

Israel: A land with digestive issues?

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The claim of the Meraglim when they return to the Jewish people needs to be understood. One of the ways in which they seem to malign the land is by saying that it is a land which is, “*Eretz ochelet yoshveha*” (Bamidbar 13:32). Literally, “a land which consumes its inhabitants”. The Talmud (Sotah 35a), which is quoted by Rashi, gives us a little context. As the spies traveled around the land, they witnessed funerals everywhere they went in Israel. In reality this was a divine distraction to make sure the Meraglim could move about unnoticed, but they took it as a sign of a dangerous place where death was omnipresent.

One question which is dealt with by many of the commentaries is how this claim could possibly fit with the fact that they saw giants at every turn. They say that they were like grasshoppers compared to these immense folk which inhabited the land. If this was such a deathly unhealthy place how could it produce such healthy and oversized specimens?

The Rishonim offer a number of creative answers to this question. The Da’at Zekaynim MiBa’lei Tosfot suggests that the fact that they were giants only supported their other claim. Their argument was that clearly these deaths were not due to weak constitutions. If even these robust giants were dying it was clearly something about the land itself and not something incidental which could be related to these specific people. The Ramban takes a similar approach and says that they were claiming that the fact that the inhabitants are so strong is because only they are hardy enough to live in the land of Israel but the Jews will surely not survive. The Seforno comments that they were claiming that these giants were the only ones left, the individuals with normal constitutions had already all died out.

We know that in the physical sense, although we may be able to understand their claim, it was certainly mistaken. But perhaps their claim had a kernel of truth in another sense. Maybe they were right on a spiritual plane. Eretz Yisrael may only be for those with a strong religious constitution, the rest get kicked out. This point is made elsewhere in the Torah in the context of forbidden relationships. In sefer Vayikra (18:28) the Torah warns us that if we don’t live up to the commandments the land of Israel itself may “spit us out”. Perhaps their claim was a reflection of their spiritual concerns, which on some level may have been warranted.

The language here is striking. In Vayikra the Torah speaks of the land “spitting out” people while the Meraglim speak of the land “eating” people. What is reason for this choice of metaphor? Eating is taking food in and making it a part of ourselves and spitting out is the opposite. In a spiritual sense there may have been good reason to fear the land rejecting them if they were not able to live up to the standards Hashem had set. But this does not seem to have been their concern. They were afraid of not being able to continue on in Israel with the same identities they had in the desert. This was a paradigm shift for them and they were afraid of being swallowed up in this new world. They weren’t afraid of the land rejecting them they were afraid

of the land erasing their own identity. Perhaps this is fundamentally what these leaders were afraid of, losing their own senses of who they were as they were to enter such a new phase of life. It is not easy to come face to face with such a new reality, from career slaves to conquerors and pioneers. The Meraglim were not able to overcome this struggle, may Hashem give us the strength to continue into the next challenge of our ever-changing world.