

# ONEG SHABBAS

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## How About Them Fruit?

In Moses' retelling and contextualizing of the travels and travails of the Israelites at the outset of the book of Deuteronomy in this week's Torah portion, we read of an interesting abbreviation of the story of the scouts who returned with bountiful fruit (Numbers 13). In Moses' retelling (Deut. 1:25):

They took some of the fruit of the land in their hands and brought it down to us. And they gave us this report: "It is a good land that The LORD, our God, is giving to us."

ויקחו בידם מפרי הארץ ויורדו אלינו וישבו אתנו דבר ויאמרו טובה הארץ אשרה' אלהינו נתן לנו

Rather than specifying which fruits or even the most significant fruit of them all, Moses characterizes them as simply fruit. As we read in *parashas Shelakh*, the primary fruit was grapes, which was so bountiful, they needed to be carried on a pole. Moreover, as discussed in this space for that parashah, there are rabbinic midrashim that mention multiple poles and/or a more complicated carrying apparatus needed in order to transport this massive bunch of grapes ("The Bounty of Grapes"). As we know, grapes are the foundational aspect of wine, the privileged beverage of the Torah and our people.

Here, Moshe decided not only to not mention the grapes, specifically, but also mentions that they took the fruit in their hands. Definitely not the same description as carrying them on a pole, which seems to minimize their size. It's also pretty shocking, since they came back bringing the bounty of the fruits of the land of pomegranates, figs, and massive bunches of grapes, yet Moses downplays it. What's particularly striking, though, is the juxtaposition of saying it is a good land, yet bringing back such small fruits. In Numbers 13, they had massive fruits and while Caleb and Yehoshua provided positive reporting, the other ten provided pessimistic reporting. So what is going on here?

### Midrashic Approach

On this verse, Rabbi Shimon, a leading second-century sage offered a sorrowful perspective on how the fruit was brought (*Sifrei Devarim* 23:1):

Rabbi Shimon said: "Shameful are these men who took in their hand: like a man who would take in his hand an *assarius*'s worth of figs or an *assarius*'s worth of grapes, thus they took in their hands."

א"ר שמעון: עלובים בני אדם שחך נטלו בידם, כאדם שנטול באיסר תאנים באיסר ענבים כך נטלו בידם

While an *assarius* does not mean much to you or me, it was the lowest valued coin regularly issued during the Roman Empire, weighing about 177 mg, so he is pointing out that Moses' description of their handling of these fruits in a way that seemed to downgrade their worth. For Rabbi Shimon, he is not bothered by Moshe contradicting the story as it was told in the book of Numbers, but rather characterizing the way in which these men handled these fruits as being degrading and, thus, reflecting back shamefully upon them (which is a bit of foreshadowing, since they spoke ill of their chances of conquering the land).



For Rabbi Shimon, it seems to him that these men were handling them quite lightly. As there are other fruits mentioned in *parashas Shelakh* - pomegranates and figs (Num. 13:23) - maybe Rabbi Shimon is seeking to point to the figs as being handled lightly like



little coins? This is certainly possible, since it would be hard to imagine Rabbi Shimon is seeking to point to the figs as being handled lightly like little coins? This is certainly possible, since it would be hard to imagine the pomegranates as being handled lightly like little coins. However, perhaps there is yet another possibility: the handling of the individual grapes as little coins(!). In this way, it can certainly seem to be disrespectful to the bounty of the land. Thus, leading him to condemn their behavior, since the word *עלובים* implies not just pitiful behavior, but a kind of moral or spiritual poverty. He laments how people are capable of reducing something grand and sacred — God's promise and bounty — to something trivial and small.

### A Simple Approach

A simple, straightforward approach to the word "בידם (in their hands)" - was articulated by the 11<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Rabbi Toviah ben Eliezer, who wrote (לקח טוב דברים א' כ"ה):

With their permission, but not in their actual possession, as it says: "And all the good of his master was in his hand" (Genesis 24:10).

ויקחו בידם מפרי הארץ - ברשותם ולא בידם ממש שנאמר (בראשית כ"ד:י') וכל טוב אדוניו בידו

In so writing, he points out that there seems to imply a distinction between having authority or permission over something versus having direct ownership or physical possession of it. Rabbi Toviah's reference here is describing Eliezer, Abraham's servant, who had permission to use his master's wealth, but it was not truly his own. Seemingly, this is pointing out that they had this fruit in their hands because it was requested of them to bring back.

### Displaying Proudly

A proud approach to considering this description was composed by Rabbi Yitzhak ben Yehudah Abarbanel (1437-1508), who wrote (אברבנאל דברים א' כ"ה):

And [Scripture] recalls that they took in their hand from the fruit of the land in order to show the nations and the leaders its richness. And they gave their report publicly before all of Israel, just as they had requested at the outset. This is [the meaning of] "they brought them back word and said, 'The land is good,' etc." Now, in saying "The land is good," they were referring only to it being a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore,

וזכר שלקחו בידם מפרי הארץ להראות העמים והשרים את דשנה. ונתנו תשובתם בפרסום לכל ישראל כמו שבקשו בראשונה. וזהו וישבו אותם דבר ויאמרו טובה הארץ וגו'. והנה באמרם טובה הארץ לא כווננו זה רק על היותה זבת חלב ודבש ועל כל עם הראות

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when showing the fruit, they said “the land is good” specifically in regard to the fruits and all the produce. And the strength of this statement is what is said there: “We came to the land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey – and this is its fruit.” For this is the goodness that they confirmed was present in the land. And therefore, this statement is fitting for all the spies, for they only intended by “good” to refer to the richness of the land and its pleasures.

הפרי אמרו טובה הארץ בפני עצמה בעיני הפירות והמוזנות כלם וכח זה המאמר הוא מה שנאמר שם באנו אל הארץ אשר שלחתנו וגם זבת חלב ודבש היא וזה פריה. כי זה הוא הטוב אשר קיימו שהיה בה. ולכן יאות המאמר הזה אל כל המרגלים כי לא כונו בטובה כי אם דשנות הארץ ותענוגיה

In short, Rabbi Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar here focuses on using this phrase of “took in their hand” as distinguishing between the ten negative spies and the two positive ones. He is interpreting this phrase as a subtle hint that only the ten spies took physical fruit from the land (grapes, a fig, a pomegranate), as supported by the Talmud in *Sotah* 34a. Joshua and Caleb, by contrast, did not carry any fruit, reflecting their different attitude and mission. Thus, “they took in their hand” serves as textual evidence identifying the ten spies who later gave the negative report, and helps explain why Moses recounted the episode in general terms, avoiding the harsh details out of respect for those who had died. The distinction also justifies the textual repetition of “they brought back a report” (referring to the ten) and “they said, ‘The land is good’” (referring to Joshua and Caleb).

In Rabbi Abarbanel’s commentary, the display of the fruits by the spies is framed as a deliberate act of public demonstration meant to showcase the land’s physical bounty, certainly different than Rabbi Shimon’s perspective on their shameful display of the fruits.

### An 18th Century Inquiry

Clearly, the aspect of this verse that stands out the most is the word “בִּידֵם” (in their hands) - why is this word used? Rabbi Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar (1696-1743) (popularly known as the Ohr haHayyim) questioned (אור החיים על דברים א:כ"ה, ד"ה ויקחו בידם וגו):

It is necessary to know Why did the Torah have to add the words בִּידֵם, “in their hands?” It would have sufficed for the Torah to write that the spies brought with them some of the fruit, etc.

He then goes on to provide an answer:

Indeed, the intent is that there were two levels among the spies: one negative, which was the response of the ten spies, and one positive, which was the response of Joshua and Caleb. In his words here, he mentions both responses. Corresponding to what the ten wicked men responded negatively, it says, “And they took... and brought us back word” – meaning, Moses, peace be upon him, did not wish to repeat the negative things they said so as not to arouse judgment against those who had already died. Therefore, he stated the matter in general terms—that they brought back a report.

To hint that it refers to the ten spies, it says, “And they took in their hand”, which alludes to what our Sages said (*Sotah* 34a): eight spies took a cluster of grapes, one took a fig, and one took a pomegranate. But Joshua and Caleb took nothing, as is stated in the words of our Sages. That is what is implied in the phrase “And they took in their hand” – to indicate that these were the ten who took from the fruit of the land. ...

צריך לדעת למה הוצרך לומר ויקחו בידם שלא היה צריך לומר אלא ויורידו אלינו מפרי הארץ

אכן הכוונה היא לפי שהיו במרגלים שתי הדרגות, אחת רעה היא תשובת עשרה מרגלים, ואחת טובה היא תשובת יהושע וכלב, ובדבריו כאן אמר שתי התשובות, כנגד מה שהשיבו עשרה האנשים הרשעים לרעה אמר ויקחו וגו' וישיבו אותנו דבר פירוש לא רצה משה ע"ה לחזור הדברים הרעים שלא לעורר הדין על שכבר מתו ואמר הענין סתם שהשיבו דבד,

ולהעירך שעל עשרה מרגלים הוא אומר אמר ויקחו בידם, פי' על דרך אומרים ז"ל (סוטה ל"ד). ח' מרגלים נטלו אשכול, אחד נטל תאנה, וא' נטל רימון, אבל יהושע וכלב לא נטלו כלום כאמור בדבריהם ז"ל, והוא מה שדקדק במאמר ויקחו בידם לומר שהם העשרה שלקחו בידם מפרי הארץ....



They were all in agreement about the excellence of the land, and they even had the proof in the form of the fruits they had brought back. Everything else was merely the subjective impression that the gigantic appearance of the inhabitants had made on the faint-hearted. Had the people been filled with the right spirit, they would have taken from the spies’ report only the account of the land’s excellence; everything else would have left them unmoved.

Über die Vortrefflichkeit des Landes waren sie ja alle einverstanden und hatten ja auch den Beweis in den mitgebrachten Früchten in Händen. Alles andere war ja nur der subjektive Eindruck, den die riesige Erscheinung der Bewohner auf die Kleinmütigen gemacht hatte. Wäre das Volk von dem rechten Geist erfüllt gewesen, so hätten sie nur jenen Bericht von der Vortrefflichkeit des Bodens aus der Erzählung der Kundschafter entnommen, alles andere hätte sie unberührt gelassen.

For Rabbi Hirsch, perhaps this was a subjective perspective; not that the fruits were actually that small, but it subjectively seemed that way, just as the inhabitants of the land seemed to be so subjectively huge and undefeatable. The fruit, especially the grapes, impressed upon the people the massiveness of the challenge ahead of them. Perhaps, however, what Moses is doing is recasting this story to say to the people just as the fruits were not that crazily massive, nor are the inhabitants of the land - it was a ridiculous report by those ten scouts. Just as the fruits were smaller-sized, so, too, are the inhabitants of the land and the challenge they pose to the Israelites.

### Conclusion

While it seems striking that Moshe refers to the bunch of grapes, as well as other fruits brought back by the scouts in the book of Numbers as simply fruits brought back in their hands. Whether that’s meant to be taken literally, figuratively, possessively, or otherwise, perhaps it was meant to paint the ten spies in a bad light, to diminish them. However one understands this painting of the picture of how they brought the fruits back in order to present them, it does offer us a different framing of the scene of when the fruits, especially the massive bunch of grapes from Israel, were brought back by the scouts. And, of course, the more grapes, the more wine.

L’chaim 