

Calev & Moshe's Conversation

Classic Questions

What did Calev say about Moshe? (v. 30)

Talmud: Calev said to them, “He took us out of Egypt! And he split the sea for us! And he fed us the manna! If he said to us, ‘Make ladders and go up to the heavens,’ would we not listen to him?” (Sotah 35a).

Rashi: “Didn’t he split the sea for us? And he brought down the manna for us! And he made the quails fly to us!”

[Then he said,] “We will definitely go up,” even to heaven. If [Moshe] tells us, “Make ladders and go up there,” we will succeed in whatever he says.

Be’er Mayim Chayim: Even though Moshe performed many other miracles for the Jewish people, Calev mentioned these three in particular, as they encompass the entire universe: Splitting the sea was a feat on earth, manna came down from heaven, and the quails were in the earth’s atmosphere. Calev suggested that Moshe could empower the Jewish people to place ladders on the ground and climb through the atmosphere to the heavens, since he had already demonstrated his powers over the earth, skies and heavens.

The Rebbe's Teachings

Calev’s Defense (v. 30)

In his commentary to verse 30, Rashi writes that Calev mentioned three miracles to the Jewish people that Moshe had performed for them: a.) The splitting of the Reed Sea; b.) producing manna in the desert; and c.) producing quails.

What question at the literal level led Rashi to conclude that Calev mentioned these three events? And why did Rashi reject the Talmud’s assertion that Calev mentioned the exodus from Egypt, writing instead that he mentioned the quails?

Rashi continues to explain Calev’s following words: “We will definitely go up”—“even to heaven. If [Moshe] tells us, ‘Make ladders and go up there,’ we will succeed in whatever he says. ”

This begs the question: Why did Rashi not interpret Calev’s words literally, that he was promising the people that “we will definitely go up” and conquer the Land of Israel?

The Explanation

In verses 28-9, where the spies begin to negate the likelihood of a successful military conquest, three proofs are offered:

- a.) The military might of the enemy within the Land of Israel—“the people who live in the Land are [extraordinarily] powerful. The cities are huge and well-fortified, and we even saw giants there” (v. 28).
- b.) The military might of the surrounding nations, that would prevent them from even reaching the Land—“the Chitites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the mountains, and the Cana’anites live (both) on the coast and alongside the Jordan” (v. 29).
- c.) The presence of Amalek who had previously fought against the Jewish people, incurring heavy losses (v. 29 and Rashi *ibid.*).

Yet on reading Calev’s response to the spies in the next verse, we do not find that he addressed any of these issues, and he merely “silenced the people to [listen to what he would say about] Moshe. ” Rashi therefore concluded that Calev’s words about Moshe must have been a direct response to the three above-mentioned arguments:

- a.) In response to the spies’ argument that the enemy within the Land was too strong to be defeated, Calev replied: “Didn’t he split the sea for us?” Calev was thus saying: “Remember when we were faced by the Egyptian army, which was much stronger than ours, and we had no way of defeating them. Nevertheless, Moshe made a miracle for us, the sea split, and G-d destroyed the enemy for us!”

(Thus Rashi could not cite the Talmud’s view, that Calev mentioned the exodus from Egypt, for at that time the Egyptians were not threatening to fight the Jewish people; on the contrary, they helped the Jewish people to leave Egypt.)

- b.) In response to the spies’ argument that there were strong nations that would attack the Jewish people, even before they reached the Land of Israel, Calev responded, “He brought down the manna for us!” Calev thus proved that Moshe had secured miraculous assistance for the Jewish people even while they were in the desert, before entering the Land.

- c.) The third argument of the spies was that Amalek, an arch-enemy of the Jewish people, stood in the way. The Jewish people had suffered heavy losses in their earlier war against Amalek due to the fact that they had doubted G-d, “saying, 'Is G-d among us, or not?’” (Shemos 17:7). This was a particularly powerful argument in this instance, for it appeared that the Jewish people had also demonstrated a lack of faith in wanting to send spies to investigate the Land, when G-d had already promised them a miraculous victory. So the spies were effectively saying: “Remember how you suffered in the war with Amalek because you lacked faith! You lack faith now too, and Amalek is poised to attack you if you attempt to conquer the Land!”

To this Calev replied, “He made the quails fly to us!” This refuted the spies’ argument, for when the Jewish people complained to Moshe that they wanted meat, “they were seeking a pretext to turn away from G-d” (Rashi on Bamidbar 11:1), and yet Moshe performed a miracle to help them. This proved that, with Moshe’s leadership, G-d’s miraculous help was at hand even when the Jewish people doubted Him.

Calev's Final Argument

Having explained how Calev responded to all of the spies' arguments, Rashi was now left with a question: What did Calev add by saying, "We will definitely go up"?

Calev was concerned because he detected dishonesty in the words of the spies (see Rashi to v. 23), so he could not be sure what kind of argument they might fabricate next. Thus—explains Rashi—Calev concluded with an argument which refuted anything that the spies might say: "We will definitely go up, even to heaven. If [Moshe] tells us, 'Make ladders and go up there,' we will succeed in whatever he says." With these words, Calev was saying, "Whatever rational argument the spies might now offer, you should know that Moshe's powers are not limited to the realm of the rational!"

The Spies' Counterargument (v. 31-33)

How could the spies possibly counteract such a powerful argument?

The Torah records that they replied, "We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than us" (v. 31). This troubled Rashi, since there does not seem to be any significant response here to Calev's arguments.

Therefore Rashi explains that the spies did not say "they are stronger than us," but rather, "they are stronger than Him," meaning to say, stronger than G-d's power in the heavens. This was the only way they had of counteracting Calev's argument that G-d would perform miracles for the Jewish people as He had done in the past.

But how, the people would wonder, is it possible that the inhabitants of the Land would be stronger than heaven? At first glance, such an assertion appears to be utterly ludicrous, especially to a nation that had witnessed G-d's miracles with their own eyes.

Clearly, the spies needed to substantiate their claim, so they continued: "We saw *nefilim*-giants there" (v. 33). These were not the giants which the spies referred to previously, in verse 28, as merely repeating what they said earlier would not bring any support to their argument. Rather, these were a unique type of giant, as Rashi explains, "Giants, descended from Shamchazai and Aza'el, who fell from the heavens."

"So if you are wondering," the spies were intimating, "how the inhabitants are a force even against the heavens, you should know that these giants themselves fell from heaven, so they are an equal match for G-d's angels!"

Still, the notion that these giants had any power against G-d was difficult to believe, so the spies added that they were giants, "who fell in the generation of Enosh," which was before the great Flood in the times of Noach. Thus, the spies were saying: "You don't believe that heaven is powerless over the the inhabitants of the Land? You should know that when heaven punished all mankind with annihilation during the Flood, these giants survived. And now they are living in the Land of Cana'an!"

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The Chumash incorporates a flowing English translation of the Torah which is loyal to the commentary of Rashi and includes 'Classic questions' that are drawn from a range of commentators and are then ingeniously brought together by the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory.

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