



Uncovering the Spies

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The big story in Parashat Shelah is the story of the spies.¹ The people are nearing the Land of Canaan, and Moshe sends ahead men, one from each tribe, to cross the border, check things out, and then bring back a report. So they head out for 40 days, return safely—and, at first, all seems well. They confirm that the land, as promised, “flows with milk and honey” (Numbers 13:27). But then the conversation turns. They begin to spill out all kinds of fears: the cities are fortified, the people are gigantic, and the land... “devours its inhabitants” (Numbers 13:32).

The people begin to panic, screaming and crying, and saying they want to go back to Egypt (Numbers 14:1). They even threaten to throw stones at anyone who tries to calm them down (Numbers 14:10).

God gets angry, for they seem to have lost all faith (Numbers 14:11). They don’t believe that God will protect them. They don’t trust their leaders. And, worst of all, they have disparaged the land of their ancestors, the land that God has promised them. It is one of the great tragedies of the Torah, a transgression so egregious that the punishment will be 40 years of wandering in the desert.

¹ See Rashi on Numbers 13:2, who refers to it as פרשת המרגלים (*parashat ha-meraglim*).



This what becomes known as “חטא המרגלים - the Sin of the Spies” (*heit ha-meraglim*).² The characters in this episode are referred to as, *meraglim* (spies) from at least the time of the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:3). Later *midrashim* continue that usage. The Tanhuma (Shelah 2), for example, says that “המרגלים באו ואמרו לשון הרע על הארץ - the spies came back and spoke ill of the land.”

But the strange thing is, here in Parashat Shelah, they are never actually called “spies.” Nor is their expedition referred to as “spying.” Not once. From the start they are always told to “וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן - **scout** out the land of Canaan” (*va-yaturu et eretz kena'an*, Numbers 13:2). The Torah then repeats that language when Moshe sends them out, again when they actually go, and again when they describe their journey. The *parashah* only ever refers to them as “הַתְּרִים - the scouts” (*ha-tarim*).

Now we might suggest that “spies” and “scouts” are basically the same thing. But although it is true that these two words can describe similar activities, in both Hebrew and English they have different connotations. “To scout out” (לתור) is just to look around, to survey the land. “To spy” (לרגל) is to do something devious, and presumably to stand in an adversarial relationship with those one is spying on.³ But even if we were to gloss over this difference in meaning, the question remains: where do our commentators get this language of “spies” (מרגלים) if the Torah itself doesn’t use it? How did this incident come to be known as “חטא המרגלים - the Sin of the Spies?”

The first hint at an answer comes in the way their report is described:

² This phrase itself is not commonly used until the Medieval period (the earliest reference I could find is in the Zohar Balak III:205b).

³ See Ha-Emek Davar on Numbers 13:2, who also distinguishes between these two verbs, and says that לתור means to go and investigate an unknown terrain, searching for a the best location for one’s needs (מחפש איזה מקום הוא הטוב יותר לענינו), whereas לרגל means to go somewhere one already knows about (specifically, on foot, ברגלי), in order determine the characteristics of that place (לראות תכונות זה המקום).



במדבר יג:לב

וַיִּצְיֹאוּ דִבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ.

Numbers 13:32

Thus they produced **bad reports** about the land that they had scouted.

The term for “bad reports” here, דיבה (*dibbah*), stands out. It is repeated two more times in this story, but it is an unusual word. In fact, it is only used in one other story in the Torah, as Ibn Ezra points out in his explanation of its meaning:

אבן עזרא במדבר יג:לב

וַיִּצְיֹאוּ דִבַּת הָאָרֶץ – דבר שלא היה ואין כן ויבא יוסף.

Ibn Ezra on Numbers 13:32

“They produced bad reports”—that is, a thing which never happened. But that was not the case when Yosef brought [bad reports].

So, first of all, Ibn Ezra is suggesting that the “bad reports” here in our *parashah* were not just bad, they were false. And perhaps that was the truly sinful act that warranted such severe punishment.

But he also draws a contrast to this *dibbah* from the other usage of the word, in the Yosef story, back in Genesis, where we read that:

בראשית לז:ב

וַיָּבֹא יוֹסֵף אֶת דִּבְתָם רָעָה אֶל אֲבִיהֶם.

Genesis 37:2

Yosef brought terribly **bad reports** about [his brothers] to their father.

This is at the beginning of the Yosef narrative, and it is the first indication we have of the deep rift that will exist between Yosef and his brothers. Soon enough, there will be other terrible conflicts between the brothers. They grow to hate him, we are told, and eventually they will capture him and sell him into slavery in Egypt. But the tension all started with these “bad reports.”

Now that we have established a unique linguistic connection between our scouts and Yosef, we can begin to notice other similarities between the two stories. There are 12 brothers, 10 of whom are united in their mission to seek out food, and two who are not (Yosef, who is already in Egypt, and Binyamin, who stays behind), and 12 men sent to survey the land (who also bring back food), 10 of whom are united in their report, and two who dissent. Yosef is “sent” out by his father to check on them (וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱלִיהֶם), just as Moshe “sends” the men out to check on the land (וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם). And in both stories, there is a signaling towards the Land of Egypt: the scouts call for a return to Egypt; the brothers sell Yosef down to Egypt.

The most incredible parallel, however, does not come until much later in the dramatic Yosef narrative—after he has served as a slave in Egypt, been thrown into prison for a crime he did not commit, risen to fame as a dream-interpreter, and placed as second-in-command of all of Egypt during its years of famine. Yosef has wisely stored up grain for the lean years, and hungry people are now flocking to Egypt from all over seeking sustenance – including, eventually, his brothers. They come down at their father’s behest, to bring food back to the family. But when they are finally standing before their brother Yosef, though he recognizes them, they do not recognize him. They tell their sob story, and ask Yosef for help. But his reaction is as surprising as it is harsh:

בראשית מב:ט

וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֻמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִרְגָּלִים אַתֶּם לָרְאוֹת אֶת עֲרֹת הָאָרֶץ בְּאַתֶּם.



Genesis 42:9

Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Yosef said to them, “You are **spies**!

You have come to see the secrets (*lit.*, nakedness) of the land!”

“Spies,” he calls them. It is not entirely clear why he chooses that word, nor what the accusation has to do with the dreams he had. But whatever his reasons, Yosef is fixated on calling them spies. He does so two more times before the scene is over. First, the brothers deny the charge, saying:

בראשית מב:יא

כְּנִים אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא הָיוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ מְרַגְלִים.

Genesis 42:11

We are honest men! Your servants have never been **spies**!

And Yosef repeats:

בראשית מב:יד

הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם.

Genesis 42:14

It is as I have told you: You are **spies**!

And then finally, he suggests a test:

בראשית מב:טז

שְׁלַחוּ מִכֶּם אֶחָד וְיָקַח אֶת אֲחִיכֶם וְאַתֶּם הָאֲסוּרוֹ וַיִּבְחֲנוּ דְבָרֵיכֶם הֲאֵמֶת אַתֶּם וְאִם לֹא חֵי פְרֵעָה כִּי מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם.



Genesis 42:16

Let one of you go and bring your [youngest] brother, while the rest of you remain confined, so that your words may be put to the test, to see if the truth is with you. Otherwise—by the life of Pharaoh—you are **spies**!

You are spies, you are spies, you are spies! Yosef keeps repeating it, and what he means to suggest by it, above all, is that they are liars. He knows, after all, that they are almost certainly not actual spies. But either he believes they are still hiding something, or he wants them to think he does. They claim to be honest, and he responds with the same charge: no, you are spies!

We started off with a story popularly known as the “Sin of the Spies” but that never actually used the word “spies.” Yet we found another word in our story that linked it to the tale of Yosef and his brothers. And now we find that earlier narrative **does** use the word spies—quite a lot! In fact, it is the only place in the Torah where anyone is actually **called** a spy at all!

Our Rabbis were surely familiar enough with the language of the Torah to know this. It must be, then, that when they began to call the scouts “spies” in their *midrashim*, they were knowingly importing language from the Yosef story. They wanted us to read the account of the scouts suspiciously, to regard them with the same mistrust that Yosef showed his brothers. As that terminology began to stick, more and more, the classical commentaries were framing the latter story in the themes of the earlier one, even referring to the story in our *parashah* with words that Yosef was the first to utter.

Now, it is true that outside of the Yosef story, no one in the Torah is ever explicitly called a “spy.” Yet there is one description of the events in Parashat Shelah that comes fairly close.



It is much later on, in Deuteronomy, when Moshe is recounting the scouting expedition to the next generation. He says:

דברים א:כד

וַיִּפְנּוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ הָהָרָה וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד נַחֲלֵי אֶשְׁכּוֹל וַיִּרְגְּלוּ אֹתָהּ.

Deuteronomy 1:24

They turned and went up into the mountains, and they came to Wadi Eshkol, and **spied** it out.

Now he says they “spied” it out?! Why does Moshe suddenly change the language that he used in the book of Numbers? He is the one who sent them to “**scout** out” the land. Could it be that, looking back, he remembers the story differently? Upon reflection, he now thinks they were lying all along. They were never just scouting out the land to bring back information; they were working with a hidden agenda from the start.

Or, perhaps, Moshe was influenced by the Yosef story as well. As Moshe begins to recall the day his scouts came back from the land and gave their “bad report,” and all the tragedy that ensued, he cannot help but think of an earlier story of “bad reports” that led to mistrust and tragedy. So Moshe borrows, consciously or unconsciously, language from that earlier tale. Moshe is now re-reading his own life through the stories of his ancestors.

In that sense, Moshe becomes the first midrashist, drawing linguistic connections between the stories of his people, across generations, in order to uncover themes that have been running throughout their history. And so Moshe is teaching us, too, not only how to read the Torah, but also how to read the Torah into our lives.

