A Jewish leader is talking to a group of Diaspora Jews who are about to visit Israel. “Make sure you visit all over,” he says. “Find out what it’s like there. What are the people like? Is the food good? And when you come back, can you bring me a souvenir?”

Of course, I’m referring to Numbers 13:17–20. Yes, Shelah Lekha is the first example of Israel education in Jewish history. Thinking of this story as some kind of archetypal case study for Israel education, what can we learn? What can the story teach us about the dilemmas we face in talking about Israel today?

Firstly, Moses’s instructions to the spies display some of the same problems that we sometimes find in contemporary Israel education. The questions he asks are pretty basic: just the surface facts. When thinking about teaching Israel, for many teachers, the default educational move is to teach Israel’s geography and history from a facts-centric perspective. We thrust a weird triangle shape (or, if we’re left-wing, a shoe-with-heel shape) under our students’ noses, and ask them to mark Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Eilat (always the easiest one). If we’re really creative, we draw this map really big and put it on the floor. But Israel remains an abstract, academic, artificial subject, removed from children’s real life experiences as young American Jews. To borrow the terms of the philosopher of Jewish education Michael Rosenak (z”l), we teach “about” Israel, creating a “secondary relationship”: “one can instruct about a tradition in a secondary relationship, but one cannot teach it; one cannot educate toward commitment to it” (Commandments and Concerns, 106, italics in original).
difference between Caleb’s position and the rest of the spies’ position is not
nuance; it is absolute. It’s a zero-sum game.

So too, much contemporary teaching about Israel is plagued with zero-
sumness, the same kind of zero-sumness that has infected much of our
contemporary political lives. In today’s polarized discourse, we no longer
have different opinions, or contrasting arguments, or diverse positions; we
have different facts. Fake news. Post-truth era. Facts in one bubble that are
fiction in the other. You’re either Caleb or the spies.

Israel education continues to deal with high stakes situations for the Jewish
people, and too often we respond to positions that we don’t agree with by resorting to the kind of polarized and shrill discourse that we see in Numbers
14:1–4. You’re leading us to disaster, the Israelites cry, to “fall by the sword.”
Here, the Torah doesn’t offer us a satisfactory resolution, but a later Jewish
tradition, recorded in Targum Jonathan, suggests that this event took place
on Tishah Be’Av. The association of this archetypal zero-sum situation with
the archetypal day of Jewish tragedy offers us a cautionary tale. When we
are presenting Israel and we find ourselves in situations where it’s either
“Caleb or the spies,” with each side seeing the other as disastrous and traitorous, it behooves us to pull each side back from the brink and try to
create open, respectful, thoughtful dialogue about the issues that might let us avoid 40 more years of wilderness.

What’s the result of this kind of presentation of Israel? The spies all seem to
gain a great deal of knowledge. They have the answers to Moses’s
questions. They would score highly on a quiz about Israel. But that’s not
enough. The spies teach us that knowledge alone doesn’t create
commitment. The first major challenge when teaching about Israel is to
spark in our students the motivation to seek knowledge.

A second core question revolves around when to introduce children to the
more difficult, frustrating, and perhaps alienating aspects of modern Israel.
Should we adopt a “love first” approach in which students are only exposed
to these complex issues when (or if?) they are already committed to Israel?
Or should we adopt a more holistic approach, in which from day one we share with children, in developmentally appropriate ways, the flaws and
failures of Israel along with its wonders and beauties, hoping to engender in
students a love of and commitment to Israel that is robust enough to
include critique about its problems?

Rashi offers a delightful insight on verse 17 that might be applied to this
perennial question. Sensitive reader of the text that he is, he picks up on
the differences between what biblical critics now refer to as the J and E
sources that have been woven together here. J has the spies going only
into the area around Hebron and the hills of Judah, whereas E has them
going throughout Northern Israel too. Rashi (who, of course, sees the text
as a unified whole) wonders why in verse 17 it suggests to start with the
Negev (in other words, the Southern part of Judah, according to Jacob
Milgrom). Rashi’s answer, quoting from Midrash Tanhuma, is that God is
like a wise merchant: first he shows a prospective purchaser the inferior
goods, then the best stuff. This might be too extreme an approach for us,
but perhaps Rashi can reassure us that showing “inferior goods” along with
“the best stuff” can instill a Caleb-like complex commitment to Israel. (The
flaw in this argument, of course, is that God’s educational success rate in
Shelah Lekha is only 17 percent, or 2 in 12! Perhaps this approach isn’t for
everyone . . .)

Finally, in verses 25–33, we get a glimpse of a third major challenge that we
face when discussing Israel. Two different people look at the same facts,
the same empirical situation, the same set of events, and interpret them not
just differently, but wildly differently: so differently that each sees the
other’s position as disastrous for the future of the entire Jewish people. The

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