

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger ..." John 6:35

NUMBERS 12-15

Last week we entered into the chapters noted for complaining and murmuring. The peoples' craving for meat indicated that Egypt was still very much in their hearts. They looked back with longing instead of looking forward to the promise, and to the LORD as their total provider. The people did not yet understand the importance of getting their priorities right, in order to be blessed beyond their imagining.

CHAPTER 12 – Dissension of Aaron and Miriam

The well-known incident of Aaron and Miriam contained in this short chapter raises a number of questions, which have led to much conjecture by the sages, but no real answers – which commonly means there is a deeper messianic message. The first, and most puzzling question being: Why are they speaking against Moses "because of the Ethiopian (Cushite) woman¹," (mentioned twice in verse 1) - then she is never mentioned again?

As we have noted before, when there are no clear answers, we will usually find only a 'messianic lens' will provide an explanation. The twofold repetition of the Cushite woman (i.e. non-Israelite, Gentile), also tells us that this is not insignificant, but is a clue to unravelling the chapter.

v.2 *So they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. v.3 (Now **the man** Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)*

The LORD's response was abrupt: *"Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!" So the three came out.* [Read and discuss remaining chapter – keeping in mind the thread we have been following in previous chapters – i.e. look out for the messianic message.]

We have not heard anything of Miriam since Exodus 15, when she danced and sang with a timbrel after the Red Sea crossing, and will not hear of her again until her death, later in Numbers.

You may recall that we looked at the law of leprosy, *tzara'at*, in Leviticus 14. It was considered to be a skin disease brought about by *lashon hara*, slander – here, slander against God's anointed one.

CHAPTER 13 – Spying out the Land

Read 13:1-3 ... now read Deut. 1:20-23 – Do you notice an anomaly between these two accounts? Whose idea was this? The answer to the apparent contradiction may be found in Numbers 13:2, commonly translated: "Send men to spy out the land..." In the original Hebrew, a small word

¹ Presumed to be Zipporah, whom Moses met by a well, and married.

follows 'send', which is overlooked as irrelevant by most translations, and would translate more like: "Send forth men, if you please..."² i.e. for yourself/on your own initiative.

This is the land "that I give to the Children of Israel" (v2) - the Land God has promised for so long – the final destination. Is it like a slap in the face to God for them to want to check it out carefully before they enter in, and not simply put their trust in Him?

We also need to take note of the word often translated 'spy'. The Hebrew word used throughout Numbers 13 & 14 is *tuwr* - a relatively rare Hebrew verb which means to 'explore', 'search out'. It is the same word used in Numbers 10:33 "... the ark ... went before them for the three days' journey, **to search out** a resting place for them. This word appears seven times in this chapter – a significant number often used to indicate a key word. And in the next chapter it appears a further five times. These significant repetitions of a relatively rare Hebrew verb draw our attention to the word (more on this later).

From Moses' perspective this is simply a fact-finding mission, not a spy mission. It was to encourage them to "choose" the Land! v.17-20 – "Ascend ... climb the mountain ... see the Land – how is it? ... You shall strengthen yourselves and take from the fruit of the land." Most of the great Hebrew sages agree that, for Moses, this was all about things like climate, fertility of the soil, and the availability (or not) of natural resources. Whether the people of Canaan were fierce warriors was not really the issue as far as Moses was concerned. I would add that, on a deeper level, *ascend, climb the mountain*, also refers to a spiritual ascension that is necessary in order to 'occupy the land'.

Distinguished leaders from all twelve tribes were represented in the scout party. Note verse 16: "Moses renamed Hoshea son of Nun, Yehoshua/Joshua. (Hoshea - "salvation"; Yehoshua - "YHWH is salvation"³) Looking ahead, it will be Joshua, not Moses, who leads the people into the Promised Land. Moses leads them up to it, but not into it. In a direct parallel the Torah of Moses leads people up to the ultimate Promised Land, but not into it.....for that it took Yehoshua - Jesus the Christ.

They came Hebron where the three sons of Anak⁴ were (v22). Despite the extreme fruitfulness of the land, their hearts melted in fear. Hebron is very significant—e.g. Abraham first camped there under the Oak of Mamre, and the three patriarchs and their wives are buried there. This is where they found the concentration of the most fierce of the inhabitants!

Read Numbers 13:27-14:4. After 40 days they returned with their report, not just to Moses & Aaron, but to "all the congregation". According to their initial report, the land *was* everything that the LORD had promised it would be? **But...** notice the superlatives used when relaying the negatives they perceived. The scouts' assessment was that there was no way they could enter the Land to dwell in it because there were giants (Nephilim⁵) in the Land and "*we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes.*" Were they really grasshoppers in the eyes of the inhabitants? Or was that just their own assessment because of how they felt?

13:32 'It's a land that devours its inhabitants.' It's this defamation of the Land that the sages say they are punished so severely for. Everything that God has brought His people through up to this point is in order that they might possess this land. God's purpose is to bring His chosen people and His chosen land, together. The land is a treasure, it is a gift of God but instead of treasuring it, they

² Jewish translation. This verse begins the Torah portion, *Shelah Lekha* - "Send for Yourself"

³ *Yeshua* is the shortened form and its English spelling is "Joshua." *Iesous* is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name, and its English spelling is "Jesus." See Heb. 4:8 in KJV "For if Jesus had given them rest..."

⁴ Goliath was an Anakite. 'Anak' pertains to neck, choke, choker/chain.

⁵ Nephilim means *fallen ones*

are ready to reject it and that, is very serious. This is more serious than the sin of the Golden Calf – then they sinned, God forgave (most of) them and they went on. This time God will also forgive, after Moses’ heartfelt pleading, but He cannot go with them in the same way. The punishment for their unbelief was that this entire generation would die in the desert and only Joshua and Caleb, and the children would finally enter the Land.

CHAPTER 14

Once again we see the children of Israel murmuring and complaining in their tents – even weeping the entire night – and saying: “Let us appoint a leader and let us return to Egypt.” (v.4)

Q. What is their complaint and who or what is it against?

In stark contrast, read Joshua’s and Caleb’s report (14:6-9). The drama builds – with the LORD’s anger and Moses’ powerful intercession and pleading – not so much for the sake of the people but for the status of the LORD in the eyes of the nations. He reminds the LORD of His own words on Sinai after the Golden Calf incident (Ex. 34:6-7), “*And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying, “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”*”

God’s ultimate greatness is seen in His mercy and forgiveness. How vital it is to have an intercessor, who stands in the gap for sinful man and understands the merciful heart of God—we are grateful indeed that Yeshua continues to intercede for us at the right hand of God (Rom. 8:34).

20 Then the LORD said: “I have pardoned, according to your word; —21 “but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD—“because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. 24 “But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it.”

After sleeping on it, the people decided they *were* ready to go in after all. *40 And they rose early in the morning and went up to the top of the mountain, saying, “Here we are, and we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised, for we have sinned!”* This is interpreted as superficial regret, rather than sincere remorse. Despite Moses’ warning that God would not be with them, they defiantly attempted to go up – and were attacked by the Amalekites and Canaanites and driven back. **Q. How do these verses speak to us?**

“God’s fierce justice and holiness is the only clear background upon which we can see His mercy and grace.... This was the message for Israel and is also the message to the carnal, wandering Christian.

What should have been a wonderful story about triumph and prosperity – a tale of Israel inheriting the Land and all the goodness that the Lord had prepared for them – instead turns into a tragic narrative about disbelief, failure, and a direct repudiation of God's grace. Israel had only days and weeks earlier been consecrated by the Lord, given His Torah, and was basking in the constant presence of their God, but they so quickly succumb to their own fears and desires.

This is a sobering picture for all of us. In 1 Cor. 10:11 Paul says “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction...” Hebrews 3 and 4 calls us to ‘exhort one another daily’ and take a lesson from the children of Israel who did not enter in due to lack of faith.

As Gentile believers we don't look to possession of the land as our destination, so what does the 'land' mean to us? If possessing the land was their goal, what is our goal?

There are layers of meaning and a greater fulfilment corporately, but on a personal level, it is necessary for all believers to overcome our carnal nature and the temptations of the material world in which we live, and not be daunted by the difficulties, but keep one's eye on the goal. 1 Peter 1:9 ... *because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* The word "receiving" means to *receive back*. The salvation of our souls is the crown of the Christian life. *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

When God breathed into man the breath of life and he became a living soul, he was perfect ... until sin entered in. In Christ we are being restored back to that perfect state. Little by little we receive back that which is already ours. This is a process, but **in Him** we are complete.

It helps us to understand that the Amalekites, Canaanites, etc. each represent a common character flaw that is common to man, i.e. they are enemies of our soul. Without the testing, struggles and the overcoming in our lives, our faith (in God's faithfulness) cannot grow.

Q. Do we sometimes fear things that need not be feared, if seen through the eyes of faith?

Q. Do we see situations as impossible because we only consider the weakness of our natural man?

Recall David and Goliath, and the contrast between how the Israelites and young David viewed Goliath: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty..." (1 Sam. 17:45)

CHAPTER 15

Very intentionally, Chapter 15 reverts to the sacrificial offerings required when they do enter the land, and at the end of the chapter we find the first mention of putting a blue thread through tassels on the corners of their garments – known today as tzitzit:

Num. 15:39-41 *And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that **ye may look upon** it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them ; and that ye **seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring:** That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.*

A most interesting aspect of these verses is the verbal connections with the previous chapters.⁶ (Unfortunately these connections are almost completely lost in translation.)

First is the term, "and you shall look upon" – the specific Hebrew term appears only three times in the Torah, twice in this Torah portion – "**and you shall see the land** (Num. 13:18); and in the above verse, **you shall see** (*the blue thread*) and remember the commandments...

A second verbal connection is another use of the unusual verb, *tuwr*, mentioned previously as meaning to 'explore', 'search out'. In the above verse it is translated '**seek**' (not). I've used KJV to bring this out more clearly, because it is typically completely lost in other translations. In Hebrew, however, the echo is unmistakable. The fringes on the corners of the garments are there so that in the future, people will see them, and the **seeing** will cause them to remember the commandments,

⁶ I acknowledge Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, for these insights.

their hearts will be transformed, and they will not do what the spies did – revert to their fleshly fears and self-will.

Yet another repetition is, *zēnuwth*, meaning ‘adultery’, ‘to commit fornication’. This word was also used in chapter 14: *And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms...* (remember how we saw the adulterous woman as referring to Israel)

These three verbal connections are very significant. What is at stake is visual perception – the testimony of the eyes. The mission of the spies was fraught with danger because it was based on ‘seeing’ – which can be very deceptive, and entice us to make wrong judgments. That began in the Garden of Eden – when the woman “**saw** that the tree was good for food”.

Our eyes and our hearts are deeply connected. In our physical world we can be easily be lured by what our eyes see – but it is what is in our hearts, that determines our response. Notice that our verse puts *heart* before *eyes*. **How we perceive** what our eyes see, is determined by the state of our hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 warns, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” What we look upon often reveals what is truly in our hearts. Consider in contrast, the state of Joshua and Caleb’s hearts and their perception of the land: “God is with us, do not be afraid of them.”

The supreme act of faith in Judaism is *shema*, meaning to ‘hear’ – remember and do. As we know, the Word of God is vital to building a strong faith. In its original context, the Word of God was read and *heard*. But God gave the children of Israel a visual reminder also, to keep their eyes on Him and on His Word. This is the function of the tzitzit, with its thread of blue – representing heavenly commandments. This is not the Jewish prayer shawl, which is an outer garment for all to see; rather, it is a fringed undergarment, representing the inner person – the face shown only to God. The wearing of this is not obligatory, but an act of free-will. Likewise, the willingness to walk according to the will of God – the Word of God – is an individual act of free-will.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.