

TORAH WEEKLY

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Repercussions for Generations

By: Rabbi Aryeh Erlanger (Originally Published 2005)

One of the great tragedies in the history of the Jewish people was the affair of the spies, which takes place in this week's Parsha (Bamidbar 13-14). It had repercussions not only for that generation, whose members were condemned to die in the desert; but for all generations, as our Sages say that this sin was the root cause of the Jewish people being exiled from the land of Israel many years later.

There are many questions that come to mind when reading the Torah's account of this affair. Moshe had instructed the spies to bring back information about the military strength of the inhabitants of the land, and to find out whether the cities were fortified, and whether the land was good and fertile.

What was Moshe's purpose in sending them on this mission? First, would he lead the Jews back to Egypt if he received a negative report? Second, Hashem promised the nation a good and fertile land. Did Moshe doubt Hashem's word? Third, what did the spies do wrong? Weren't they expected to report the facts as they saw them?

The Ramban clarifies all of these issues. Moshe's intention in sending the spies was twofold. He needed information on the lay of the land and the strength of the enemy in order to plan the conquest accordingly. He also wanted the people to receive an eyewitness report on the goodness of the land to inspire and motivate them on their travels and in their battles.

The spies, however, lost heart when they discovered that the Canaanites were a very powerful people with well-fortified cities. They did not believe that the Jewish people could overcome them.

When they presented their report to the people, they said that the Canaanites were very powerful, which was true; however, they implied that the Jews would not prevail. This was their sin because they were, in essence, denying Hashem's ability to miraculously vanquish the enemy.

Later, to further convince the people, they lied outright when they said that the land "devours its inhabitants," meaning that the land is uninhabitable.

This is how the Ramban explains what went wrong in this tragic event that changed the course of Jewish history.

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Rabbi Aryeh Erlanger

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