

Geulas Yisrael #56

Shelach: A Land of Illusions or Allusions?

Something about the land they were infiltrating was "off", and the meraglim spies sensed it. They were startled by outsized fruit, and stunned by heavily-fortressed cities. Massive giants dwarfed them into tiny human-shaped grasshoppers. If all this weren't enough, they detected an unusually high death rate amongst the indigenous population. It appeared as if this dreadful land was literally devouring its inhabitants. Petrified and panicked, they determined that the land which had been divinely promised over four hundred years earlier, was currently unattainable. Terror quickly spread throughout the desert camp as Jewish history came crashing down.

The spies weren't fools and these scenes weren't concocted. They didn't fabricate their reports or exaggerate the information. Giants did roam this land littered with gigantic fruits. The crime of the spies consisted in their *interpretation* of the intel. There *was* something different about this land, but it was precisely these differences which should have empowered them, rather than terrifying them.

Life in the land of Israel is fundamentally different than it is elsewhere. Living under the eye of Hashem and under His direct presence changes everything. Our proximity to Hashem induces a supernatural condition in which crops are massive and people are colossal. Unlike worldwide rainfall, rain in Israel is delivered directly from Hashem and the size of the crops reflects this. These roving giants were the same celestial "beings" who fell from Heaven, as described in Breishit. Half man and half angel, they naturally migrated to Heaven's door in Israel. Size matters, and there was nothing incidental about the large fruits and enormous people. So it is in the land of God.

It doesn't take a heavenly giant to perceive divine presence in Israel. Even average-sized humans discern the land's importance. Deep in its collective subconscious, humanity realizes that life originated in Yerushalayim and that history will terminate there. Humanity has always been irrationally drawn to this land- at great cost to human life. Man was first murdered amidst a quarrel over this land. Kayin and Hevel each enjoyed unlimited real estate options, yet they sparred over the rights to Yerushalayim. Since that brutal slaying, endless blood has been shed over this land. Given the disproportionate interest in our small strip of land, it wasn't incidental that the meraglim encountered over thirty chieftains vying for control. Everyone wanted a toehold in the land of human history.

Life in the land of God was also, uncommonly austere. Conditions in the land of God were harsh and unforgiving. The reasons for the unusually high death rate were unclear. Were so many inhabitants dying prematurely because of their morally decay? Was the land of God "spitting out" its sinful inhabitants- as it would hundreds of years later when we, ourselves, fell into moral dysfunction? All this is unknown, but one thing is clear: life in the land of God would never be "easy". The land of God isn't Scandinavia and the meraglim should have understood as much.

Life in the presence of Hashem is different: large, disputed and unyielding. Instead of flinching we should have risen to the challenge of living before God. Nothing of value comes without a price. A ticket into the land of God isn't cheap. Instead of horrifying us this "theater of the absurd" should have reinforced our faith. We should have realized that a divine land which lies beyond human proportions and beyond human reach will only be delivered to God's people. Faith should have provided backdrop but unfortunately, the meraglim had no context.

Lost in a land of *illusion* their didn't notice the various *allusions*. All the signs pointed to this being the land of God, earmarked for the Jews.

So it was then, and so it continues to be throughout history. Formidable empires would perennially battle over control of this land, but none would succeed long-term. Agricultural conditions in Israel would fluctuate wildly between abundant fertility and unmanageable sterility. In its heyday, reported by the Talmud to have lasted into the third century, the land provided abnormal bounty. As the Jews began to depart and the Shechinah followed, a divine curse descended upon Israel, parching it dry and sentencing it to two millennia of thorns and thistles. As Jews slowly return home, and the divine presence returns, the land is slowly recovering, and gradually returning to its former plentiful state.

Just as then, humanity still hotly disputes our presence in the land of God. The cities of Israel are no longer armed but the borders are, and our neighbors are intent upon, G-d forbid, dislodging us. Just as it was then, life in the land of God will never be simple.

Living in Israel doesn't only affect agriculture and economy but cultural norms. Living under the constant presence of God infuses us with inner strength, courage, confidence, and intelligence. Ideally, these traits contribute to our military strength and to our becoming an innovative "start-up" nation. However, all this confidence and empowerment can also create overconfidence, impoliteness and a society of "know-it-alls". Israelis may not be "giants", but they sometimes possess "giant heads". As it is, Jews are predisposed toward stubbornness and obstinacy. For this reason, God selected us to defy the world and launch a revolution of religious consciousness. God desired a stiff-necked people and He certainly found one! Stubborn people, fueled by the confidence of

living in the land of Hashem don't always listen to each other or, for that matter, to authority.

Ideally, life in the land of God is empowering but humbling, endowing us with inner strength but also with modesty. Those traits aren't easy to calibrate. So it is in the land of God, nothing comes "easy".