



**RABBI SHALOM**

**ROSNER**

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# Self-Perception and the Sin of the Spies

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker Rebbe, was one of the greatest Hasidic masters of the 19th century, famed for his sharp and uncompromising insights. He offers a striking perspective on a *pasuk* in this week's *parasha*.

When the spies return from Eretz Yisrael, they describe what they saw:

וַיִּבְרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָדָם כְּצִמְצוּמֵי הָעֵינִים וַיִּבְרְאוּ אֶת־עַצְמֵיהֶם כְּצִמְצוּמֵי הָעֵינִים וַיִּבְרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָדָם כְּצִמְצוּמֵי הָעֵינִים וַיִּבְרְאוּ אֶת־עַצְמֵיהֶם כְּצִמְצוּמֵי הָעֵינִים

“We saw there the giants... We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we were in their eyes.” (Bamidbar 13:33)

The spies depict the inhabitants as giants and themselves as insignificant grasshoppers. But the final phrase is puzzling: “and so we were in their eyes.” How could they possibly know how they were perceived?

Rashi explains that they overheard the locals speaking and comparing them to

insects in the vineyards. But the Kotzker Rebbe offers a deeper explanation. This very statement, he suggests, is part of their sin. A person who lives with integrity and clarity does not become preoccupied with how others perceive him. Such a person is anchored, internally secure, guided by truth rather than by the shifting opinions of others. The spies, however, revealed something deeper: “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes.” Their failure began not with the giants outside, but with the smallness within. Once they saw themselves as small, they assumed and perhaps even ensured, that others would see them that way as well.

The Kotzker sharpens the point even further: how a person sees himself is how he will be seen. Inner insecurity projects outward. Confidence rooted in truth commands respect. The spies’ fear was not only a fear of the inhabitants of the land, it was a lack of belief in themselves, and therefore a lack of faith in Hashem. Had they truly believed that Hashem was with them, they would not have felt like grasshoppers at all.

## STANDING ON HOLY GROUND

A similar idea emerges from another teaching associated with the Kotzker. When Hashem appears to Moshe at the burning bush, He tells him:

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*“Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy ground.”* (Shemot 3:5).

The Kotzker challenges us to reconsider this moment. Was that place inherently holy, or did it become holy because of what transpired there? His answer is transformative. *Kedusha* is not a function of geography but rather it is a function of consciousness and conduct.

The message is not only that Moshe stood on holy ground, but that wherever a person stands can become holy ground, if he lives with awareness, integrity, and an unequivocal belief that he stands before God.

The spies failed not only because they feared giants, but because they forgot where they were standing. They stood in the presence of Hashem’s promise, on the threshold of destiny and yet saw themselves as grass-hoppers. Moshe, by contrast, stood before a simple bush in the desert and was told that he stood on holy ground. The difference is not the place. The difference is the person.

An individual who sees himself as small will shrink even in the greatest moments. But a person who carries within him faith, dignity, and purpose, transforms even the most ordinary place into holy ground. Perhaps that is the enduring message of the Kotzker: Do not ask how others see you. Ask how you see yourself. Ask whether you are living in a way that reveals the presence of Hashem in your life. When a person stands with truth and purpose and follows the path of the Torah - he is never standing on ordinary ground. ■



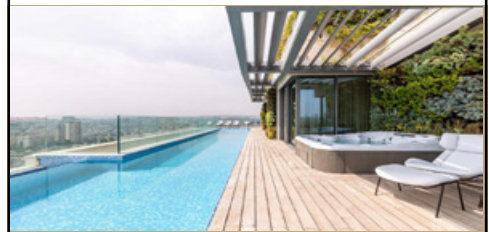
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