

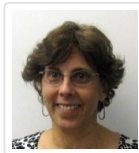
Shine Your Light!

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Bemidbar: Grasshoppers, Almonds, and the Anthropocene

By [Robert Pollack](#) | Issue Date: January 2012

The fourth of the five Books of Moses is called Numbers in English, but in Hebrew it is called Bemidbar, that is, "*Where the Wild Things Are.*"

In Numbers 13, the Israelites send scouts, led by Caleb, from their desert encampment into the Promised Land. They return 40 days later, reporting that the land is good, but reducing themselves by self-mockery and self-deprecation.

31] But the men who had gone up with him [Caleb] said "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we."

32] Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, "The country that we traveled and scouted devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size;

33] we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them."

The punishment for this failure of self-respect is direct and to the point, in Numbers 14:

31] Your children who, you said, would be carried off—these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected.

32] But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness,

33] while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness.

34] You shall bear your punishment for forty years, corresponding to the number of days—forty days—that you scouted the land: a year for each day. Thus you shall know what it means to thwart Me.

Joshua—the one scout who did not make the mistake of self-deprecation—would indeed lead the next generation of Israelites to that Promised Land, but only after an additional 40 years—one year for each day— so that the generation of self-mockery would die off to leave their children to enter it with confidence. Neither Moses nor Aaron escaped that consequence of communal self-deprecation.

But their children did, and here we are. Bemidbar does not say much about that, but it does give us a beautiful picture of what it must have meant, to some of those condemned to die in the desert, to know their children would prevail.

In the following portion, Numbers 18, concerned with the priesthood, the future fertility of Aaron's descendants is described in terms of a budding, flowering, blooming, fruitful almond branch:

21] And Moses spoke unto the children of Israel; and all their princes gave him rods, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods; and the rod of Aaron was among their rods.

22] And Moses laid up the rods before the LORD in the tent of the testimony.

23] And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and put forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and bore ripe almonds.

Forty years is a long time, but today with good medicine, good food, and good luck, it is only the first half of a lifetime. That's enough time to begin to think about where we are today. Are we fruitful, productive, like almond flowers, or are we—like those self-deprecating, paralyzed scouts— grasshoppers in our own eyes?

The answer matters, because we are in an odd time in human history. We are already well into what my most well-informed and dispassionate colleagues in the sciences tell us is a new geological Era, the Anthropocene. The Holocene—the previous 11,000 years in which all of our texts and all of our communal experiences including those in Bemidbar must have occurred— ended a few centuries back, when our species began to refashion the planet in our own image.

In those few centuries our numbers have outstripped the numbers of any other animal our size by a factor of about 100,000- fold. The carbon dioxide we continue to put into the atmosphere by burning coal and oil for our transportation and our electric power may reach a concentration that would irreversibly heat our planet's atmosphere and oceans, making our days here—or anywhere else



on Earth—considerably different and more difficult than they are today.

We have known about the need to control our planetary addiction to the burning of coal and oil—so much like a person's addiction to tobacco—for closer to 40 years than 40 days. But, like those scouts in the Bible, we have for the most part acted as if the problem was gigantic and we were but grasshoppers in our own eyes.

For myself, these past 40 years have shown me a path to doing better, and I'd like to share that with you. I am a scientist by training. That means I have been taught the craft of converting my curiosity into a set of ideas that can be tested.

This notion of testing—we call it doing experiments—is the key step in science, because when the test fails, there's no choice but to say of our idea "It's wrong," and move on. That way, science keeps itself from wasting more time and effort than necessary on ideas that can be proven wrong by testing.

Of course there are many ideas that cannot be tested nor disproved, but must be either accepted or not as a matter of inner conviction. The commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself is a good example of that. But there are many, many ideas that can be tested.

We are not grasshoppers, we are people. But what does that mean in the light of science? From the ideas that can be tested, have been tested, and have been found to survive the test, science has built up a remarkably clear vision of our place in the natural world. It is a vision that allows us to choose to act to prevent our planet and our descendants from being overcome by our past actions.

We are chemical, science says, made of only a few elements, the same elements that fill the universe: Hydrogen, Oxygen, Carbon, Nitrogen, Sulfur, and Phosphorus. But so are grasshoppers.

We are complicated, science says, with one chemical, called DNA, so complicated that it carries in it an instruction book for the construction of a whole new creature from a single cell. But so are grasshoppers.

We are a species, science says, with each one of us being fertile, that is, capable in principle of being the source of DNA for the formation of a new generation of individuals in our species. But so are grasshoppers.

We are mindful, science says, with brains so big, so complicated, so capable of learning and imagination, that we have become quite dependent upon our mental worlds. The mental world makes humans different not only from grasshoppers but from everything else alive.

Our mental worlds are expensive: We spend upwards of a quarter of the energy we get from food on the upkeep of our brains, this tissue no larger than two clenched fists. In our special mental power lie our hope and our liberty, if we would only take responsibility for each other's future.

Look around for the person who looks most different from you. That person's DNA and your DNA are about as similar or different as your DNA is from your biological brother or sister's DNA. We *are* all one family.

So, we are each mistaken, science says, when we choose to live in a mental world in which we think that any one of us is special. This is the modern way of seeing others as grasshoppers. And of course, if everyone thinks that way about someone else, it is no different overall from everyone thinking of themselves as grasshoppers as well.

So, let us resolve today to do better than Caleb's scouts. Let us resolve today to begin to see each other as equally valuable, equally rare, equally vulnerable, no matter what differences there are among us.

Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994.

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