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The Interconnections between Numbers 11-14 and Numbers 15

The possibility that the mitzvot of **Numbers 15** may have a purposeful connection with the stories of rebellion that precede them was already suggested by **early Jewish commentators like Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides: The incident of the spies is immediately followed by the section containing mitzvot which apply only to the Promised Land. This was intended to give confidence of the ultimate possession of the Land to the wilderness generation, who might have been skeptical about the fulfillment of the forty-year-old promise.**



That this section of mitzvot for life in **Canaan** was intended to serve as words of promise for **the wilderness generation** is confirmed by the concluding verse in this section. It reaffirms **God's** relationship to **Isra'el** after the trauma of the rebellion stories in **Numbers Chapters 11-14: I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.** This is important since the major issue in the spy story is **Isra'el's** desire to undo **the Exodus** and return to **Egypt (14:2-4).** The mitzvot in **Numbers 15** explicitly apply only when **Isra'el** arrived in **Canaan**; therefore, they carry an implicit promise: it is **the Land**, God promises, that **I am**

giving to you (15:2). The reaffirmation of **God's** relationship, and the implicit promise that **YHVH** would bring **Isra'el** back into **the Land** was reassuring to **the wilderness generation** that **He** would be faithful to the promises that **He** had made to **them (14:31).**

Many other connections between the mitzvot of **Numbers 15** and the preceding rebellion stories of **Numbers 11-14** may also be seen. Other refrains in **Numbers 15** touch on themes in the revolt narratives.

Numbers 11-14

Numbers 15

In Numbers 11-14 we see the Gentile rabble (11:4) who followed the Hebrews out of Egypt, and the Cushite wife of Moshe (12:1); while in Numbers 15 we see the Gentile foreigner.

In Numbers 11-14 we see that the Exodus generation will die in the desert, but the wilderness generation will live in the Land (14:30-31); while in Numbers 15 we see the phrase, "throughout the generations to come."

In Numbers 11-14 we see the reversal of the fact that ADONAI's fire broke out against the rebels in the camp (11:2-3); while in Numbers 15 we see an offering by fire to YHVH.

In Numbers 11-14 we see the anger of ADONAI (11:1, 10, 33, and 12:9); while in Numbers 15 we see the offerings as "a pleasing aroma to ADONAI."

Other associations between the mitzvot in **Numbers 15** and the rebellion stories in **Numbers 11-14** can be seen. Examples of **sinning defiantly** and **despising ADONAI** discussed in **Numbers 15:30-31** abound in the rebellion stories of **Numbers 11:1** and **4-6, 12:2, 13:32-33, 14:2-4; while in Numbers 15 certain offerings, a priest could atone for unintentional sins (to see link click [Cj - Unintentional Sin](#)).** But in the case of intentional rebellions by individuals or **the community**, as in the spy story, only **Moses** could seek forgiveness in an extraordinary act of intercession. Even so, **the community** was severely punished (**Num 14:13-24**).

The image of the sacrifices and offerings in the land of Canaan that combine different meats, flour, and wine in Numbers 15:1-21 suggests

that Canaan was a place of rich food, fertility, and wonderful variety. This portrait confirms the first spy report concerning **Canaan** that it was **a land flowing with milk and honey (13:27)** as well as **Caleb** and **Joshua's** report that it was **an exceedingly good land (14:7)**. The delicious variety of food reflected in the prescribed time after **Isra'el** was to arrive **in Canaan after forty years (15:1-21)** provides an answer to **the rebels who were tired of the monotony of manna** and **yearned to go back and eat** the variety of foods **in Egypt (11:4-6)**. In effect, the **grain and drink offerings (15:1-16)** taught **the Israelites** how to properly receive and eat what **YHVH** provided – with thanksgiving and with the recognition that it was a gift from **God (11:32-33)**.

The death penalty by stoning in the case of the Sabbath-breaker as commanded by Ha'Shem (Numbers 15:36) contrasts with the rebellious attempt by the community to use **death by stoning** against the two faithful spies, **Caleb and Joshua**, in the spy story in **Numbers 14:10**. **The concern with both individual acts of sin and community acts of sin in 15:22-31** reflects the interplay of individuals and **the whole community** in **Numbers Chapters 11-14**. At times individuals engage in acts of rebellion (**the rabble** in **11:4**; the rebellion of **Miryam** and **Aaron** in **12:1-3**; the **ten unfaithful spies** in **13:31-33** and **14:36-38**), and at other times **the entire community** was guilty (**11:1, 3** and **33**; **14:1-4** and **39-45**).

Finally, the blue cords on the tzitzit remind Isra'el to be diligent in obeying the commandments so that their eyes do not stray and they do "not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes" (15:39). The Hebrew literally reads, **"so that you are not spying out (Hebrew: tur) after your own heart and after your own eyes as you are shoring (Hebrew: zenuth) after them.** The same pair of Hebrew verbs, **to spy out** and **to commit spiritual adultery**, occurs in **14:33-34**. There, **God** condemns the faithless spies and the whole community for their faithlessness, which led to the punishment of death in **the wilderness**. The verb **to commit spiritual adultery** is often used as an image for **Isra'el's** going after other gods or idols, phantom gods that are not the true **God of Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gq - The Golden Calf Incident**). The faithless **spies** had lied and exaggerated what they saw: **a land that devoured its inhabitants** and primordial **giants named Nephilim (13:32-33)** rather than **God's gift of a very good land flowing with milk and honey**. The rebellious **people** redefined reality by claiming to see **Egypt** as a place of salvation and promise (**14:1-4**) rather than **a land of slavery, suffering,**

and death (Exodus 1:8-22 and 3:7-9). Therefore, the blue cords and tzitzit worn on their clothing were to remind the people of their God and His mitzvot, the first of which is that, “I am ADONAI your God . . . you shall have no other gods beside Me (Deuteronomy 5:6-7).

Overall, the interconnections between **Numbers 15** and the stories of rebellion that precede it are numerous. The mitzvot of **this chapter** were meant to be words of encouragement to **the wilderness generation** (see [Cg](#) - **A Whisper of Hope: Reassurance for Life in the Promised Land**), in spite of the disobedience and death of **the Exodus generation**. In this case, the mitzvot function as a profound promise for **their** future.²⁶⁵