



The Danger of Independence

Masechet Taanit 29a teaches that the various calamities of Tisha B'Av can be traced to the report given by the spies sent to scout *Eretz Yisrael*. The causative link between the sin of the spies and the tragedies of Tisha B'Av should compel us to investigate this sin to better understand what lies at the root of this tragic day.

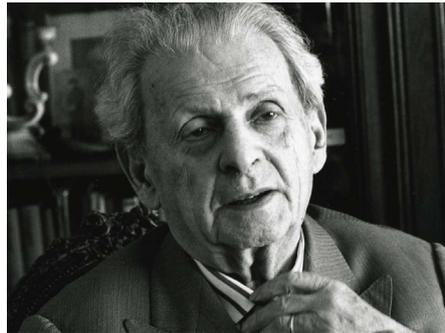
The spies reported that the Land contained giants, but why were the spies so afraid of them? While it is true that the Jewish people had undergone generations of slavery and were, perhaps, psychologically unready to seize their spiritual inheritance, their complete despair is surprising.

These were the people that had witnessed supernatural plagues systematically dismantle Egypt's deities; watched the sea split; heard the 'Voice of G-d' at Har Sinai; journeyed through the desert, enveloped by clouds of glory and guided by a pillar of fire; witnessed food rain down from the sky. They had seen countless miracles – but feared these giants because... they were bigger than them?

In light of this question, I want to explore a 'Talmudic reading' from Emmanuel Levinas.¹ Levinas refers to *Masechet Sotah 34b*, in which the Sages explore the verse from *Devarim* (1:22) that records the Jewish people's determination to send spies "that they may **search** [veyachperu] the land for us." The Sages evaluate the verb 'search' in light of *Yeshayahu 24:23* – "Then the moon will be embarrassed [vechafera], and the sun will be ashamed" and using this connection, expand the meaning in *Devarim* to imply that the people actively sought to embarrass or 'shame' the Land. Levinas builds on this connection through the commentary of the Radak. Relating to the verse in question, the Radak responds to an obvious problem – how can the moon, an inanimate object, be embarrassed? He explains that it is not the moon but rather **the worshippers** of the moon that will be embarrassed.



The spies were not going to embarrass the Land. They were looking to embarrass the worshippers of the Land – the desert Zionists, those individuals committed to entering *Eretz Yisrael*.



Through this, Levinas completely transforms the narrative of the spies and their concerns. The spies were not going to embarrass the Land. They were looking to embarrass **the worshippers** of the Land – the desert Zionists, those individuals committed to entering *Eretz Yisrael*. But why? Levinas goes on to describe what it was about the giant inhabitants of the Land that sparked a desire to shame its worshippers:

"They were magnificent beings... that is what the indigenous inhabitant of the country was to become... We can now understand the anxiety of our men better."

Perhaps the explorers caught a glimpse of sabras. Fear seized them; they said to themselves: this is what awaits us there; these are the future children of Israel, those people who make holes wherever they set foot, who dig furrows, build cities... But that is the end of the Jewish people!"

According to Levinas, the spies were not afraid of being defeated by the giants.

They feared becoming them – transforming into magnificent *sabras* and forgetting about their relationship with a G-d they no longer needed. Like industrious children that find work, an apartment of their own, and in becoming embroiled in their own lives, forget to call home – the Jewish people were about to discover the glory of independence. They would no longer need the manna or the clouds of glory – instead, their sustained and exalted existence would be the work of their own hand, nothing more: Complete independence – from G-d.

On Chanukah, I started to sense that their fears were not entirely misplaced when my daughter marched home from kindergarten, chanting a popular folksong. Composed by Menashe Ravin, it celebrates the victory of the Maccabees: *Mi Yimallel Gevurot Yisrael...* – "Who will tell of **Israel's** strength?" The words sounded familiar, hauntingly so. They are from *Tehillim 106*: "Who will tell of **G-d's** strength?" A subtle shift from praising G-d to the egoistic rejoicing in our own might – the fears of the spies, manifest in our local Israeli kindergarten.

While the conclusion of the story of the spies, in which the entire generation of men is sentenced to die in the wilderness, makes it clear that we must reject any attempt to undermine the imperative of our existence in the Land of Israel, the concern remains genuine. The obligation to recognize G-d's role and presence in our lives was not a mere neurosis of the spies but a fundamental Jewish value. While the spiritual risk associated with independence does not permit us to ignore our obligation, we are also not allowed to ignore the risk.

¹ Levinas, E., & Aronowicz, A. (2019): *Nine Talmudic Readings*.

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