



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Shelach (שְׁלַח-לָךְ, "Send for yourself!")**
- **Chapters: Numbers 13:1-15:41**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

The Israelites had been through a lot after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt. First they were led to Mount Sinai, where Moses was given the Torah and the people were ratified as God's covenant children. Next, the Levitical priesthood was established and the tribes of Israel were meticulously arranged into military camp formation around the Tabernacle - the dwelling place of the LORD. After camping at Sinai for nearly a year, the Shekhinah cloud lifted from the Tabernacle and the tribes began their march to the Promised Land. But after just three days into their journey, the people began complaining of their difficulties, and God sent fiery judgment. A bit later they began to miss the "free fish" of Egypt, and God sent them a plague of quails. Miriam then slandered Moses' leadership, and God temporarily exiled her with a case of leprosy.

Our Torah portion opens with the Shekhinah leading the Israelites to Kadesh (in the desert of Paran) near the edge of the land of Canaan. Moses then commissioned twelve spies - one prince from each of the twelve tribes - to go into the land of Canaan and to bring back a report. The spies returned 40 days later with outrageous stories and samples of the extraordinary fruit that grew in the land. However, ten of the spies also gave a discouraging report, indicating their lack of faith that the people could conquer the land. Only Joshua and Caleb were encouraging. Tragically, the people accepted the discouraging report and clamored to return to slavery in Egypt. Angered by their lack of faith, God sought to destroy the people, but Moses successfully persuaded Him to relent. Instead, God decreed to lengthen the Israelites' wandering in the desert to 40 years, one year for each day the spies were in the land. All of the faithless generation of the Exodus over the age of 20 would die in the desert, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who kept faith with the LORD. After hearing the judgment of God, a group of remorseful Israelites decided to "repent" by taking matters into their own hands. Without either the "ark of the covenant of the LORD" or Moses' leadership, they presumptuously decided to storm a mountain on the border of the land, but were defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

The portion then shifts from the dramatic narrative to discuss various laws of sacrifice (reading almost like a passage from Leviticus) that includes the narrative of a man who was judged for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. The portion concludes with instructions for placing fringes (*tzitzit*) on the four corners of garments to remind us not to "spy after" our own hearts and eyes "which you are inclined to whore after."



Parashah Questions

1. What does the word “shelach-lekha” (שְׁלַח-לְךָ) mean? ¹
2. What was the status of each of the 12 men sent out as spies? ²
3. Moses changed the name of one of the spies before he took part in the mission. Who was that spy and what was his name changed to? What is the difference? ³
4. What time of year was it likely that the spies were sent on their mission? ⁴
5. What were the spies to look for? ⁵
6. From what place did they bring a large cluster of grapes? ⁶
7. Did they bring other samples of the fruit of the land? ⁷
8. How long did they spend on this spying mission? ⁸
9. When the spies returned, did they report back to Moses? ⁹
10. What good did the spies report of the land? ¹⁰
11. What bad did the spies report of the land? ¹¹
12. How did the spies describe the sons of Anak? ¹²
13. How did the spies feel they appeared in relation to the people they saw in the land? ¹³
14. What Hebrew word does the Torah use to describe the report of the spies? ¹⁴

¹ “Send for yourself!” Notice that we learn later that it was the *people’s* desire - based on their fear - to send out the spies, and not the result of God’s command (Deut. 1:21-33).

² They were the chosen “princes of the tribes” (נְשִׂאֵי הַטִּבֵּיּוֹת) and heads of the clans of Israel.

³ Hoshea’s name was changed to *Yehoshua*. Hoshea means “God has helped”; Yehoshua means “God *will* help.”

⁴ The Israelites left Sinai on Iyyar 20. Since the spies were gone 40 days and returned with a sample of the first ripe grapes on the 9th of Av, it is likely they went on their mission sometime in early summer.

⁵ The strength and number of the inhabitants, the quality of the land, whether the cities were fortified, and whether there were “trees” in it (thought to mean righteous men).

⁶ The Valley of Eshcol (13:32), near Mamre, the site where Abraham met the three angels (Gen. 18).

⁷ Yes, they brought some pomegranates and figs.

⁸ 40 days (that later were to represent 40 years of wandering in the desert).

⁹ Yes, though they did not discuss their findings with him first and instead appealed directly to the congregation.

¹⁰ They testified that it was indeed a “land flowing with milk and honey.”

¹¹ They said the people there were strong, the cities were fortified and unable to be conquered, the land “devoured its inhabitants” (i.e., was plague-ridden) and was filled with “men of measure” (i.e., giants).

¹² Nephillim (נְפִילִים), “fallen ones,” perhaps descendants of fallen angels who cohabitated with women (Gen. 6:2-4). The Talmud (Yoma 67b) says the nephillim originally were Uzza and Azazel, two angels who fell from God and introduced perversity into human nature during the time of Enoch (before the flood).

¹³ They felt like “grasshoppers” before them.

¹⁴ The report is called an “evil report” (i.e., *dibbah*: דִּבָּה).



15. When the people heard the report of the spies, what was their reaction? ¹⁵
16. Two of the spies dissented from the majority report. What are their names and what tribes did they represent? ¹⁶
17. What was the reaction of Joshua and Caleb to the people's rebellion? ¹⁷
18. How did the people respond to Joshua and Caleb's appeal for repentance? ¹⁸
19. What did Moses and Aaron do when they saw the people rebelling at Kadesh? ¹⁹
20. What was God's *initial* reaction to the people's rebellion at Kadesh? ²⁰
21. What argument did Moses use to appeal to God on behalf of the people? ²¹
22. On what basis did Moses ask for forgiveness of the people? ²²
23. How did God determine to punish the people? ²³
24. Were the Levites subject to God's decree of judgment upon the Exodus generation? ²⁴
25. How did God punish the *children* of the Exodus generation? ²⁵
26. What was the punishment for those spies who brought the evil report? ²⁶
27. What did the people do in response to God's decree? ²⁷
28. What did Moses say to the people who "repented"? ²⁸
29. Did the "repentant" people listen to Moses? ²⁹

¹⁵ They wept and thought it would have been better to have died in Egypt or earlier in the desert. They then sought to appoint a new leader to take them back to the land of Egypt (14:1-4).

¹⁶ Joshua bin Nun (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נֹון) from the tribe of Ephraim, and Caleb ben Jephuneh (כָּלֵב בֶּן-יִפְנִיָּה) from Judah.

¹⁷ They tore their clothes and appealed to the people to take heart and repent (14:6-9)

¹⁸ They sought to stone them to death (Num. 14:10).

¹⁹ They fell on their faces in supplication.

²⁰ He said that he would destroy all of the people except for Moses and start over (14:11-12).

²¹ He said that when the Egyptians would hear that the LORD had destroyed Israelites, they would say that he failed to keep his promise to bring them into the land he had sworn to them.

²² He cited the revelation of the Name of the LORD given in Exodus 34:6-7 (Shelosh Esrei Middot Rachamim).

²³ All those over the age of 20 (except for Joshua and Caleb) would perish during 40 years of wandering in the desert (one year allotted for each day the spies were in the land). All the children would be allowed to go into the land.

²⁴ It is not clear, though they were not part of the spying expedition.

²⁵ They would suffer for their parent's faithlessness. They would be shepherds who would bury their ancestors but later they would inherit the land (14:33).

²⁶ They died by a plague (14:37).

²⁷ They mourned greatly, confessed their sin, and organized an army to take possession of the land (14:39-40).

²⁸ He told them it was too late, that God's decree was final, and that the people should not attempt to take the land. "Because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you" (14:41-43).

²⁹ No, they went up anyway but were defeated terribly in the battle by the Amalekites and the Canaanites.



30. What is the traditional date of mourning over God's decree of judgment? ³⁰
31. How do the sages interpret the spies statement that "the land devoured its inhabitants"? ³¹
32. Why did the spies return after only 40 days? Doesn't it take longer than that to travel throughout the Promised Land? ³²
33. Why do the rabbis say that the account of the sin of the spies is placed directly after the account of the sin of Miriam? ³³
34. Are there different laws of sacrifice for Jews and non-Jews in the Tabernacle? ³⁴
35. What is *challah* and how does it resemble "firstfruits"? ³⁵
36. What is the punishment for deliberately defying the law of Shabbat? ³⁶
37. What are tzitzit and why did God command it? ³⁷
38. What happens when someone cries and complains for no good reason? ³⁸
39. What did Moses mean when he told the spies to "check if there is a tree" in the land? ³⁹
40. Why was Caleb given Hebron as his inheritance (Deut. 1:36; Judges 1:20)? ⁴⁰

³⁰ Tishah B'Av, the same calendar date when both Temples were later destroyed in Jewish history.

³¹ God sent a plague as a sign to the spies that the inhabitants were as good as dead, but their evil eye interpreted this to mean that the land was poisonous. The midrash says that God also caused there to be so many funerals that the inhabitants would not detect the presence of the spies themselves.

³² God foresaw that he would punish the Israelites one year for each day the spies were gone, so he helped them return quickly so the people's punishment would be less.

³³ To tell us that the leaders did not heed the warning given to Israel against speaking lashon hara.

³⁴ No. There is one law for both regarding offerings made at the Tabernacle. "You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you" (15:14-16).

³⁵ It is loaf of bread created from "the first of your dough" that was given as a contribution (terumah) to the priests. The sages later made a symbolic observance of this law by saying that a small portion of the dough (minimally the size of an olive) should be twisted off and burned in an open flame (a custom called hafrashat challah). The "twist" we see in a Sabbath loaf is meant to remind us that it was made from a batch that was first offered to God (15:18-21). Technically speaking, the piece of dough that is separated is called "challah," though most people use the word to refer to the bread on the Sabbath table as well....

³⁶ Death by stoning.

³⁷ Specially knotted "fringes" or tassels worn on the "four corners" of garments. Today they are traditionally placed on the corners of a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tallit katan* (undershirt). The four corners are said to represent the four expressions of redemption: "I will take you out; I will save you; I will redeem you; and I will take you as my own." Tzitzit were commanded as a reminder not to sin as did the spies.

³⁸ According to the sages, God will give them a real reason to cry. Being of good cheer invites blessing from heaven.

³⁹ A tzaddik is compared to a tree, so Moses wondered if there was someone there whose merit would protect the inhabitants.

⁴⁰ Because he went to the Cave of Machpelah during the spying mission to pray for strength (Sotah 24b).



Discussion Topics

1. In the Haftarah portion for Shelach (Josh. 2:1-24), Joshua sends out spies to the city of Jericho, and their mission was successful. Identify some of the differences between Joshua's two spies and the twelve spies that Moses sent. Discuss how Rahab's faith contrasts with the unbelief of the Israelites of the Exodus generation.
2. After the Sin of the Golden Calf Moses presented arguments to dissuade God from destroying the Israelites (Exod. 32:11-13). Compare these arguments with the ones he offered after the Sin of the Spies (Num. 14:13-19).
3. In Numbers 14:22 God said that "none of the men that tested me these *ten* times" would be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Can you find the ten instances in the Torah?
4. When the people repented of their unbelief and confessed their sin, they attempted to take possession of the land, even after God gave his judgment upon that generation. Do you think that God finally "reaches his limit" – and there is no way to repair a wrong? Discuss how being forgiven for a sin does not remove the consequences of that sin.
5. According to Midrash Rabbah, even those Israelites who disagreed with the majority report of the spies were decreed to die in the desert, and even the children of that generation were forced to suffer for the mistakes of their parents. Do you agree with the idea that being silent or passive in the face of evil makes you culpable?
6. Discuss what it means to "walk by faith, not by sight." On the other hand, discuss how unbelief is a form of spiritual blindness...
7. Some of the sages have said that God did not want the Exodus generation to take possession of the land, because they were not spiritually ready. Discuss how we grow in faith so that we enabled to experience deeper levels of God's promises.
8. Unlike Moses who gave the law and led the faithless back into the desert, Joshua (Yehoshua) is a "type" of Messiah who was able to lead the people into the Promised Land. Discuss how Yeshua fulfills the promise of Moses by truly bringing us into God's inheritance as His people.

For Next Week:

- Read **Korach** (Numbers 16:1-18:32)
- Read the Haftarah (1 Sam. 11:14-12:22)
- Read the New Testament (Rom. 13:1-7)

