

Liberators or Colonialists? The 12 Spies

17 And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said: 'Go to the South, and into the mountains; 18 and see the land, what it is; and the people that dwells there, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many; 19 and whether the land they dwell in is good or bad; and the cities - whether in camps, or in strongholds; 20 and the land - whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood / trees or not. And be of good courage, and bring of the fruit of the land.'--Now the time was the time of the first-ripe grapes. 21 So they went up, and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, at the entrance to Hamath. 22 And they went up to the South, and [he] came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the children of Anak, were there.--Now **Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.**

25 And they returned from spying out the land at the end of forty days. 26 And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, in the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word to them, and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 And they told him, and said: 'We came to the land you sent us, and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it. 28 Howbeit the people that dwell in the land are fierce, and the cities are fortified, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. 29 Amalek dwells in the South; and the Hittite, and the Jebusite, and the Amorite, dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanite dwells by the sea, and along by the side of the Jordan.'

יז וישלח אתם משה, לתור את-ארץ כנען; ויאמר
אלהם, עליו זה בנגב, ועליתם, את-ההר. יח וראיתם
את-הארץ, מה-הוא; ואת-העם, הישב עליה--החזק
הוא הרפה, המעט הוא אם-רב. יט ומה הארץ, אשר-
הוא ישב בה--הטובה הוא, אם-רעה; ומה הערים,
אשר-הוא יושב בהנה--הבמחנים, אם במבצרים. כ
ומה הארץ השמנה הוא אם-רזה, היש-בה עץ אם-אין,
והתחזקותם, ולקוחותם מפרי הארץ; והימים--ימי,
בפורי ענבים. כא ויעלו, ויתרו את-הארץ, ממדבר-צן
עד-רחב, לבא חמת. כב ויעלו בנגב, ויבא עד-חברון,
ושם אחימן ששי ותלמי, ילדי הענק; וחברון, שבע
שנים נבנתה, לפני, צעון מצרים. כה וישבו, מתור
הארץ, משא, ארבעים יום. כו וילכו ויבאו אל-משה ואל-
אהרן ואל-כל-עדת בני-ישראל, אל-מדבר פארן--
קדשה; וישיבו אתם דבר ואת-כל-העדה, ויראו את-
פרי הארץ. כז ויספרו-לו, ויאמרו, באנו, אל-הארץ
אשר שלחתנו; וגם זבת חלב ודבש, הוא--וזה-
פריה. כח אפס כיעז העם, הישב בארץ; והערים,
בצרות גדלת מאד, וגם-ילדי הענק, ראינו שם. כט
עמלק יושב, בארץ הנגב; והחתי והיבوسی והאמרי,
יושב בהר, והכנעני יושב על-הים, ועל יד הירדן.

30 And Calev stilled the people toward Moses, and said: 'We should go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.' 31 But the men that went up with him said: '**We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we (mimenu).**' 32 And they spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out to the children of Israel, saying: 'The land, through which we have passed, is a land that eats up its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature. 33 And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.'

1 And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night...36 And the men, whom Moses sent to spy out the land, and who, when they returned, made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up an evil report against the land, 37 even those men that did bring up an evil report of the land, died by the plague before the LORD. 38 But Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Yephuneh, remained alive of those men that went to spy out the land. 39 And Moses told these words to all the children of Israel; and the people mourned greatly.

40 And they rose up early in the morning, and got them up to the top of the mountain, saying: 'Lo, we are here, and will go up to the place which the LORD has promised; for we have sinned.' 41 And Moses said: 'Why do you transgress the commandment of the LORD, seeing it shall not prosper? 42 Go not up, for the LORD is not among you; that you be not smitten down before your enemies. 43 For there the Amalekite and the Canaanite are before you, and you shall fall by the sword; forasmuch as you are turned back from following the LORD, and the LORD will not be with you.' 44 But they presumed to go up to the top of the mountain; nevertheless the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and Moses, departed not out of the camp. 45 Then the Amalekite and the Canaanite, who dwelt in that hill-country, came down, and smote them and beat them down, even to Hormah. {P}

ל ויהס כלב את-העם, אל-משה; ויאמר, עלה נעלה ונרשנו אתה--כי-יכול נוכל, לה. לא והאנשים אשר-עלו עמו, אמרו, לא נוכל, לעלות אל-העם: כי-חזק הוא, ממנו. לב ויצאו דבת הארץ, אשר תרו אתה, אל-בני ישראל, לאמר: הארץ אשר עברנו בה לתור אתה, ארץ אכלת יושביה הוא, וכל-העם אשר-ראינו בתוכה, אנשי מדות. לג ושם ראינו, את-הנפילים בני ענק--מן-הנפילים; ונהי בעינינו כחגבים, וכו' היינו בעיניהם.

א ותשא, כל-העדה, ויתנו, את-קולם; ויבכו העם, בלילה ההוא. לו והאנשים, אשר-שלח משה לתור את-הארץ; וישבו, וילוו (נילנו) עליו את-כל-העדה, להוציא דבה, על-הארץ. לז וימותו, האנשים, מוצאי דבת-הארץ, רעה--במגפה, לפני יהוה. לח ויהושע בן-נון, וכלב בן-יפנה, היו מן-האנשים ההם, החלכים לתור את-הארץ. לט וידבר משה את-הדברים האלה, אל-כל-בני ישראל; ויתאבלו העם, מאד

מ וישכמו בבקר, ויעלו אל-ראש-ההר לאמר: הנהו, ועלינו אל-המקום אשר-אמר יהוה--כי חטאנו. מא ויאמר משה, למן הזה אתם עברים את-פי יהוה; והוא, לא תצלח. מב אל-תעלו, כי אין יהוה בקרבכם; ולא, תנגפו, לפני, איביכם. מג כי העמלקי והכנעני שם לפניכם, ונפלתם בחרב: כי-על-כן שבתם מאחרי יהוה, ולא-יהיה יהוה עמכם. מד ויעפלו, לעלות אל-ראש ההר; וארון ברית-יהוה ומשה, לא-משו מקרב המחנה. מה וירד העמלקי והכנעני, הישב בהר החוא; ויכום ויכתום, עד-החרמה.

The Talmud (tries to) fill in the gaps...

“Now Hebron was built seven years [before Zoan]” What does ‘was built’ mean? If it means literally built, is it possible that a man constructs a house for his younger son [Canaan] before his elder son [Mitzrayim]; As it is written: And the sons of Ham: Cush, Mizrayim Put and Canaan? [i.e. Mitzrayim is older than Canaan. Zoan should be built before Hebron]

[The Gemara answers] Rather it means that it was seven times more productive than Zoan. There is no worse stony ground in all the land of Israel than Hebron, and that is why they bury the dead there; and there is none among all the countries superior to the land of Egypt... and in the land of Egypt there is no place superior to Zoan... Nevertheless Hebron was seven times more productive than Zoan.

[The Gemara asks a new question] But was Hebron really stony ground; behold it is written: And it came to pass at the end of forty years, that Absalom said to the king, Please let me go [and pay my vow ... in Hebron]; and R. Iwya — another version is, Rabbah b. Bar Hanan-said - He went to fetch lambs from Hebron; and there is also a teaching: [The best] rams are from Moab and lambs from Hebron!

[in other words, if Hebron has lambs, how can you say its stony ground]

[The Gemara answers] From that very fact [it is proved that the land was stony]; because the soil is thin it produces pastures and the cattle grow fat there.

[in other words, in conclusion – Hebron is stony and its more cultivated than Zoan]

וּחְבְּרוֹן שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים נִבְנְתָה [מֵאֵי נִבְנְתָה] אֵילִימָא
נִבְנְתָה מִמֶּשׁ אֲפֶשֶׁר אָדָם בּוֹנֵה בֵּית לְבָנו קֶטָן קוֹדֵם
לְבָנו גְּדוֹל דְּכֹתִיב (בְּרֵאשִׁית י) וּבְנֵי חָם כּוֹשׁ וּמִצְרַיִם
וּגוֹי

אֵלָא שְׁהִיתָה מְבוֹנָה עַל אֶחָד מִשְׁבַּעָה בְּצוּעוֹן וְאִין לָךְ
טְרֵשִׁים בְּכָל אִיִּי יֵתֵר מִחְבְּרוֹן <מִשּׁוּם> דְּקִבְרֵי בְּהַ
שִׁיכְבִּי וְאִין לָךְ מַעוּלָה בְּכָל הָאֲרָצוֹת יֵתֵר מֵאֲרָץ
מִצְרַיִם שְׁנֵאמֵר (בְּרֵאשִׁית יג) כִּגְן ה' כֵּאֲרָץ מִצְרַיִם
וְאִין לָךְ מַעוּלָה בְּכָל אֲרָץ מִצְרַיִם יֵתֵר

וּחְבְּרוֹן טְרֵשִׁים הֲוֵי? וְהָא כְּתִיב (שְׁמוּאֵל ב טו) וַיְהִי
מִקֶּץ אַרְבַּעִים שָׁנָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִשְׁלוּם אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲלֹכָה
נָא וּגוֹי וְאֵמֵר רַב אֹיִא וְאִיתִימָא רַבָּה בְּרַ בְּרַ חֲנַן
שֶׁהֲלָךְ לְהַבִּיא כְּבָשִׁים מִחְבְּרוֹן וְתֵינֵי אֵילִים מִמוּאָב
כְּבָשִׁים מִחְבְּרוֹן מִינָה אִיִּדֵי דְקִלִּישָׁא אֲרַעָא עֲבַדָּה
רַעִיא וְשִׁמּוֹן קִנְיִינָא

The Talmud (tries to) fill in the gaps...

And Caleb stilled [wa-yachas] the people concerning Moses Rabbah said, [It means] that he won them over [hissithan] with words. When Joshua began to address them, they said to him, 'Would this person with the lopped-off head speak to us!' [because he doesn't have children] [Caleb] said [to himself], If I address them [in the same strain as Joshua], they will answer me in like manner and silence me; so he said to them, 'Is it this alone that Amram's son has done to us!' They thought that he was speaking to censure Moses, so they were silent. Then he said to them, 'He brought us out of Egypt, divided the Red Sea for us and fed us with manna. If he were to tell us, Prepare ladders and ascend to heaven, should we not obey him! Let us go up at once and possess it etc.'

But the men that went up with him said: We will not be able etc. R. Hanina b. Papa said: A grievous statement did they make at that moment. For they are stronger than us — read not than Us [*mimenu*] but than He; [*mimeno*]. As it were even the master of the house cannot remove his furniture from there

ויהס כלב את העם אל משה אמר רבה שהסיתן
בדברים פתח יהושע דקא משתעי אמרי ליה דין ראש
קטיעה ימלל אמר אי משתעינא אמרי בי מילתא
וחסמין לי אמר להן וכי זו בלבד עשה לנו בן עמרם
סברי בגנותיה קא משתעי אישתיקו אמר להו
הוציאנו ממצרים וקרע לנו את הים והאכילנו את
המן אם יאמר עשו סולמות ועלו לרקיע לא נשמע לו
עלה נעלה וירשנו אותה וגו'

והאנשים אשר עלו עמו אמרו לא נוכל וגו' אמר רבי
חנינא בר פפא דבר גדול דברו מרגלים באותה שעה כי
חזק הוא ממנו אל תקרי ממנו אלא ממנו כביכול אפילו
בעל הבית אינו יכול להוציא כליו משם

A Land without a People for a People without a Land?

The fear of the explorers can be interpreted yet another way. Perhaps the explorers had moral qualms. They may have asked themselves whether they had the right to conquer what had been so magnificently built by others.

(Emanuel Levinas)

Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan: The Talmudists know very well that the priority of Palestine does not come to it from its pre-Israelite past. Hebron was not really founded seven years before Egypt, but it received culture according to a different order. In the land of Israel, founding [being built] must have a new meaning:...Its superiority is not of the same order as that of the great Eastern civilizations. Hebron was not founded before Zoan but it was seven times more cultivated. Consequently, the poorest, the rockiest, the most wretched area of Israel's land, reserved for graves (and, as if by chance, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are buried there) is the most cultivated, the richest in spiritual potentials, richer than the land which had greater real antiquity and greater visible splendour [Egypt]....

The first answer to the explorers question is the following. The children of Israel will go into an already inhabited country, but in this country, the tombs of the ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are to be found. Despite the rocks, despite the vast quantity of sand, this country holds more possibilities than Zoan, which is located in the midst of Egypt, in this midst of civilization; its calls upon those who are capable of realizing these potentials.

"The Arabs may possess rights of residence, but they do not possess rights of collective ownership over the Land of Israel; The Arabs of the Land of Israel are a small part of the larger Arab nation, and Palestine is but a small holding within the vast Arab world. The Jewish people have no other place that can serve as a platform for national independence. Arab nationalist aspirations can be fulfilled beyond the borders of Palestine; All Zionist policy depends on the "meticulous protection of the civil, political, and the national rights of the Arabs living in the Land of Israel."
(David Ben Gurion)

Are we really more moral than others?

THE SPIES RESPOND: [we aren't necessarily more moral] Aren't some rights conferred through moral superiority?...the invocation of rights due to the moral superiority of Israel is improper. In the first place, is this superiority evident? Does Hebron evoke only the moral grandeur of Israel? Is Abraham the only memory we have of Hebron? ...in our text someone asks 'is Hebron really so poor? Isn't it written [that Absalom went to Hebron?]'...Why this discussion then? [if in the end the Gemara's conclusion remains the same]

Because it destroys the argumentation of a moment ago. Earlier we had said 'We, the Israelites, have a right to his land because we have the Bible. The objection consists in reminding us of the very teaching of this Bible and of the deeds it relates? People of the Book? Nothing but sons who honor their fathers? Children who obey their moral principles? What about Absalom? The example is wonderful well chosen. Bad lots are not lacking in the Bible; but isn't Absalom in a certain sense the counterpart of Ham, the founder of the land of Canaan? Remember what Ham did. He made fun of his father's nakedness. And Absalom? Here a euphemism is in order, even in the presence of intellectuals: he cohabited with all his father's concubines on the roof of the royal palace. So much for the superiority of Judaism! Which obviously gives it the right to conquer a country! One can understand the explorers; one can understand the revolt of the pure. They asked themselves dear Rabbi: By what right are we going into this land? What moral advantage do we have over the inhabitants settled in this country?.

The Society we will build will be different

Then Calev calmed the people about Moses: Where does this idea of a ladder and of heaven which are missing in the biblical text come from?...is he simply following the cult of personality, defending Moses' policies come what may?...If Moses brought us out of Egypt, split the sea, and fed us manna, do you think, then, that under his leadership we are going to conquer a country the way one conquers a colony? Do you think that we will appropriate a plot of land for ourselves so that we can use and abuse it?...We are going toward this land in order to experience celestial life. "we are going into this land to ascend to heaven" we will not possess the land as it is usually possessed; we will found a just community in this land.

You will say that everyone can imagine that he is founding a just society and that he is sacralising the earth, and will that encourage conquerors and colonialists? But here one must answer: to accept the Torah is to accept the norms of a universal justice. The first teaching of Judaism is the following: a moral teaching exists and certain things are more just than others. A society in which man is not exploited, a society in which men are equal, a society such as the first founders of kibbutzes wanted it – because they too built ladders to ascent to heaven despite the repugnance most of them felt for heaven – is the very contestation of moral relativism. What the Torah provides norms for human justice. And it is in the name of this universal justice and not in the name of some national justice or other than the Israelites lay claim to the land of Israel.

Ludwig Gumplowitz, a professor of law at the University of Gratz, warned Herzl that he was pursuing a mirage. He advised him to return to literature 'you are endowed with a political naivete such as one can pardon only in poets' Gumplowicz wrote to Herzl in 1899 'you want to found a state without bloodshed? Where have you ever seen such a thing? Without force or cunning? Just like that, open and honest – by easy instalments?' Herzl's answer was of course, yes. In his last book Altneuland, he drew a rosy picture of the Jewish commonwealth, Herzl contemplated a New Society outside the accepted framework of the national state. He envisaged an open, scientifically designed society, based on cooperative forms of association. (Amos Elon, The Israelis: Fathers and Sons)

The rights of the natives are absolute

But the men who had gone with him said ‘we will not be able to’ The right of the native population to live is stronger than the moral right of the universal God. Even the Boss cannot retrieve the tools entrusted to them, as long as the tools correspond to their needs, there would be no right on earth that could deprive them of them; one cannot take away from them the land on which they live, even if they are immoral, violent, and unworthy and even if this land were meant for a better destiny. Even an absolutely moral people would have no right to conquest.

Musa Alami was a Cambridge University Graduate who had formerly served as personal secretary to the British High Commissioner and was now assistant attorney eternal for the British Mandatory Government in Palestine. At his first meeting with Alami, Ben Gurion stressed the economic benefits that would accrue to local Arabs if they worked with the Zionists. But Alami was not impressed. Chaim Weitzman had made the same case to Emir Faisal in 1919 that the Arabs could benefit from the coming Zionist enterprise. As Ben Gurion reported the exchange. “Musa Alami told me that he would prefer the land to remain poor and desolate even for another hundred years, until the Arabs themselves were capable of developing it and making it flower”

In response Ben Gurion demonstrated a keen ability to empathize with the Arabs. He later talked about seeing Zionism ‘through Arab eyes’, and said about Alami ‘I felt that as a patriotic Arab he had every right to this view’ (David Makovsky and Dennis Ross, Be Strong and of Good Courage)

So what's the answer?

They not only commit themselves to justice but also apply it rigorously to themselves. Already they are potentially exiled. The date of their exile is fixed before that of their conquest. They do not know that their crisis is the source of their right, for there is no right that cannot be revoked. **Only those who are always ready to accept the consequences of their actions and to accept exile when they are no longer worthy of a homeland have the right to enter this homeland.** You see, this country is extraordinary. It is like heaven. It is a country which vomits up its inhabitants when they are not just. There is no other country like it; the resolution to accept a country under such conditions confers a right to that country... (Levinas)

8 And he said: 'O Lord GOD, how shall I know that I shall inherit it?'

ח ויאמר : אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה, בְּמַה אֲדַע כִּי אִירָשָׁנָה.

9 And He said to him: 'Take Me a heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.'

ט ויאמר אליו, קחה לי עֵגְלָה מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת, וְעֵז מְשֻׁלֶּשֶׁת, וְאַיִל מְשֻׁלֶּשׁ; וְתוֹר, וְגוֹזֵל

13 And He said to Abram: 'Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years

יג ויאמר לְאַבְרָם, יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי-גֵר יְהִיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם, וְעַבְדוּם, וְעָנִי אֹתָם--אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת, שָׁנָה.

18 In that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates;

יח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, כָּרַת יְהוָה אֶת-אַבְרָם--בְּרִית לְאָמֵר: לְזַרְעֲךָ, נָתַתִּי אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, מִנְּהַר מִצְרַיִם, עַד-הַנְּהַר הַגָּדוֹל נְהַר-פָּרָת.

Additional Sources

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck has written a fascinating book, *Mindset*, on why some people fulfil their potential, while others do not. Her interest, she says, was aroused when she observed the behaviour of 10-year-old children when given puzzles to solve. Some, when the puzzles became difficult, thrived. They relished the challenge, even when it proved too hard for them. Others became anxious. When the puzzles became hard, they were easily discouraged. ...Some see their abilities as given and unalterable. We just are gifted or ordinary, and there is not much we can do about it. She calls this the “fixed” mindset. Others believe that we grow through our efforts. When they fail they don’t define this as failure but as a learning experience. She calls this the “growth” mindset. Those with a fixed mindset tend to avoid difficult challenges because they fear failure. They think it will expose them as inadequate. So they are reluctant to take risks. They play it safe. People with the growth mindset react differently. “They don’t just seek challenge, they thrive on it. The bigger the challenge, the more they stretch.” When do people with the fixed mindset thrive? “When things are safely within their grasp. If things get too challenging . . . they lose interest.”

The fixed mindset lives with the constant fear of failure. The growth mindset doesn’t think in terms of failing at all. Apply this logic to the spies and we see something fascinating...They were people with reputations to guard. They were princes, leaders, men of renown. If Dweck is right, people laden with expectations tend to be risk-averse. They do not want to be seen to fail. That may be why they came back and said, in effect: We cannot win against the Canaanites. Therefore we should not even try. There were two exceptions, Caleb and Joshua. Caleb came from the tribe of Judah, and Judah, we learn in the book of Bereishit, was the first baal teshuvah...Judah is the clearest example in Bereishit of someone who takes adversity as a learning experience rather than as failure. In Dweck’s terminology, he had a growth mindset. Evidently he handed on this trait to his descendants, Caleb among them. As for Joshua, the text tells us, specifically in the story of the spies, that Moses had changed his name...Anyone who has experienced a name-change has been inducted into a growth mindset. People with the growth mindset do not fear failure. They relish challenges. They know that if they fail, they will try again until they succeed. It cannot be coincidence that the two people among the spies who had the growth mindset were also the two who were unafraid of the risks and trials of conquering the land. Nor can it be accidental that the ten others, all of whom carried the expectations (as leaders, princes, men of high rank) were reluctant to do so. (Jonathan Sacks)