

# Ask the Right Questions

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The tragedy of the meraglim is certainly one of the most painful episodes recorded in Torah. A people stand poised to enter Eretz Yisroel with Hashem at their head, ready to bring the Exodus from Egypt to its successful conclusion, only to have the great journey abruptly aborted. The evil report of the spies brings the triumphant march to a complete halt in the desert.

The Torah says: "They brought before the children of Israel an evil report about the land that they had spied out, saying: 'The land through which we have passed, to spy out, is a land that devours its inhabitants...'" (Bamidbar 13:32). On this ugly phrase Rashi comments: "In every place where we passed we found them burying the dead" — and the Holy One Blessed is He did it for the spies' good, in order to distract the Canaanites with mourning so they would not notice these spies." What an absolutely terrible mistake they made. They see an act of Hashem's kindness and concern for them as a terrible indictment of Eretz Yisroel. How did they get it all wrong? Should they have been able to get it right? In fact they saw funerals wherever they went, so what were they logically to conclude?

If they are tourists their curiosity should have been aroused so that they would casually ask about what was happening.

If they are spies it is the very heart of their mission to investigate, to probe, and to question in order to determine what is the meaning of all these funerals. Any less than intensive study of this frightening scene is criminal failure to carry out their mission.

If they are only human beings passing through the land, should they not be concerned that there is an epidemic raging and that they should take immediate precautions?

The sinful and grievous tragedy is that they failed to ask the question that was begging to be asked. Would they have asked, they would most certainly have discovered that all the deaths had only just then started, and that the inhabitants of the land themselves were terrified of this sudden, unexpected, and inexplicable phenomenon. The spies would have discovered that it all began precisely at the time of their own entry into Eretz Yisroel. If they would have just asked the right question they would have discovered the truth, that this is all the hand of Hashem to distract the Canaanites and crown their mission with success.

But they didn't ask, and the rest becomes a most painful tragedy whose sorrow reverberates down the centuries.

The Kotzker Rebbi said in explanation of this Rashi that in fact the report of the meraglim was true. People were dying wherever they went. They were telling the truth.

Yet "truth," the Kotzker said, is not necessarily reporting reality as it is. Certainly one who reports what he did not see is lying, but one who tells what he saw cannot necessarily be called a man of truth. When one sees that which is in stark contradiction to the word of Hashem, it becomes his sacred obligation to reconcile G-d's words and the perceived reality. Hashem has said that this land is His great gift to the Jewish people — but there is death in the land. They had to resolve the contradiction in order to be able to "see" the truth. Yehoshua and Calev perceived the greatness of Hashem but the others did not.

Rashi is saying that the ongoing search for truth in life requires that we ask the right questions. The meraglim wanted to return with an evil report and here they had it. Questions might have stood in the way of their report. They didn't want to be "confused with the real facts."

On my travels I meet people who consult with their Rov about the significant aspects of their lives, i.e., to what schools should they send their children, where to buy a house, whether to go into a business venture, and all sorts of halachik queries.

I gently ask them— did you ever ask your Rov whether it's a mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisroel and that maybe you should go on aliyah? I am usually met with a blank stare. Hardly ever did I get an affirmative answer. The great challenge of our time is Eretz Yisroel, yet people don't ask the right questions. That was the sin of the meraglim.

On the bright side of course is that boruch Hashem, Eretz Yisroel today is the largest Jewish community in the world, ken yirbu. Hopefully our people will ask the right questions and speedily join us here.