

Shelach Lecha – How Many Spies? - Michael Lebrecht (reprinted)

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'.....one man, one man, from his fathers' tribe.....' (Bamidbar 13:2).

The almost inexplicable episode of the meraglim and its tragic consequences has exercised the minds of numerous meforshim and Torah giants over the centuries.

However, one point that has received scant attention concerns the number of spies sent by Moshe.

The Yerushalmi (Sotah 7:5) wonders why the phrase 'one man' is repeated. A suggestion is that two spies – one man, one man - represented each tribe thus making a total of 24. The Torah chooses to name only the more prominent of each pair.

Whilst this answers the specific question, it leaves us wondering why two men per tribe were required.

In the sefer Hamaor ShebaTorah the following suggestion is proffered:

There were two functions being performed by the meraglim. Firstly, an agricultural assessment of the land to see whether the quality of the land and its' produce 'was worth the candle' and worth fighting for. The second objective of the spies was to perform a military assessment to see what tactics would be required to conquer the land currently inhabited by warlike nations. Hence, each tribe was represented by two spies – one to provide an agricultural appraisal and the other for a military appraisal.

With this in mind, the flow of pesukim 18-20 makes for easy reading. 18 - 'see the land, what is it? (agricultural issue) and the people ... strong or weak' (military issue). 19 - 'and is the land good or bad (agricultural issue) and are the cities open or fortified' (military issue). 20 - 'is the land fertile or lean (agricultural issue), are there trees in it' (military issue – based on Rashi who explains that the 'tree' is a reference to any person who might protect the people in battle due to his merits).

We can now also look at the list of spies in a different light. 'For the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea bin Nun (13:8). For the tribe of Yosef, for the tribe of Menashe, Gaddi ben Sussi (13:11).

Why is only Menashe linked to Yosef but not his brother, Ephraim? ¹

The answer is that the tribe of Yosef was split into two – Menashe and Ephraim – with each destined to inherit their own portion of Eretz Yisroel. Ergo, they each needed to send their own spy to assess the agricultural worth of the land and report back their findings to their respective tribe.

However, regarding the military mission of the meraglim, Yosef could remain united and be represented by just one (military) spy. Since Menashe was the firstborn he had the prerogative to provide the shared military spy. He took the lead role for 'the sons of Yosef'.

But if Ephraim only sent one spy, surely, the total number of spies would have been 23 – not 24 as mentioned in the Yerushalmi!!

The answer lies with the tribe of Levi. The pesukim make no mention of Levi providing a spy. This is understandable since they did not inherit land upon entering Eretz Yisroel.

However, that only explains why they sent no 'agricultural' spy. Levi would still have to send a 'military' spy since Levi is called upon to participate in a Milchemes Mitzva such as conquering Eretz Yisroel. (Sotah 43a – concerning Kohanim). The Sifri in Parshas Matos (ch 157) writes that Levi took part in the war against Midyon.

Since Levi sent a military spy, this compensated for the solitary spy sent by Ephraim and completes the group of 24. According to this explanation the named spies in the Torah were the 'agricultural' spies, who were partnered with unnamed military ones.

¹ The Baalei Tosfos suggest their own answer. This whole sorry episode hinged around the bad reports the meraglim brought back with them. There is a similarity with Yosef who bad-mouthed his brothers to Yaacov. (Bereishis 37:2 and Rashi ibid). Hence, it was only the representative of Menashe who displayed the same traits as his ancestor suggesting he was 'cut from the same cloth' and of kindred spirit. For that he is linked to Yosef. However, Ephraim was represented by Yehoshua who did not say one negative word about Eretz Yisroel and thus escaped being associated with Yosef in this context.