

An Exploration of Moral Self-Evaluation in Leadership
Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) Torah commentary

The Israelites' request to send spies according to Deuteronomy 1, 22

Let us send men before us, that they may search the land for us, and bring us back word of the way by which we must go up, and the cities unto which we shall come.

5

Moses' six questions of the explorers --- Numbers 13, 17-20

And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them: 'Get you up here into the South, and go up into the mountains; and see the land, what it is;

and the **people** that dwells therein

10

Question 1: whether they are strong or weak,

Question 2: whether they are few or many;

and what the **land** is that they dwell in [Abravanel: that is, the **cities**],

Question 3: whether it is good or bad; [Abravanel: e.g. the quality of the climate in these cities]

15

Question 4: and what cities they are that they dwell in, whether in camps, or in strongholds;

[Abravanel: the following are questions about the **unsettled** land]

20

Question 5: and what the land is, whether it is fat or lean,

Question 6: whether there is wood therein, or not.

And so from these six questions which Moses commanded to the spies so that they would know and report about, none was a question that the people had asked Moses when they requested to send spies. As it says (Deuteronomy 1, 22) "[Let us send men before us, that they may search the land for us,] and bring us back word of the way by which we must go up, and the cities unto which we shall come".

25

For Moses did not command the spies that they should bring back information about the roads, nor which cities were ready to be conquered first. And also the spies when they returned did not answer about this at all.

30

But Moses knew of the people's wickedness: they wanted to know if the land "was good" and plentiful, plentiful with food and settlements in such a way that they might eat and be satisfied and rejoice fully upon it [after they settled in]. Thus he commanded the spies the two questions about the settled land [questions 3 & 4]. And also the two last questions; if the land is cultivated and seeded [questions 5 & 6].

35

Surely, Moses initiated the two first¹ questions [questions 1 & 2] from his own mind.

¹ The text renders "last questions" but the context of the sentence proves this to be a mistake.

He thought that this would cause the people to know their enemies were a great and widespread nation and that their cities were walled to the heavens. As a result, the people would recognize and know that the conquest of the land [lit. "the redemption"] would be challenging. That not by their own might would they inherit the land and their own power would not be of help. Thus [Moses thought] they would cling to their God (be Blessed) and call to Him for it was “a time of need for Jacob [Israel]” and from their clinging God would save them. 5

Here it becomes clear that Moses did not ask the spies whether the land was good or bad because he was in doubt about the destiny that God is prescribing -God forbid. He asked in the goal to address what he perceived the people's [real] questions to be, by formulating the questions in his own words once the people's requested to send spies. And Moses only asked the spies to "see the land, what it is; and the people that dwells therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many" (Numbers, 13, 18) in order to incline the peoples' hearts to turn to God and to plead before Him, for God's is their salvation and thus they would say 'Let's go and return to the God who will do for us all the wonders just as He did at the sea.' 10 15

And it seems to me truly that our master Moses sinned in asking these first two questions that he asked about the people and about the cities, because Israel did not ask about them and also God did not command it.

But he-Moses himself- asked them and there is no doubt that it was his good intention but the outcome came as "an [unintentional] error which proceeds from a leader."² And because "an [unintentional] error of teaching/learning is tantamount to a willful transgression,"³ the master of all prophets was punished. (Abravanel, Bemidbar p. 64) But regarding this, we infer that in answering those questions (the questions that Moses asked the spies to answer regarding the Land), those spies said, “the nation is fierce and the cities are fortified,” (Numbers 13, 28) in a manner that dissolved the heart of the people [of Israel], and they undermined the trustworthiness of the Lord and of Moses. And because of that, it was decreed that they would not enter the land, and they would all die in the wilderness. But because Moses our Teacher (he should rest in peace) was the cause of this incident, it was Divine justice that he who caused 20 25 30

² Ecclesiastes 10, 5: "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, such as an [unintentional] error which proceeds from a leader"."

³ Pirke Avot 4, 13: Rabbi Judah would say: Be careful with your studies, for an [unintentional] error of teaching/learning is tantamount to a willful transgression.

An Exploration of Moral Self-Evaluation in Leadership
Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) Torah commentary

the generation to die in the desert, and not enter [the Land], also would not enter therein, because “a pedagogical mistake causes wickedness.”⁴ And since Israel sinned over this maliciously, whereas Moses sinned by mistake, with good intentions, the Holy One, Blessed be He, spared his honor and did not bring his [Moses'] decree [punishment] along with that of the people of Israel ... (Abravanel, Bemidbar, p. 103) 5

And since Israel sinned willingly, and he, peace be upon him, sinned by mistake and with a good intention, God, may he be blessed, wanted to spare the honor of Moses, [such that] his decree should not be amidst the decree of the people in Parshat Shelach Lecha (Numbers 13). And [so] He delayed His anger upon him, as He delayed His anger upon Aaron for the story of the [golden] calf. And when in Parshat Zot Chukat HaTorah the people complained about the water, and in their complaint, they pointed out how Moses and Aaron were the cause of the people's death and that they [would] not enter the land - as they said (Numbers 20:4) "And why did you bring the congregation of the Lord to this wilderness to die there, us and our cattle" - the verse mentioned that Moses and Aaron "went from in front of the congregation to the tent of meeting" (Numbers 20, 6), mourning and with covered heads; and [they were] like embarrassed women at the mention of their sins. And thus did the word [of God] come to them that they should speak and do the act that He mentioned to extract the water. (Numbers 20, 7-9) And when Moses came to anger in his saying (Numbers 20:10), "Listen now, you rebels," the Holy One, blessed be He, became full of anger with him; since Israel caught him fittingly and he did not admit in his heart that which he sinned, and [so] got angry with them. And therefore He saw at this time to give [Moses and Aaron] their punishment for their earlier sins. And, if so, the Waters of Merivah (Numbers 20) were the means to their punishment [not to enter the Land] and not the actual cause for it. (Abravanel, Deuteronomy p. 24) 10 15 20 25

Thank you to Betsy Forester, Jane Shapiro and Rabbi Francis Nataf for their translations of Abravanel.

⁴ This expression reflects a rabbinic principle according to which a teacher is held responsible for the evil performed by his student, if it was caused by the teacher's pedagogical mistake". See for example Tractate Baba Metzia 33b.