

Echoes of Eden

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Have I Got a Land for You!

The tragic tale of the spies is well-known: Moshe handpicks leaders to pay a visit to the Promised Land, but the mission spirals out of control. Upon hearing the spies' report, mass hysteria breaks out, and, as a result, a death sentence is handed down to all those involved: The entire generation that had been liberated from Egypt would perish in the desert.

What happened? How did such a failing in leadership come about? And how were these erstwhile leaders capable of leading the people so far astray?

My revered teacher, Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, made an observation that is the

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key to understanding the entire episode: The sin committed by the spies was, quite simply, that they saw themselves as spies. Moshe had not tasked them with spying – not on the land, not on its inhabitants. He instructed them to visit the land, to tour it and let it make an impression on them. The “spies” sinned because they behaved like spies: They misconstrued their mandate, and grossly over-estimated their own expertise and importance.

And yet, we may ask, if they were not meant to act as spies, what was the purpose of their visit?

Their mission is best understood with the help of an analogy: When a matchmaker approaches a young man or woman, the matchmaker describes the attributes of the intended. If the match sounds promising, both sides agree to meet, but they will go to the date with a critical eye. Does their date match up

to the matchmaker's glowing description? Do they find the other person attractive? Intelligent? Appropriate? Can they imagine spending the rest of their life with this person? Can they love this person? Is there chemistry, biology, or any other attraction that brings them together and increases the odds that this relationship will endure and grow?

In a very real sense, this is how the spies approached their mission. Their initial report was that they found the land attractive; only later did they add the caveat that, attraction notwithstanding, the land was unobtainable, "out of their league." When Caleb challenged them, insisting that the land was within their reach, they began to denigrate the land itself, perhaps in an attempt to justify their feelings of inadequacy, describing it as "a land that devours its inhabitants."

However, to return to our analogy, let us consider what a first date would be like if the matchmaker was God. What if God Himself said to a young man or woman, "Long ago I created a soul. This soul was subsequently divided into two. Half the soul was placed in your body; the other half of this soul resides in the body of the person I would like you to meet. I would like to introduce you to your "soul mate."

It would be safe to assume that the young man or woman in such a scenario would agree to go on the date, but their purpose would be different. They would probably spend little or no time or effort on superficial, inconsequential issues: Tall or short, fat or thin – these make no difference at all. This first date would be far less of an exercise in critical judgment, and far more of an opportunity to start the next chapter of their life together. The purpose of this date is to reunite.

This was the purpose of the mission with which Moshe entrusted the emissaries. A careful reading of their mandate, of the questions he asked them to consider during their visit, makes this clear. Moshe did not ask them to pass judgment or plot the course of the impending conquest. He posed rhetorical questions aimed at helping the emissaries appreciate the beauty of the Promised Land. Rather than reading Moshe's question as an earnest, worried, "Is it, or is it not, a good land," we should read Moshe's question as, "Is this a good land, or what!?" The last words Moshe spoke to the emissaries illustrate the point:

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What is this land? Is it rich or lean? Does it have trees? Be strong, and bring fruit from the land. (B'midbar 13:20)

There seems to be a phrase missing. We would expect Moshe to have said, "Does it have trees? If so, bring back a sample of the fruit of the land." However, Moshe knows there is fruit; this is a land flowing with milk and honey. More importantly, this is the land that God promised to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. This is the Promised Land. This is the land in which the Jewish People would realize their dreams, fulfill their destiny. Could it be anything less than what God Himself had described?

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The sin of the spies was their belief that they were, in fact, spies. Being important leaders, they assumed that their critical opinion was significant, and they felt it was their duty to be critical. They went on their mission to catch the matchmaker "red-handed" in an exaggeration or even an outright lie.

Moshe envisioned their first date with the Promised Land quite differently. He sent emissaries whom he thought would have a finely-honed sense of history and destiny. He assumed that they knew and understood that the Land of Israel and the Jewish People are soul mates, made for one another, created as one and separated, only to be reunited, destined to fall in love and live together – happily ever after.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-shelach.html>