

Getting the Story Straight

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Shabbat Chazon

Sefer Devarim is known as “Mishna Tora” (the review of the Tora) not only because within Devarim, there is a reference to a compendium by this name (Devarim 17:18),^{1[1]} but also because it contains reviews and repetitions of Commandments^{2[2]} and events^{3[3]} that are previously mentioned in the prior 4 books of the Chumash.

One such event that is repeated in Devarim is the sin of the spies that first appears in BaMidbar 13-14. A particular aspect of this grievous sin that is recorded in two markedly different ways when is the **origins of the sin, i.e., whose idea was it to send the spies in the first place?**

Devarim 1:22-23

And **all of you (the people) approached me (Moshe) and you said: Let us send men before us** and they will spy out the land for us and they will come back to us with information regarding the way by which we should go up and the cities that we should come upon. And the matter was good **in my eyes** and I took from among you 12 men, one man per tribe.

BaMidbar 13:1-3

And **HaShem Spoke to Moshe Saying:**

Send for yourself men and they will spy out the land of Canaan that I am Giving to the children of Israel, one person per tribe of his forefathers you will send, every one a prince among them (the people of the tribe).

And Moshe sent them from the desert of Paran **according to the Words of HaShem** all of them men, the heads of the Jewish people they were.

^{1[1]} The “Mitzvat HaMelech” (Commandments incumbent upon a King—see Devarim 17:14-20) include writing a “Sefer Tora” and keeping it with him at all times (17:19). According to Sanhedrin 21b, the King was obligated to write two Sifrei Tora, one that is full-size and another that is in the form of an amulet that he would wear wherever he would go. While this second Tora could be the full text of the “Chumash” reduced in size and written by means of micography, it is just as likely that this portable, wearable Tora contained only portions of a complete Tora. The term “Mishna Tora”’s referring to only part of the entire Biblical text is similarly implied in Sota 7:8 where the portions of the Tora that the King is to read publicly in fulfillment of the “Mitzva” of “HaKhel” all come from Devarim, but do not constitute even that entire book, let alone the other 4 books of the Tora. Since in both contexts the purpose of the amulet Tora as well as the Commandment of “HaKhel” is to increase fear of God, it is logical to assume that the identical texts would be utilized in both cases.

^{2[2]} Examples of Commandments that are repeated in Devarim either for emphasis or in order to supply additional details (see RaMBaN’s introduction to Devarim) are:

a) “Kashrut”	VaYikra 11:1-47	Devarim 14:3-21
b) “Tzitzit”	BaMidbar 15:37-40	Devarim 22:12
c) Prohibition against charging interest	VaYikra 25:35-37	Devarim 23:20-21

^{3[3]} Examples of events that are repeated in Devarim include:

a) Korach’s rebellion	BaMidbar 15	Devarim 11:6
b) Sin of the Golden Calf	Shemot 32	Devarim 9:7-10:5
c) Receiving the Tora	Shemot 19-20	Devarim 5:1-30

When the two accounts are taken independently of one another, two contradictory scenarios emerge, causing one to wonder why the stories were not integrated from the outset:

- a) According to Devarim, HaShem was not involved in the decision-making process at all. It is difficult to understand why Moshe would not have consulted with Him before embarking upon such a perilous course of action. If not only the people in general, but Moshe himself was expected to believe unconditionally in God's Promises of Giving the Jews a wonderful, fertile land, originally stated in Shemot prior to the Exodus from Egypt (Shemot 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3), why would the Jewish leader agree to sending spies instead of trying to talk the people out of such a course of action? Doesn't faith in God mean that one relies on His Promises without attempting to personally verify if those Promises are fulfillable?⁴[4]
- b) According to BaMidbar, the plan to send spies into Canaan emanated from HaShem. Consequently, the sending of the spies was not a manifestation of a lack of belief in Divine Promises and Omnipotence on the part of the people, but rather the carrying out of a Divine Commandment. Why then should anyone be particularly blamed for what eventually transpires when the spies come back with their report if not a single member of the Jewish people would have presumed to send spies in the first place without God's initially Proposing that this be done?⁵[5]

The traditional approach⁶[6] for understanding the verses in question from BaMidbar and Devarim requires that they be combined into a single, cohesive narrative, i.e.,

- a) (Devarim 1:22) The people come to Moshe with the request to send the spies.
- b) (*ibid.*) Moshe inquires of HaShem whether this should be done.
- c) (BaMidbar 13:1-2) HaShem Places His Imprimatur upon the project.
- d) (Devarim 1:23) Moshe picks the individuals for the mission.
- e) (BaMidbar 13:3) The spies are sent upon their way.

Da'at Mikra⁷[7] attributes the different presentations to the distinct nature of the prose in BaMidbar and Devarim.

⁴[4] Although the principle of "Ein Somchin Al Haneis" (do not rely on miracles) would appear to justify the sending of spies before embarking upon a military expedition, and we see that Yehoshua does so prior to the battle for Jericho without Divine Reproach (Yehoshua 2), according to BaMidbar Rabba 16:7, quoted below, the prior actions of the Jewish people lend perspective to their motivation for wanting to send spies before entering Canaan. Based upon their comments and actions in the past, this request reflected a deep-seated lack of faith in God and therefore their desire for spies was Deemed illegitimate by God.

⁵[5] Just as Moshe and the people could later complain that God should have Stopped them from sending the spies and thereby Prevented the regrettable developments that ensued, a similar argument appears in Shemot Rabba 43:8, where the sin of the Golden Calf is attributed to God's having sent the Jews into exile to Egypt, a center for idolatry. Perhaps if they had been led to a different Diaspora, they would not have been accustomed to idolatrous practices and would not have come to engage in this sin.

⁶[6] R. David Tzvi Hoffmann (Sefer Devarim, Netzach, Tel-Aviv, 5720, p. 36) alludes to and roundly rejects the approach of the Higher Biblical critics, when he writes, "...It is easy to demonstrate that the contradiction (between BaMidbar and Devarim in this regard) that some of the heretical commentators have convinced themselves can be found (leading to the conclusion that the stories originate in different documents), is just an illusion."

⁷[7] Aharon Mirski, Mosad HaRav Kook, Yerushalayim 5762, p. 19.

...Do not be surprised (at the differences) because events that are recounted as part of a **story**, as in Parshat Shelach, are never presented in the same manner as the elements of a **speech**.^{8[8]} One telling a story can omit details that he feels are not necessary for the story line, details that the one giving a public address might feel are very necessary. Consequently, it was always the case that the Jews were the ones who initiated the request to send spies, as well as God Agreeing that their will should be carried out. In Parshat Shelach, Moshe recounts the essence of the mission, whose beginning was in accordance with the desires of those who requested it, as well as with God's Agreement. But here (Parshat Devarim), where Moshe is coming to rebuke them,^{9[9]} Moshe emphasizes to Israel how they requested the spies, and there was concealed within these words a rebuke over the weakening of their faith in God, Who had Led them in the desert and Performed great miracles on their behalf...

Whereas Da'at Mikra assumes that the story that BaMidbar and Devarim draw upon is the same, with any differences attributed to matters of emphasis with respect to the context and manner in which the information is being presented, an alternate approach implies that a change in perspective took place on the part of Moshe between the events of BaMidbar and his reprising of them in Devarim.^{10[10]} Such an approach is based upon redundant language in verses in BaMidbar and Devarim leading some commentators to hypothesize that Moshe had misunderstood HaShem's Allowing the spying expedition to take place, thinking that the absence of a Divine Objection was tantamount to God's actually approving the project. In fact, this interpretive approach maintains God was Engaging in a form of "entrapment" whereby the desire on the part of the people and Moshe to do something that was spiritually objectionable was being permitted by HaShem with the full intention that the people would ultimately have to bear responsibility for their sinful actions.^{11[11]} Commentators creatively suggest why Moshe gave the people the benefit of the doubt, and originally suspected no negative motivation in their desire for spies to be sent:

a) **Seporno on Devarim 1:23**

I thought that there was no doubt on your parts with regard to HaShem's Word that you would conquer the land and that it was good, but that (by getting the spies' report) you wished to be able to choose the best portions of it immediately, since you realized that it would not be possible to conquer the entire land in a single year.

^{8[8]} Devarim is the valedictory address that Moshe gives the people before the leadership is transferred to Yehoshua, in which he attempts to alert them to the dangers that lie ahead as well as the responsibilities that they have vis-à-vis fulfilling God's Will.

^{9[9]} See the classical commentators on Devarim 1:1 who all draw attention to at least the beginning of this Biblical book being a series of rebukes to the Jewish people delivered by Moshe prior to his death.

^{10[10]} Such an understanding assumes that Devarim is comprised of Moshe's actual words—there is some discussion regarding the last 8 verses of the book in which Moshe's death is described; see Bava Batra 15a—rather than a script that God Gave him to read to the people. Abrabanel, based upon the first verse in Devarim, i.e., these are not only the words that Moshe enunciated, but that he composed and decided upon, advocates such an approach.

^{11[11]} God's Agreement to allow the spies to be sent then becomes a manifestation of the principle: "BaDerech SheAdam Rotzeh Lolechet, Molichin Oto" (in the path that a person wishes to go, he is conducted). RaShI on BaMidbar 22:32, quoting BaMidbar Rabba 20:12, applies this rule to God ultimately Giving permission to Bilaam to go and attempt to curse the Jewish people on behalf of Balak.

b) **Ohr HaChayim on Devarim 1:23**

And the Rabbis said (Yalkut Shimoni, beginning of Parshat Shelach) that the intent of the people was that they would send spies to discover the places where the Canaanites had buried their valuables and money.¹²[12]

c) **HaEmek Davar on Devarim 1:23**

Because Moshe understood that the holy path that they were following until this point was difficult for Israel to continue and that it was possible that they would stumble any moment. This was in fact the case until they reached Kadesh Barnea.¹³[13]

Moshe assumed that if there was Divine Approval for the mission, then his positive understanding of the people's motivation must be correct. God's true intent in permitting the spies to proceed, i.e., to expose them to punishment for their lack of faith, becomes apparent to Moshe only **after** they return with their negative report and cause consternation throughout the Jewish encampment.

Sota 34b

(BaMidbar 13:2) "Shelach **Lecha**¹⁴[14] Anashim" (lit. send for **yourself** men)—Reish Lakish said: "Lecha" means from your own mind (you must take responsibility for this plan and do not attribute its origins to Me), because would anyone choose a bad position for himself (i.e., since this turns out badly for HaShem's Master Plan for bringing the Jewish people to Canaan as quickly as possible after the Exodus from Egypt, He would never have been a party to it). That is why it is written, **(Devarim 1:23)** "And the matter was good **in my (Moshe's) eyes**"—Reish Lakish said: It pleased me (Moshe), but not HaShem.

RaShI takes the two comments of Reish Lakish in the Talmud, and associates each of them with the relevant verse in his Biblical commentary:

RaShI on BaMidbar 13:2

"Shelach **Lecha**"—In accordance with **your** thinking. **I** am **not** Commanding you. If **you** wish, send...

RaShI on Devarim 1:23

"And the matter was good in **my** (Moshe's) eyes"—In my eyes, but not in the "Eyes" of HaShem...

Reish Lakish's and RaShI's understanding of how to reconcile the accounts of the origin of the decision to send spies in BaMidbar and Devarim can lead us to appreciate the importance of the Tora's not combining the two versions into a single cohesive story. What is written in **BaMidbar** is the perspective of Moshe "**before the fact**", i.e., before the spies return, present their negative report, drive the people to hysteria, and God Decrees that practically the entire generation will die in the desert without entering the land of Canaan. Before the negative results of this

¹²[12] Such a perspective is consistent with the Rabbinic contention that when Canaanite houses had to be destroyed as a result of "Tzora'at" breaking out on their walls, treasures that had been hidden in the walls would be uncovered. See "Tzora'at's Silver Lining" at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Tazria-Metzora.html>

¹³[13] See Devarim 1:2.

¹⁴[14] The Midrash and Aggadah assume that "Lecha" is superfluous, and rather than interpreting the word as placing emphasis upon the word "Shelach", i.e., **surely send**, it rather suggests **send on your own behalf** as opposed to doing something of which I Approve.

project become apparent, since God did not explicitly Object when Moshe inquired about sending the spies, the Jewish leader concluded that he had God's "Blessing" for the endeavor. But "**after the fact**", as described in Devarim, now that Moshe is equipped with "20-20 hindsight", he comes to understand that rather than Approving, God had in fact no more than Abstained from taking a position concerning the spies.

Whereas the above explanation provides insight into Moshe's thinking regarding the spies, why might God have Wanted the spies to be sent? On the one hand, since HaShem is defined as the "Bochein Levavot" (lit. the Discerner of hearts, i.e., He Knows what people are thinking regardless of their actions and words), it is possible that He Wishes to empower them to act upon their present malicious thoughts and state of disbelief.¹⁵[15] However, the following Midrash suggests that the act of requesting the spies on the part of the people merely confirmed an earlier lack of faith that they had obviously remained unchanged despite all that God had Done on their behalves:

BaMidbar Rabba 16:7

(BaMidbar 13:2) "Shelach Lecha Anashim" (lit. send for **yourself** men)—Even though the Holy One, Blessed be He, Said "Shelach Lecha" (implying that God Ordered the mission), it (the order) did not come from the Holy One, Blessed be He, that they should go. Why?

Because the Holy One, Blessed be He had already Said to them the praises of the Land of Israel:

(Devarim 8:7-8)¹⁶[16] "Because the Lord your God is Bringing you to a good land, a land of streams, fountains, depths that emanate from valleys and hills. A land of wheat and barley and vineyards, and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey."

And similarly He Said, **(Devarim 11:10-11)** "Because the land to which you are coming there to inherit is not like the land of Egypt from where you came out, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, a green garden. But the land into which you go to possess it is a land of hills and valleys, that drinks water from the rains of heaven."

And while they were still in Egypt He Said: **(Shemot 3:8)** "And I will Go down to Save Him (the Jewish people) from Egypt and Bring Him up from that land to a land that is good and wide, to a land flowing with milk and honey..."

And the verse states, **(Shemot 13:21)** "And God Walks before them during the day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar

¹⁵[15] This is an explanation given with regard to HaShem's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Since Pharaoh really didn't want to release the Jews, God was Giving him the strength to act upon his resolve and not give in to the pressure of the plagues.

¹⁶[16] Although verses in Devarim appear in the Tora considerably after the story of the spies is first mentioned in BaMidbar 13, it is assumed that because Devarim is a repetition of what has previously transpired, the people had been told about the wonderful qualities of the land of Israel many times prior to their sending the spies.

of fire to give them light that they may go by day and night.”¹⁷[17]

So what is the meaning of “Shelach **Lecha** Anashim”? The people of Israel requested this course of action, for when the time came to inherit the boundaries (of the land),¹⁸[18] God Said to them: **(Devarim 1:21)** “See HaShem has Given you the land”. It was at this moment that the people approached Moshe, as it is said, **(Devarim 1:22)** “And all of you approached me”.

This is what Ezra was referring to, when he said, (Nechemia 9:16-17) “And they did not listen to Your Commandments, and they refused to listen and they did not remember Your Miracles”. And similarly the Tora stated, **(BaMidbar 10:33)** “...and the Ark of the Covenant of God journeyed before them three days to spy out a place to rest” (suggesting that God would Take care of all logistical considerations regarding the conquest of Canaan). But rather (than trusting HaShem in this regard) they said, **(Devarim 1:22)** “Let us send men before us and they will spy out the land for us”.

This demonstrates that they did not believe. And similarly in the words of David it is stated, (Tehillim 78:22) “Because they did not believe in God”. And it is written, (Ibid. 78:10) “And in His Tora they refused to walk”.

R. Yehoshua said: To what were they like? They were comparable to the case of a king who found for his son a beautiful wife who was the daughter of distinguished and wealthy people. The son said to him: I would like to go and see her, because he did not trust his father.¹⁹[19] Immediately the matter became difficult and the father

¹⁷[17] While this verse does not deal with the virtues of the land of Israel, it does imply that there should be no need for a “forward party” to precede the people into the land in order to ascertain the most strategic routes because God Himself was going to Fill this role.

¹⁸[18] The incident of the spies took place shortly after the people began to travel away from Har Sinai, following the erection and dedication of the Tabernacle.

BaMidbar 10:11 And it was in the **second year** (following the Exodus from Egypt) in the **second month**, on the **20th** of the month, the Cloud lifted from atop the Tabernacle of Testimony.

Ibid. 33 And they journeyed from the Mountain of God **three days**, and the Ark of the Covenant of God journeyed before them three days to spy out a place to rest.

BaMidbar 11:1-3 The murmurers and the plague of fire.

Ibid. 4-35 The quails and the plague against those who had disparaged the Manna.

BaMidbar 12 Miriam and Aharon speaking negatively about Moshe and the plague that affects them (while Miriam was affected for an entire week, Aharon was momentarily afflicted—see Shabbat 97a).

→ **The implication of the verses is that only a few days elapsed from the time that they started to travel until the story in BaMidbar 13 begins. This is confirmed by Devarim 1:2 “It is an 11 day journey from Chorev (Sinai) by way of Mount Se’ir to Kadesh Barnea”, i.e., to reach the entry point into Israel, it was a relatively short journey from Sinai, where they had encamped to receive the Tora, construct and then dedicate the Tabernacle.**

¹⁹[19] The Midrash reflects an interesting attitude towards “Shidduchim”, i.e., that a child should simply accept the arrangement that his/her father makes for him/her. While God’s certainly Knows what’s best for His Creatures, can the same be said about every parent vis-à-vis the ideal spouse for his child? Assuming that the child has already reached the age of maturity, sources in the Oral Tradition can be cited to challenge such an assumption. Perhaps it has to be posited that the Jewish people who had only recently been redeemed from Egypt must be considered immature, and therefore the parable would not be out of place.

was upset. The father said: What can I do? If I say to him, "You may not go to see her", he will conclude that she is in fact repulsive and for this reason he does not want me to see her. In the end, he (the king) said: Go to see her, and you will see that I have not misled you. But because you did not have faith in me, I vow that you will never see her in your house, but I will give her to your son.²⁰[20]

So God Said to Israel: The land is good. But they did not believe it, and for this reason they said, "Let us send men before us and they will spy out the land for us". The Holy One, Blessed be He Said: If I prevent them (from carrying out their plan) they will say that because it isn't good He has Denied us the opportunity to preview it. But rather they will see it, but I will Make an oath that not a single one of them will enter into it, as it is said, (BaMidbar 14:23) "Surely they will not see the land that I Swore to their fathers, nor shall any of them that provoked Me see it".

The Midrash that immediately follows the previous one assumes that sending the spies proved nothing as far as God was Concerned, therefore suggesting that He had already Decided that this generation was not going to enter into Canaan. The only one whose "eyes were opened" by the negative report and the people's reaction to it was Moshe.

BaMidbar Rabba 16:8

As soon as they said to Moshe, (Devarim 1:22) "Let us send men before us", Moshe began to stand and wonder.

He said: Is it possible for me to do anything before I consult with the Holy One, Blessed be He?

He went and consulted. He said to Him: Such and such Your Children are demanding.

He Said to him: This is not the first time that this has happened. When they were in Egypt, they mocked Me, as it is said, (Hoshea 7:16) "This was their mockery in the land of Egypt". They are consistent, and for this reason I do not have to test them, as it is said, (Daniel 2:22) "He Knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him".

HaShem Said to him: Moshe, I Know what they are. Therefore if you are asking "Shelach **Lecha**" (it would be good for HaShem in order to discover the true nature of this people), this is purely for yourself.

From where is there a proof to this? It is written, (BaMidbar 13:16)

"These are the names of the men that **Moshe** (as opposed to HaShem) sent to spy out the land..."

The Midrashic approach offers a much more poignant understanding of the relationship between Moshe and the people. It is suggested that Moshe continued to hold out hope that the Jews could be redeemed not only from slavery, but also from their lack of faith and confidence in HaShem. The story of the spies taught Moshe not only about the people's shortcomings, but also about his failure to properly understand the capacities of those he was leading.

Shabbat Shalom.

²⁰[20] Polygamy is obviously assumed by this Midrash. The parable also begs the question of the respective ages of the prospective "Chatan" and "Kalla".
