

Notes for Parsha Shelach Lecha: Numbers 13:1 – 15:41

In this parsha we have five main incidents: the story of the spies, another rebellion by the Israelites and their subsequent punishment, the rules surrounding various sacrificial offerings and the mitzvah of tzitzit.

The story of the spies is well known. On the edge of the Promised Land, Moses sends out twelve men to check out the land and see what it's like. The twelve men are charged with finding out about the people that inhabit the land; whether or not their towns are fortified; is the soil rich or poor; and whether or not the land itself is good. They are then to return to camp and report their findings.

At the wadi Eshcol they found grapes and cut one cluster which, according to the text, was so large that they had to cut a branch to use as a carrying pole.

The spies scouted out the land for forty days after which they returned to speak to Moses, Aaron and the entire Israelite community.

Their report verified that the land was flowing with milk and honey and very fruitful. They displayed the cluster of grapes. They also reported that the land was inhabited, the cities were both huge and fortified and the people living there were powerful. They also reported that Amalekites were living in the land.

Caleb advocated taking possession of the land, but the other men who had scouted the land with him disagreed. They believed it would be dangerous to attack a people stronger than they were and so, they spread tales about how the land devoured its inhabitants and how the people looked like grasshoppers against some of the inhabitants who were the size of giants.

These tales led to the people whining again about how they wished they had stayed in Egypt! Now they would die by the sword and their wives and children carried off. The end result was that the people decided they should return to Egypt.

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces to the ground and Joshua and Caleb tore their clothing. They exhorted the Israelites that the land was good and reminded the people that God was on their side and they would prevail. The community, though, was past the listening point and picking up stones, threatened to pelt Joshua and Caleb.

God appears to the Israelites at the Tent of Meeting and demands of Moses, "How long will this people spurn me and how long will they have no faith in me despite the miracles and signs I have shown them?" Again, God threatens to destroy the people and make a new nation of Moses. Again, Moses' reminds God that to do so would make a mockery of God by the Egyptians. We see another repetition of some of the Divine Attributes. Moses, again, pleads with God to forgive the people and God does so with the addition that of the generation that left Egypt, none of the men who saw God's signs and miracles but have still tried God's patience and

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disobeyed him will see or enter into the Promised Land. The land would now be given to their descendants. However, Caleb and Joshua will be the exceptions as their faith in God remained.

God also says that the other ten spies who had spread the tales would be struck with a plague and would die.

Moses passes these words to the people who are filled with grief at not being able to enter into the land they were promised. The next morning they admit their wrong doing and attempt to go up into the hill country. Moses warns them that their enemies, the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there to face them causing them to die by the sword. The people refuse to listen, head into the hill country anyway and are struck down by swords.

At the beginning of Chapter 15, the narrative switches to a discussion of various laws that are to be followed after they enter into the Promised Land. These laws include laws of sacrifice which will also pertain to the stranger who has taken up residence among the people and has become one with the people. (Side note: It takes more than a sacrifice to convert today.) A listing of what type of sacrifices to bring for unwitting or accident sins follows. If, however, the person acts in defiance of God, then that person is to be cut off from the community.

The parsha concludes with instructions for wearing tzitzit or fringes on the four corners of one's garment. According to the text, this instruction was given to the Israelite people as a whole which makes the wearing of fringes an obligation for both men and women. The purpose of the tzitzit are to remind the people of God's commandments so they don't trespass them and do not follow where their lustful hearts and eyes might take them. The Israelites are a holy people and, as such, must act like a holy people.

The last verse in the parsha repeats the first of the Ten Commandments by announcing that God is God who brought the people out of Egypt so God could be their God and they could be God's people.