



When the Meraglim are describing Eretz Yisrael to Bnei Yisrael, they describe it as an "אֶרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ"¹ - a land that eats up its inhabitants. But what exactly does this mean? Why did the spies choose this specific phrase to describe the land that the people were destined to inherit?

מורדות and מעלות ר' יעקב מוינא says that the spies were saying that the land had a lot of. In the Gemara in Eruvin², Rav Yehuda says that in any city with many ascents and descents, the people and animals either only reached half of their life expectancy, or aged prematurely due to the strain of climbing up and down the inclines. The Meraglim saw Bnei Yisroel as being weak, and had a strong sense of dubiety that the nation would be able to survive all of this potential suffering.

The Mincha Belulah³ gives an answer that the Meraglim thought that the land could barely provide any sustenance, and in the case of hail or fungus to the plants, there would be no bread to eat; it seemed highly improbable to them that Bnei Yisrael would be have a sufficient amount of nourishment in the land.

Rashi⁴ explains that it means that everywhere the spies traveled, they saw people burying the dead. In reality, this was actually part of Hashem's plan to benefit the Meraglim; in the Gemara in Sotah,⁵ Rava explains that Hashem caused a profusion of deaths to allow the spies to remain inconspicuous: whenever would reach a certain area, the most important people of the town would die. This meant the residents of the town would be so preoccupied in burying the dead that they would hardly notice the Meraglim, let alone question their presence and identity. However, the spies had a negative frame of mind, and took the myriad of deaths as an ominous sign that this land was one that consumes all its occupants.

The common theme in all of these explanations is the Meraglim speaking about Eretz Yisrael with a perspective of pessimism and a cynicism about Bnei Yisrael being successful in the land. The Ibn Ezra⁶ says that אֶרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ means there was a bad air surrounding the land; it is possible that the spies produced this negative climate through their outlook of defeatism.

¹ במדבר יג:לב

² עירובין נו.

³ מנחה בלולה במדבר יג:לב ד"ה ארץ אוכלת יושביה

⁴ רש"י במדבר יג:לב ד"ה אוכלת יושביה

⁵ סוטה לה.

⁶ אבן עזרא במדבר יג:לב ד"ה אוכלת יושביה

⁷In the Gemara in Berachos,⁸ R' Yonasan states, “אין מראין לו לאדם אלא מהרהורי לבו” - at times, a person sees things based on their attitude. Sometimes, things have a dual perspective, and a person comes to different conclusions based on their outlook and perception of things. The Ramban⁹ writes¹⁰ that it was not necessarily evil to send Meraglim; it was a normal course of action that would enable Bnei Yisrael to figure out an optimal strategy to attack. The spies never said inherently bad things; they simply gave answers to the questions about the size of the people, and all of the factors of the land led them to the conclusion that they would be unable to conquer the land.

But why did the Meraglim express that conclusion? Did Hashem not already say that Bnei Yisrael would be able to conquer it? The answer is that the sin was not that the Meraglim were sent or gave answers to Moshe's questions, but rather because they gave their own position on the matter, and these answers were heavily clouded by their defeatist attitude, leading to an exaggeration of the dangers of the land. There is a reality, and an interpretation that they gave to the reality, which was not the same thing. The facts were not a problem; the interpretation was.⁷ Throughout life, we should always strive to avoid scrutinizing things from a cynical frame of mind, and instead view the world in a positive lens.

⁷ Based off of a Dvar Torah given by Rav Nusbacher.

⁸ ברכות נה:

⁹ רמב"ן במדבר יד:לז ד"ה מוצאי דבת הארץ רעה

¹⁰ רמב"ן במדבר יג:לב ד"ה וטעם ויוציאו דבת הארץ וגו'