

Parashat Shelakh Lekha: Big Rock Sugarcandy Mountain

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Bemidbar 13:27-28

וַיִּסְפְּרוּ-לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּאָנֹכִי אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם
זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדִבָּשׁ הִוא וְזֶה-פְּרִיָּהּ: אָפֶס כִּי-עַז הָעַם הַיֹּשֵׁב
בָּאָרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלֶת מְאֹד וְגַם-יְלָדֵי
הָעֵמֶק רֹאִינוּ שָׁם:

This is what they told him: "We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there.

1. The Lines Between Fact and "Fiction"

Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah 16:17

וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן, וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּאָנֹכִי
אֶל הָאָרֶץ וְגו' אָפֶס כִּי עַז הָעַם (במדבר יג, כו כח), כָּךְ
דִּרְכָן שֶׁל מְסַפְּרֵי לְשׁוֹן הָרַע, פּוֹתְחִין בְּטוֹבָה
וּמְשַׁלְּמִין בְּרָעָה.

"They went and came to Moses, and to Aaron.... They related to him, and said: We came to the land...[and indeed it is flowing with milk and honey and this is its fruit]. But the people that dwell in the Land are powerful" (Numbers 13:26–28). This is the way of those who relate slander; they begin with something positive and conclude with the negative.

Bavli Sotah 35a

"וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּאָנֹכִי וְגו'", וְכָתִיב: "אָפֶס כִּי עַז
הָעַם", אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן (סִימָן אֶמֶת לְבַדּוֹ לַוִּיָּה) מְשׁוּם
רַבִּי מֵאִיר: כָּל לְשׁוֹן הָרַע שָׂאִין בּוֹ דְּבַר אֶמֶת בְּתַחֲלִילָתוֹ
— אֵין מְתַקְּיִים בְּסוֹפּוֹ.

The Torah states: "**And they told him, and said: We came** to the land to which you sent us, and it also flows with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27), **and then it is written: "However, the people** that dwell in the land **are fierce**" (Numbers 13:28). Why did the spies praise the land and then slander it? **Rabbi Yohanan says** three statements **in the name of Rabbi Meir**, represented by the mnemonic device: **Truth, alone, borrowing**. The first statement answers this question: **Any slander that does not begin with a truthful statement ultimately does not stand**, i.e., it is not accepted by others.

Rashi on Bavli Sotah 35a

אֵינוֹ מְתַקֵּים - שֶׁמְחַזְּקִין אוֹתָן הַשּׁוֹמְעִין כְּבִדָּאִין לְפִיכָה
אוֹמֵר דְּבַר אֶמֶת תַּחֲלָה כְּדִי שִׂיאֲמִינוּ וְאַף מְרַגְלִים לָכֵה
פְּתָחוּ בְּשִׁבְחַ הָאָרֶץ תַּחֲלָה:

"It does not endure" — because the listeners regard such people as liars. Therefore, one first says something true so that they will be believed. And the spies, too, for this reason began by praising the land first.

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Ramban on Bemidbar 13:27	
<p>וְגַם זִבְתַּחֲלָב וּדְבַשׁ הוּא – בְּעֵבֹר שְׂצוּהָ אוֹתָם לִרְאוֹת הַשְּׂמִנָּה הִיא אִם רָזָה, הַשִּׁיבוּ לוֹ כִּי הִיא שְׂמִנָּה וְגַם זִבְתַּחֲלָב וּדְבַשׁ הִיא. וְעַל שְׂאֵלָתוֹ הָיָשׁ בָּהּ עַץ אִם אֵין, הַשִּׁיבוּ לוֹ וְזֶה פְרִיָּהּ, כִּי כֵן צוּהָ אוֹתָם לִהְיוֹתָ. וְהִנֵּה בְּכָל זֶה אָמְרוּ אֶמֶת וְהַשִּׁיבוּ עַל מֶה שֶׁנִּצְטָו, וְהִנֵּה לָהֶם לֵאמֹר שֶׁהָעַם הַיּוֹשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ עַז וְהָעָרִים בְּצוּרוֹת, כִּי יֵשׁ לָהֶם לְהַשִּׁיב אֶמֶת לְשׁוֹלָחָם, כִּי כֵן צוּהָ אוֹתָם "הַחֲזֵק הוּא הָרֶפֶה", "הַבְּמַחֲנִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים".</p>	<p>And surely it flows with milk and honey: Since Moses had commanded them to see <i>what the Land is, whether it is fat or lean</i> the spies reported to him that it is fat, <i>and surely it floweth with milk and honey</i>. And in answer to his question <i>whether there are trees therein or not</i> they reported to him, <i>and this is its fruit</i> for so he had commanded them, to show it to him. Now in all this they said the truth, and gave a report about those matters which they had been commanded [to find out], therefore they should [indeed] have said [as in fact they did] that <i>the people that dwell in the Land are fierce and the cities are fortified</i>; for it was their duty <i>to bring back words of truth to them that sent them</i>, and Moses had commanded them [to see] <i>whether they are strong or weak, [and what cities they are that they dwell in], whether in camps, or in strongholds</i>.</p>
<p>אָבֵל רָשָׁעִים בְּמִלַּת אָפֶס, שֶׁהִיא מוֹרָה עַל דְּבַר אָפֶס וְנִמְנָע מִן הָאָדָם שֶׁאֵי אֶפְשָׁר בְּשׁוּם עֲנִין, כְּלִשׁוֹן "הָאָפֶס לְנִצָּחַ חֲסִדוֹ" (תְּהִלִּים ע"ז ט), "וְאֵין עוֹד אָפֶס אֱלֹהִים" (יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ מֵה יד). וְהִנֵּה אָמְרוּ לוֹ הָאָרֶץ שְׂמִנָּה וְגַם זִבְתַּחֲלָב וּדְבַשׁ וְהָפְרִי טוֹב, אָבֵל אֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְבֹא אֵלֵיהֶם כִּי עַז הָעַם וְהָעָרִים בְּצוּרוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת מְאֹד, וְגַם יְלִידֵי הָעֵנָק רְאִינוּ שָׁם:</p>	<p>But the wickedness of the spies consisted in saying the word <i>ephes</i> ["nevertheless" — '<i>Nevertheless</i>' the people that dwell in the Land are fierce], which signifies something negative and beyond human capability, something impossible of achievement, under any circumstances, similar to the expressions: '<i>Ha'aphes</i>' <i>lanetzach chasdo</i> (<i>Is His mercy 'clean gone' for ever?</i>); <i>and there is none else</i>; '<i>ephes</i>' (<i>there is no other</i>) God. Thus the spies told Moses that the Land is fertile <i>and surely it floweth with milk and honey</i> and the fruits are good, but it is impossible to fight against <i>the people</i> because they <i>are fierce, and the cities are fortified, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there</i>.</p>

Or Ha-Hayyim on Bemidbar 13:27	
<p>וַיִּסְפְּרוּ לוֹ וְגו'. דִּקְדָּק לומר לוֹ, שֶׁהִיוּ מִיַּחֲדִים הַדְּבָר בְּיַחְדוֹ אֵלָיו, אָבֵל הַמֵּאֲמָר לֹא הָיָה לְמִשָּׁה לְבַד אֲלֹא לְכָל הָעֵדָה הַשּׁוֹמְעִים, וְהוּא אָמְרוּ וַיֵּאמְרוּ וְלֹא אָמַר לוֹ.</p>	<p>And they told him, etc. — to be precise, to say to him, that the statement was made specifically to him alone, but the statement was not only to Moses alone; rather, it was to the entire assembly of those who were listening. And he said it, and they said it, but he did not say it to him."</p>

2. Big Rock Sugarcandy Mountain

George Orwell, <i>Animal Farm</i>	
<p>'Up there, comrades,' he would say solemnly, pointing to the sky with his large beak—'up there, just on the other side of that dark cloud that you can see—there it lies, Sugarcandy Mountain, that happy country where we poor animals shall rest for ever from our labors!' He even claimed to have been there on one of his higher flights, and to have seen the everlasting fields of clover and the linseed cake and lump sugar growing on the hedges. Many of the animals believed him. Their lives now, they reasoned, were hungry and laborious; was it not right and just that a better world should exist somewhere else? One thing that was difficult to determine was the pigs' attitude towards Moses. They all declared contemptuously that his stories about Sugarcandy Mountain were lies, and yet they allowed him to remain on the farm, not working, with an allowance of a gill of beer a day.</p>	