

Good Shabbos... This week's parasha is Shelach, which includes the well-known story of the "meraglim" – the spies. The standard understanding of this story is that it is a cautionary tale of the danger of failing to have faith in God's promise, specifically in regard to conquering and inheriting the land of Canaan. But I've often been troubled by this standard understanding of the story. The Torah makes very clear that these are not your standard "cloak-and-dagger" spies operating at the shadowy edge of society. Right at the start of the parasha, it states that these 12 spies, representing each of the 12 tribes, were "everyone a leader among them." And then, in case we missed it, in the very next passuk, the Torah again states "They were all distinguished men, heads of the Children of Israel were they." In other words, these 12 recognized "leaders," these 12 "distinguished men," were all clearly from the acknowledged social, political, economic, and religious elite of the nation. They were clearly from among the "gedolim" of the society. In this light, the story of the spies now becomes something very different from the standard understanding of the story. It's no longer about the bad consequences resulting from the nation's lack of faith in God's promise. Rather, it's about the inherent dangers in placing undue faith in generally recognized leaders – whether social, political, economic, or religious. Put simply, I believe the central question raised by the story of the spies is actually about how these "gedolim," these recognized "great lights" of the Jewish people, could have been so wrong and brought such misfortune on the Jewish nation. In reviewing the parasha for a possible answer to *this* question, I came to Moses's set of detailed instructions to the spies regarding the flora, topography, and inhabitants of Canaan, which the spies were to investigate and report back on. While I didn't start out to write this dvar with the intention of drawing any parallel to American history, at this point I couldn't resist. I was strongly reminded here of another great leader's set of detailed instructions to *his* reconnaissance party. On June 20, 1803, Thomas Jefferson gave Lewis & Clark and their aptly named "Corps of Discovery" a surprisingly similar set of instructions prior to their own famous expedition. Like Moses's spies, Lewis & Clark and their Corps of Discovery were also to investigate and report back on the flora, fauna, topography, and native inhabitants of an uncharted land – in their case, the vast wilderness of the newly-acquired Louisiana Purchase. But there was one big difference between Moses's 12 spies and Jefferson's Corps of Discovery. Initially, the Louisiana Purchase had been strongly opposed by elements of America's own established elite, elements of America's own "gedolim." The strongest opposition to the Louisiana Purchase came from wealthy and powerful New

England Federalists. These Federalists correctly feared the rising and democratizing power of the West that the Louisiana Purchase did in fact represent. Like those hidebound, change-resistant New England Federalists, Moses's 12 spies represented the hidebound, change-resistant elements of the Jewish nation's ruling elite. Except for Joshua and Caleb, these 12 spies retained a vested interest – like the New England Federalists -- in maintaining the status quo. Lewis & Clark and their Corps of Discovery, however, were not bound by the concerns of the New England Federalists. In other words, they weren't bound by the common concerns of most elites. Above all, they weren't beholden to the entrenched interests of power, status, celebrity, or wealth. Unlike Moses's reconnaissance party, Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery approached their task without blinders or bias. The vast unexplored wilderness of the American West represented for Jefferson and Lewis & Clark an enormous opportunity for discovery and national reaffirmation. They eagerly embraced it. In contrast, the unexplored land of Canaan represented for most of Moses's band of spies something fearful and threatening. They actively opposed it... The story of the spies in Shelach is indeed a cautionary tale. But it's not about the danger of the people's lack of faith in God's promise to inherit the Land. It's also not about the danger of being blind to the more intangible possibilities promised by God to the Jewish people. Rather, the story of the 12 spies was -- and continues to be -- about the ever-present danger posed by inflated and unwarranted deference to established elites. It was and is about the danger posed by inflated and unwarranted deference to the social, political, economic, or religious "gedolim" of *any* society in *any* age. This, I believe, is the real moral of this cautionary tale, as valid today as ever. Good Shabbos.