



The Story of a Developing Community: From Exodus to Exoneration

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Parashat Shelah 5777

Our *parashah* is defined by a dramatic event, one that transforms the desert experience from a fleeting stop on the short journey from Egypt to Israel into a lengthy period that spans a generation. The lengthening of the days in the desert indeed ensures that those who left Egypt will not enter the land. But perhaps more significantly, the desert sojourn is not just the story of a band of former slaves merging their tribal identities into the makings of a sovereign people. It also presents as the story of a changing God: one who initially responds with immediacy and emotion, but who comes to anchor the human-divine relationship in a fundamentally different way.

A. From a personal to a communal mission

The story of the spies begins with a group of individuals who go to scout out the land on God's command.

במדבר יג, א'-ג'

וַיִּדְבֹּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר־אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵישׁ
אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אַבְתִּיךָ תִּשְׁלָחוּ כָּל נָשִׂיא בְהֵם: וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּאָרָן עַל־פִּי ה' כָּלָם
אַנְשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה.

BeMidbar 13:1-3

¹God spoke to Moshe, saying, ²“Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.” ³So Moshe, by the Lord’s command, sent them out from the wilderness of Paran, all the men being leaders of the Israelites.

The men that Moshe sends on this mission are formally described as the leaders of the nation, but the Torah’s description of them gives off an air of parochial individualism: “send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.” They have no single leader, rather “They were *all* men, the heads of the Israelites” (v. 3). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the entire journey is described in the singular, as the response to the needs of a single person—Moshe: “**Send for yourself**” (v. 1). And the story in fact continues: “Moshe... sent them” (v. 3). The spies are not sent off with any formal ceremony or wishes for a safe journey. The spies’ departure has no communal dimension.

But things change when the spies return:

במדבר יג, כ"ה – כ"ו

וַיָּשׁוּבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאֶרֶץ מִקֶּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם: וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיִּבְאוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-כָּל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֶל-מִדְבַּר פָּאָרָן קִדְשָׁה וַיִּשְׁיבוּ אֲתָם דְּבַר וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵדָה וַיִּרְאוּם אֶת-פְּרִי הָאֶרֶץ

BeMidbar 13:25-26

²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. ²⁶They went straight to Moses and Aaron and **the whole community of Israel** at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and **to the whole community**, as they showed them the fruit of the land.

The spies approach the entire “community of Israel” and deliver their report not as “one man each, one man each” (v. 2) nor to their respective tribes, nor just to Moshe, but as a group to the entire nation, to the entire community of Israel.

And then an internal argument breaks out within the group:

במדבר יג, ל' - ל"ג

וַיִּהְיֶה כָּל־לֵב אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עָלֶיהָ נַעֲלֶה וְנִרְשָׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל נוֹכַח לָהּ: וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוֹכַח לַעֲלֹת אֶל־הָעָם כִּי־חָזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: ... הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֲכָלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הִוא וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֲנָשִׁי מַדּוּת: וְשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת־הַנְּפִילִים בְּגִי עָנָם מִן־הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהָי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם

BeMidbar 13:30-33

³⁰Calev hushed the people before Moshe and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” ³¹But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” ³²Thus they spread slander among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; ³³we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

The Torah presents the spies' words in a critical light: “Thus they spread slander among the Israelites about the land they had scouted” (BeMidbar 13:32). Not only do the spies transform into a unified group with a nearly singular identity, but from the moment they return, Israel is also described as one community. They are no longer separate tribes, each with its own leader, but rather a unified group with a single voice:

שם יד, א' – ג'

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת־קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ הָעָם בְּלִילָה הַהוּא: וַיִּלְלֵנוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן ... וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל־הָעֵדָה לֹי־מִתְּנֵנוּ בְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ... וְלֵמָּה ה' מֵבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנָפֶל בְּחָרֶב נַשְׁיָנוּ וְנִסְפּוּ וַיְהִי לָבָז הָלֹא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוֹב מִצְרָיִמָּה.

BeMidbar 14:1-3

¹The **whole community** broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. ²All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died in the land of Egypt,” **the whole community** shouted at them, “or if only we might die in this wilderness!

³Why is God taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!”

Now, the entire community, which no longer believes that the project of entering the land is feasible or realistic, is opposed to individuals who think otherwise. And the argument between the two sides reaches a turning point: the dispute is no longer over the land, its qualities and the ability of the community of Israel to conquer it. Rather the discussion is over God’s power to bring the people safely into the land.

שם, ה' – ט'

וַיִּפֹּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי כָל-קְהֵל עֵדֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נּוּן וְכָלֵב בֶּן-יִפְנֶה מִן-הַתָּרִים אֶת-הָאָרֶץ קָרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֹת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר... אַם-תִּפְּצוּ בְּנֵי ה' וְהָיָא אֲתָנּוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וּנְתַנָּה לָנוּ... אָךְ בַּה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְּמַרְדּוּ... וְה' אֲתָנּוּ אֶל-תִּירָאָם

BeMidbar 14:5-9

⁵Then Moshe and Aharon fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites. ⁶And Yehoshua son of Nun and Calev son of Yefunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes ⁷and exhorted the whole Israelite community:... ⁸If God is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land... and give it to us; ⁹only you must not rebel against God... but God is with us. Have no fear of them!”

Moshe, Aharon, and two of the spies resist the lack of faith in God, but Israel’s response is, “the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones...” (14:10).

Only when the argument reaches this climax does God intervene directly: “the Presence of God appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites” (v. 10). The description of the divine reaction reveals how God interprets what has happened:

שם, י"א – י"ב

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה עַד-אַנְהָ וְנִאֲצָנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד-אַנְהָ לֹא-יִאֱמִינוּ בִּי כָּל־הָאֱתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: אֶכְנֹה בְּדִבְרִי וְאוֹרִשְׁנוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אֶתְךָ לְגוֹי-גָדוֹל וְעַצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ

BeMidbar 14:11-12

¹¹And God said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? ¹²I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!”

Israel's reaction is taken by God as an act of rebellion against Him, as a lack of faith in the project of entering the land as presented by God. God is furious; the rest of the chapter depicts Moshe's frantic efforts to placate and persuade God, who ultimately agrees to forgive them.

שם, י"ט – כ'

סֶלַח-נָא לַעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כַּגְדֹּל חַסְדְּךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתָּה לָעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד-הַנֵּה: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סֶלַחְתִּי כִּדְבָרְךָ:

BeMidbar 14:19-20

¹⁹Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.” ²⁰And God said, “I pardon, as you have asked.

B. From personal annihilation to communal atonement

Despite God's apparent forgiveness of the Israelite collective, He does not forgive the individuals who did not have faith in Him. In what seems like a moment of divine rage and pain, God determines that the men who rebelled against him will not have any part in the project of entering the land:

שם, כ"א – כ"ג

וְאוֹלָם חַי-אֲנִי וְיִמְלָא ה' אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ: כִּי כָל-הָעֹנָשִׁים הָרָאִים אֶת-כַּבְדִּי וְאֶת-אַתְמִי אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתִי

בְּמִצְרַיִם וּבְמִדְבָּר.. אִם-יִרְאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאֲבֹתָם וְכָל-מִנְאָצִי לֹא יִרְאוּהָ:

BeMidbar 14:21-3

²¹Nevertheless, as I live and as God's Presence fills the whole world, ²²none of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness... ²³shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me shall see it.

This reaction is portrayed as personal—those who rejected God will not see the land:

שם, כ"ו – כ"ט

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: עַד-מָתַי לְעֵדָה הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת... בְּמִדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פְגָרֵיכֶם ...
אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶּם עָלַי

BeMidbar 14:26-29

²⁶God spoke further to Moshe and Aharon, ²⁷“How much longer shall that wicked community keep muttering against Me?... In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop... you who have muttered against Me.

The story leaves the community of Israel not only in a state of mourning, knowing that they will not enter the land, but also with the knowledge that their God is one who gets insulted, who rages and punishes. In other words, Israel at this moment exists in the shadow of a threat that an entire generation might be wiped out because of their God's rage. The people are under a heavy cloud: Divine rage could consume an entire generation on account of a mistake, an inappropriate lack of faith or a mistaken assessment of facts that God finds insulting. Maybe this is precisely why it cannot be the end of the story: Just as, after the flood, God promises not to bring another flood upon the earth, the laws that immediately follow the story of the spies represent a shift in the relationship between God and the community of Israel.

First, the *parashah* ends with a series of laws that begin with the phrase “When you come into

the land where you shall dwell”—a kind of promise that God’s anger and punishment are ephemeral. There will indeed be a generation of Israel that will see the land. Second, another law opens up a future pathway for grappling with communal sin, an alternative to wiping out an entire generation:

שם טו, כ"ב – כ"ו

וְכִי תִשְׁגּוּ וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר ה' אֱלֹהֵי־מֹשֶׁה: אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֲלֵיכֶם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה מִן־הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' וְהִלָּאָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: וְהָיָה אִם מֵעִנִּי הָעֵדָה נִעְשְׂתָה לְשִׁגְגָה וְעָשׂוּ כָל־הָעֵדָה פֶּר־בֹּו־בָקָר אֶחָד לְעֹלָה לָרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַה' וּמִנְחָתוֹ וְנִסְכּוֹ כַּמִּשְׁפָּט וּשְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחַטָּאת: וּכְפָר הַכֹּהֵן עַל־כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם... וְנִסְלַח לְכָל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

BeMidbar 15:22-26

²²If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that God has declared to Moshe ²³—anything that the Lord has enjoined upon you through Moshe—from the day that the Lord gave the commandment and on through the ages: ²⁴If this was done unwittingly, through the inadvertence of the community, the whole community shall present one bull of the herd as a burnt offering of pleasing odor to God, with its proper meal offering and libation, and one he-goat as a sin offering. ²⁵The priest shall make expiation for the whole Israelite community and they shall be forgiven... The whole Israelite community and the stranger residing among them shall be forgiven....

This last verse echoes Moshe’s request for forgiveness from God after the sin of the spies, but there are several significant differences. First, this is no one-time response to an outstanding leader of the stature of Moshe, rather an established protocol that can be put into play by any priest in any generation, and perhaps, by extension, by any communal leader. Second, alongside the awareness that the people of Israel may sin in its entirety sits the recognition of the possibility of forgiveness that can follow in this sin’s wake. And this forgiveness need not be conditional on the death of the generation of sinners.

C. Summary

The description of the sin of the spies and their punishment is juxtaposed with a series of laws. This juxtaposition is evidence of two processes that the sin of the spies both enhances and clarifies. First, we have here another significant step in the transformation of the Israelites from a collection of individuals into a community, the community of Israel. Second, the relationship between the community of Israel and God is reorganized, and this reorganization is geared specifically towards moments of crisis and lack of trust. Through this reorganization, the qualities of the parties themselves change. We see that the sin of the spies is also a milestone not only in the unfolding character of the Jewish people, but also in God's willingness to grant them the tools to find atonement for the future sins both He and they know they will commit.