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After the Jewish people received the Torah on Mt. Sinai and were ready to enter the land of Israel, they started to get "cold feet." Although the land of Israel was the object of the hopes of the Jewish people and God had directed them flawlessly until that point, the people were challenged to trust God without even finding out where they were headed. There was a consensus among the people that they should send spies to see if it was feasible to conquer the land.

Moses knew that the Almighty's promise to give them the land included a guarantee to conquer it. However, one of the principles of life which we learn from this portion is: The Almighty allows each of us the free will to go in the direction we choose, even if it is the wrong choice. Moshe by divine decree allowed them to make this choice and sent out the princes of the tribes (men of the highest caliber) to check out the land.

Twelve spies were sent. Ten came back with a report of strong fortifications and giants; they rallied the people against going up to the land. They began to speak badly about the land that they had explored. They told the Jewish people, "The land that we crossed to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants. All the men we saw there were huge!" Joshua ben Nun and Calev ben Yefunah (Moshe's brother-in-law) tried to stem the rebellion but did not succeed. The Almighty decreed 40 years of wandering in the desert, one year for each day they spied in the land of Israel.

Why was the punishment so severe? What was wrong with wanting to be responsible and scout the terrain prior to the conquest? It's also hard to understand what the princes did wrong. Was what they said a lie? Joshua and Calev didn't deny that there were strong fortifications and giants; rather they said, "The land (of Israel) is very, very good." Why didn't they challenge the details of the spies' report?

It must be that the spies' report was accurate. If so, what did they do wrong, and what was the meaning of Joshua and Calev's rebuttal? The secret lies in their perspective. The facts observed by all of the spies were exactly the same. It was how they were perceived that made all the difference. The 10 spies viewed the challenges as impossibilities, and Joshua and Calev saw them as opportunities. They didn't deny the facts; they said, "The land (of Israel) is very, very good." In other words: It is wonderful, and we can be successful.

They didn't succeed, and the punishment was 40 years of wandering. Why? Because when you have it all and still can't see the good, you need to experience real challenges and survive in order to be able to recognize what is indeed "very, very good." Without the experience of miraculously surviving the desert, there would be no way for them to succeed in conquering the land.

This is one of the most fundamental lessons we need to learn in order to succeed on every level: If we are confident that God has given us challenges only to succeed and grow, then every challenge is an opportunity. However, if every bump in the road seems

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an insurmountable disaster, then it will be just that. Our future, as individuals and as the Jewish people, depends on an unfailingly positive and confident outlook that God has given us only opportunities to succeed. If we can channel our energies in this manner, we will rise to unimaginable heights.

Rabbi Zvi Holland is the dean of the Phoenix Community Kollel. Contact him at rabbiholland@aztorah.com.

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