

Shelach: Is Anxiety a Sin? **Brooke Pollak, Class of 2027**

Fear and anxiety are normal human emotions. In yet another example of “people in Tanakh are just like us,” I bring you the story of the spies. They may be our compatriots in anxiety and fear.

In our *parsha*, Hashem tells Moshe:

Send out men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a leader among them (Bamidbar 13:2).

Although this story is often described as “the sin of the spies (*meraglim*),” these men are never referred to as spies or *meraglim* in our *parsha*. These men are directed “וַיִּתְרוּ”. This verb, *latur*, which appears in many different forms throughout our *parsha*, is more akin to scouting, exploring, and/or seeing, than spying. In fact, in modern Hebrew, this verb is commonly used to mean “to tour.” When you go to tour a city or country on vacation, you are typically going to see the sites. Most of us tour to see the best a place has to offer.

Spies, on the other hand, are not seeking out the good. Spies are busy collecting information about an enemy people or an enemy land.

The story in our *parsha* is also commonly referred to as the **sin** of the *meraglim*. But how exactly did they sin? Given that their description seems to differ so drastically from that of Calev and Yehoshua, one has to wonder whether they lied. Let’s examine what they said:

We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are fierce, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negev region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan. We cannot attack that people, for they are stronger than we. The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are of great size; we saw the *Nephilim* (giants) there—the Anakites are part of the *Nephilim*—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them (Bamidbar 13:27-33).

As a quick review of the report, the *meraglim* say:

- The land is flowing with milk and honey (great!);
- The people there are fierce (that sounds scary);
- The cities are fortified (i.e., it will be hard to attack them);
- They are stronger than us (didn’t they already tell us that?);
- The land devours its people (that sounds really scary);
- There are *Nephilim* or giants there (giants?!); and
- We seemed like grasshoppers in comparison.

After that report, I am not sure I'd be ready to return to slavery in Egypt, but my nomadic desert life where Hashem provides manna to eat and miraculous wells from which to drink would seem like a way better option than entering a land and dying in battle against giants.

Let's see how their report is discussed in the Gemara in Sotah 35a:

“It is a land that consumes its inhabitants” (Numbers 13:32). **Rava taught: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I intended** the land to appear to consume its inhabitants **for their own good, but they** (the *meraglim*) **considered** this proof that the land was **bad. I intended** it **for their good** by causing many people to die there so **that anywhere that the spies arrived, the most important of them died, so that** the Canaanites **would be preoccupied** with mourning **and would not inquire about them. And there are** those **who say** that Hashem caused **Iyov** to die at that time, **and everyone** in Canaan **was preoccupied with his eulogy**, and did not pay attention to the spies. However, the spies **considered** this proof that the land was **bad** and said: **“It is a land that consumes its inhabitants.”**

The gemara is not disputing what the *meraglim* claim to have seen; rather, the gemara is giving context. According to Rava, Hashem made many of the people in the land die when the *meraglim* were on their mission so that the people in the land would be too busy to notice the *meraglim*. Another opinion brought here is that Hashem caused Iyov's death at this time so that the people of the land would be too busy eulogizing him to notice the *meraglim*. Either way, the context allows us to understand that there was death in the land because Hashem brought it to protect the *meraglim*. But the *meraglim* only saw death, not its Divine context, and feared the land.

So, their report isn't great, but it doesn't appear to be based on lies either. So what was the sin of the *meraglim*?

Back in our *parsha*, Hashem answers this question by rhetorically asking Moshe:

And Hashem said to Moshe, “How long will these people provoke Me? How long will they fail to have faith in Me despite all the signs I have performed among them?...” (Bamidbar 13:11).

Hashem does not accuse these men of lying; Hashem accuses them of having a lack of faith. It isn't that what they reported was factually incorrect. The *meraglim* seemingly spoke truthfully, but they spoke as spies and not as scouts. Because they went with the wrong mission in mind, they focused on all the worst parts of the land of Canaan and its inhabitants. Since they focused on the worst—the scariest and the most dangerous—they were overcome by their own fears and anxieties. They lacked the faith that Hashem would protect *Bnei Yisrael* and ensure victory when they eventually went into Canaan to conquer the land.

We are living in dark times. There are terrible things happening all around us. I don't need to list the horrors, but many of us thought this before October 7th, and that day and its aftermath just brought everything to the fore. As someone who personally struggles with anxiety, when the real

terrors are at your doorstep it is hard to distinguish between justifiable fear and overwhelming anxiety. With a war raging in Gaza and at Israel's northern border, with hostages still in the hands of Hamas suffering unspeakable torture day in and day out, with antisemitism rearing its ugly head seemingly everywhere, with, with, with, I could go on; it is easy to be *meraglim*. It is easy to let our fear take over and see the worst things all around. But that is not our charge. Our charge is to be scouts: we have to see the best.

How do you look at a world filled with unbearable suffering and find the good? The answer is not to look past or to ignore the horrors. In fact, we must force ourselves to understand the suffering and fight against it. But in moments of crisis, there are always people who step up and do the hard work of stepping into the breach. There are the stories of people in the early moments of October 7th who drove towards the attack and not away. There are people in Israel and beyond who organized to get supplies to soldiers. There are people who have been delivering meals to the families of reservists for months and months. The list of helpers (and ways to help) goes on.

Yes—the horrors are great; there is much to fear. But there is also so much hope if you know how to find it.

Several years ago, our family started a Shabbat practice of going around the table during dinner and asking what each person is grateful for in the week that has ended and what they are looking forward to in the coming week.

I can attest that this practice of looking at each day in the week and trying to find things for which to be grateful is absolutely transformative. It changes the way you walk through the world. You no longer just sit through your day waiting for the time you can go home. You now get excited when little things happen—like a friend bringing you a coffee, or a colleague offering you a compliment, or even a stranger holding the door for you—so you can report about them Friday night with gratitude.

Seek out the good and you might end up spreading good. Be scouts, not spies.

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