

*Shelach* June 17, 2017

בָּאֵנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתָּנוּ; וְגַם זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ, הִוא--וְזֶה-פְּרִיָּהּ.

Num. 13:27 *We came to the land to which you sent us; indeed it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.*



In the Torah portion of this week, Moses sends out men from each of the tribes to scout out the land they will inhabit. They are to report on the following: “Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they live good or bad? Are the towns in which they live open or fortified?” All of these first questions carry with them Moses’ concern of whether or not the Israelites will be able to conquer the land. Yet, Moses is equally concerned with the viability of the physical land on which the people could live and thrive. He asks: “Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? Make an effort to bring back some of the fruit of the land.”

The reports about the viability of the land are incredibly positive. We are told that the scouts’ expedition took place during grape season. The samples they cut down are so huge that one cluster is carried by two men. This particular verse led to the iconic images found on ancient coins, mosaics, modern artwork, and postage stamps.

The scouts also find pomegranates and figs. Additionally, showing Moses their samples of fruit, the scouts mention that indeed the land flows with milk and honey which Joshua later reiterates.

The text also states that only two of the scouts report that the land could be conquered, while ten others say there is no way the Israelites will succeed in their quest. This report seems to demoralize the people. One commentator states that this report was particularly vexing on the population born into slavery in Egypt. It is unlikely that this generation think themselves capable of being a free people in their own land. Their memory of harsh times prevents them from imagining they are strong enough to realize this vision.

There are many themes to explore in this portion, two of which are agriculture in the land of Israel then and now and the suffering of generations and the people’s response to that suffering.

Concerning agriculture in Israel, today, like in ancient days, agricultural production thrives. But, this was not always the case. In the early years that predated the establishment of the State of Israel, the land was disease-ridden and inhospitable due to human neglect and a naturally arid climate in which it is difficult to grow crops. Early immigrants worked very hard and used ingenuity to develop the land resembling the fertile place reported by the scouts.

Concerning the response to suffering, when Zionist pioneers chose rural settings, they rejected their former urban lives in eastern and western Europe, where they had no right to own land. Return to the land became a

major theme of the early Zionists; it also meant taking one's own destiny into one's own hands, a central theme of Zionism then and now. Theodore Herzl's dream to have a Jewish State that could offer independence to the Jewish people necessitated a rich and fertile land. The establishment of the Mikveh Israel School in 1870 offered a training ground to bring this dream to a reality. The Agricultural Research Organization (ARO), a leading institution of agricultural research and development, had its start as Tel Aviv's "Agricultural Station," which, since 1921 has worked to bring Israel to the forefront of global agricultural research, development of techniques, and production.

### **Discussion Questions:**

The Bilu Movement were pioneers of the First Aliyah, who came from religious communities in Eastern Europe. When they encountered Palestine, they became very focused on the need for agricultural development, despite their inexperience with farming. Discuss the intersection of religious commitment and a desire to "be tillers of the soil."

The second theme asks if people are prepared to meet a challenge. Why did some, like Ben-Gurion, fear, in the days before the Declaration of Israel's Independence, that declaring a Jewish state might be the wrong decision? Our sources tell us that he and others feared a second Holocaust within three years of the end of WWII. Fear had to be overcome.

Why in American history do some refer to those who lived through the depression in Europe as "the greatest generation ever?" What distinguishes individuals and groups that accept challenges and turn them into opportunities from others who do not take up the challenge? What should Jewish students, faculty and staff do on university campuses today? Should they accept the derision from the BDS advocates or stand up for what they believe? The question rides on if those students, faculty and staff know what a Jewish state means to them. Do they know what to stand up for and how to articulate it?

### **Additional Resources:**

[Mikveh Israel Agricultural School Marks 60th Year](#) - JTA, September 3, 1930

[Groundwork laid for First Aliyah by BILU](#)

[Anti-Semitism on American college campuses is rising—and worsening. Where does it come from, and can it be stopped?](#) Ruth Wisse, May 4, 2015, Mosaic Magazine,