fulfilled their duty professionally. They were asked to report about the Land, the cities and the people. They were asked to find out whether the Land was good or bad and they were asked to bring back some of its fruit. Thus, they brought back a cluster of grapes, as well as some pomegranates and figs, and they reported that the Land “does indeed flow with milk and honey”, ostensibly confirming the goodness of the Land by

employing God's own imagery (see Exodus 3:8 and 17). They then continue by reporting that the people of the Land are powerful and the cities are fortified, and they proceed by pointing out which nations inhabit each region. In short, they seem to give a factual and objective account of what they see, much as a good newspaper or television reporter would.

Where might we, nevertheless, find evidence of personal bias?

A careful examination of their report reveals that it was not as objective and factual as it might appear at first. True, they followed their instructions in addressing the various aspects of the land but, as the Jewish People have learned the hard way, the difference between objective and subjective, balanced and biased, reporting is often a very fine line that sometimes can be traced to a single word or nuance. The scouts began with what seemed like a very favorable report - a description of the extraordinary physical qualities of the Land, including a display of some of its beautiful fruit. Indeed, the fact that they began with this description must have built up the excitement and enthusiasm of the People. The problem, however, is with the way in which they proceeded with the report. The Land is good "however the People who inhabit the land..." This "however", which may seem so innocent, had the effect of changing its entire tone and fundamental message. In saying "however" they implied that, although the Land is good, we will never be able to benefit from it because the nations inhabiting it are far too powerful for us to overcome.

This was a clever tactic. They knew that if they had stated their true feelings outright the People would have realized that fear had gotten the best of them and the People would have suspected that they were no longer reporting the facts as they were told to do. Thus, the scouts cleverly introduced a subtlety in the way they formulated their report that would play upon the People's fears, and that would have the same effect as if they had said what they meant outright. Thus, like so much of the reporting today, the distinction between reporting and editorializing was blurred and the boundaries were crossed with hardly anyone noticing.

Text 2 - Numbers 13: 30-33 – Calev's reassurances and the subsequent report

See verse 6. Who was Calev? How can we explain his remarks?

As verse 6 indicates, Calev was the scout representing the tribe of Judah. In our text it is clear that he was a voice of dissent. He realized the way in which his counterparts were manipulating the facts to suit their purposes and the negative effect that this was beginning to have on the People. Thus, he tried to nip the problem in the bud. He gave them a pep talk and tried to calm their fears: "Let us by all means go up and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

What was the reaction of the other scouts upon hearing Calev's words of encouragement?

Given the fact that Calev was not just an outspoken member of the community but one of the twelve scouts and a leader of one of the tribes his remarks could not be easily dismissed. If the other scouts were going to succeed in dissuading the People from entering the Land, as they had wished, they would have to change their approach. They could no longer afford to be subtle and hope for the best; they would have to be straightforward and leave no room for ambiguity and doubt. Thus, they now inform the People that, although the Land is fruitful, it "devours its inhabitants", i.e., it is *absolutely impossible* to live there, because the people there are constantly at war and in this war the People of Israel don't stand a chance. Indeed, the inhabitants of the Land are so large and intimidating that we are like midgets (the modern day equivalent of the term "grasshoppers") in comparison. Any attempt to enter the Land under these conditions is nothing short of collective suicide.

Given these two radically reports of the situation in the Land what would be the reaction of the People?

Text 3 – Numbers 14:1-10 - Reactions of the People, and reactions to the reactions

If they had been dismayed and confused as a result of the conflicting reports, even though by now they should have had sufficient faith in God's promises and supreme power, they could have been forgiven. But their reaction was far more troubling than mere dismay or confusion. The text tells us that they became so demoralized by the negative report of the scouts that they began to cry uncontrollably. But not only did they become demoralized and overcome by self-pity and despair; they turned on Moses and Aaron and even God Himself: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt... or if only we might die in the wilderness... why is the Lord taking us to the land to fall by the sword?... It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!"

Thus, after just one year, the most memorable and momentous event in the annals of history - the Exodus - was just a distant memory. God who had just finished displaying to them and to the world His undying love for them in redeeming them from Egyptian slavery, in punishing their oppressors and in answering all their needs in their journey through the desert, is now viewed as a wicked God with nothing in store for them but their own miserable demise.

But they didn't stop merely with *words* that could only be described as an outrageous insult to God; they wanted to *do* something to turn back the clock and completely reverse the course of history: they wanted to "head back to Egypt". God brought them out and now, despite God, they want to go back!

What is the key word (a word that is repeated several times) in their response? What does it reveal about the People's state of mind?

A careful reading of their reaction will enable us to gain a deeper understanding of its psychological roots. In verses 2-4 they repeat the word "Egypt" three times. In other words, although they had been free from Egyptian slavery for some time, the *idea* of Egypt was still deeply embedded in their psyche. At heart, they were still an immature nation of slaves afraid to assume responsibility for themselves. They couldn't seem to get beyond an existence of complete dependency in which decisions were made for them, even when those decisions stripped them of their dignity and self-esteem. Thus, God could take the People out of Egypt but He apparently could not take Egypt out of the People.

How did the leaders of the People react?

The leaders of the entire community, Moses and Aaron, reacted by falling on their faces before the People. What does this mean? Perhaps this is an expression of helplessness and despair. After all they had done for the People, their leadership and complete dedication, what more can they possibly do? Or perhaps this is a way of imploring the People to desist from this behavior. Or perhaps it is a combination of both.

Apparently unsatisfied with the reaction of Moses and Aaron, Calev and Joshua decide to give it one more shot (Joshua's absence earlier is the subject of much scholarly discussion). They again mention the goodness of the Land and point out that it is not just good but it is "exceedingly good" and then they proceed to address the problem of the nations of the land about which the other scouts made a big fuss. They argue that although the nations of the Land may seem like giants against whom the People have no chance, with God on their side there is no contest; "they are our prey". If God wishes to bring us to the Land no one can stand in His way.

What is the key word in the reactions of Calev and Joshua? What is the psychological effect that they hope to achieve by making reference to this key word?

It is interesting that Calev and Joshua employ a clever psychological device to counter the People's psychological barrier that we described above. If the refrain of the People was "Egypt" because Egypt and all that it symbolized was deeply embedded in their consciousness, the refrain of Calev and Joshua was the "land" which they repeat 4 times in verses 7-8 (there is a fifth reference to the land in the Hebrew "*am ha'aretz*" which JPS translates "People of the *country*" and not of the "*land*"). By emphasizing the "land" they hoped to change the People's state of mind and shift their focus away from their past as slaves and onto the future in which they can shape their lives as a mature and independent People in their own Land.

Unfortunately, even the best efforts of Calev and Joshua did not yield the desired results. To the contrary; the very attempt to influence public opinion and to dissuade them from heading back to Egypt was met with fierce resistance: "The whole community threatened to pelt them with stones."

Text 4 - Numbers 14: 26-35 – The punishment

What was God's punishment? How was the punishment conceived as "measure for measure"?

From God's point of view this was the last straw. They had complained many times before but this time they went too far. God was prepared to "strike the People down with pestilence and disown them" if not for the intervention and supplication of Moses (14:11-20). Instead of the complete destruction that He had originally threatened, God decided to punish the entire adult population of the Exodus, those who witnessed the Exodus and should have known better. They will be forced to wander for 40 years in the desert - corresponding to the 40 days of the scouts in the Land - where they will eventually die, just as they asked "or if we might die in the wilderness" (14:2). Only their children will be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Thus, the journey to the Promised Land, which had already been delayed over 400 years, was destined to be delayed another 40. But if the previous delay was because the Land wasn't ready for the People, this delay was because the People were not ready for the Land. A new generation with a new attitude toward freedom and responsibility would be needed before the People and the Land could be united in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

IV. Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It is recommended to begin the lesson with a discussion relating to various descriptions of Israel. Ask the students who have not been to Israel to describe what they imagine Israel to be like and then ask the students who have been there to comment on these descriptions. Do they think these descriptions are accurate? If not, where might they come from? Then ask them to provide their own descriptions of the country. Alternatively, students can write them on paper and comparisons can be made. This exercise will allow the students to recognize that there is a range of perceptions and descriptions of Israel and that while some are based on first hand encounters others are influenced by messages and reports conveyed by others. The story of the scouts which will be the focus of this lesson relates to different perceptions of life in the Land in biblical times.

Step 2

Summarize the basic events leading up to the story of the scouts and then study and analyze text 1 guided by the questions that appear in bold print.

Step 3

Study and analyze text 2 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. Before proceeding to text 3 it is recommended to return to a discussion of similar issues in the State of Israel today. The following questions may be posed: What are some examples of biased reporting about Israel today, both in relation to the political/ military situation and in relation to life there in general? What are some of the nuances and the terminology that subtly reflect this bias?

Step 4

Study and analyze text 3 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. After studying the text we recommend returning again to reporting relating to the State of Israel. Pose the following questions: How have the various biases in reporting about Israel affected the Jewish community in North America? How has the focus of the media on the military conflict affected perceptions of life in Israel? How has it affected the desire of many Jews to travel and participate in programs there? Do you think Jews are justified in not coming to Israel during this time? Does it reflect a lack of faith and commitment or simply common sense? Would you cancel school or organizational trips to Israel if you were the one making the decisions and you were responsible for the participants?

Step 5

Study and analyze text 4 guided by the questions in bold print. Do you think God overreacted in punishing the People this way? What does this whole story mean to you in terms of your relationship with Israel?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Compare this story of the scouts to the account in Deuteronomy 1:22-39. What are the differences between the two accounts? Try to explain the differences.
2. Read Numbers 14:13-19. What arguments does Moses make to dissuade God from destroying the People? Compare these arguments to his arguments after the sin of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32:11-13. Try to explain the differences.



I. Literature for Further Reading

Besdin, A. (1979). "The Singularity of the Land of Israel", in *Reflections of the Rav*, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, pp. 117-126.

Leibowitz, N. (1980). *Studies in Bamidbar*, Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization, pp. 135-170

Milgrom, J. (1990). *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, Philadelphia: JPS, pp. 99-117