

The Faith of the Past = The Faith of the Future

Parashat Shelah; June 14, 2014/16 Sivan 5774

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

I love history...I always have. I'm not sure why some people gravitate toward the sciences or mathematics or languages or the arts...But as far back as I can remember, I have always been enthralled by history. American, European, Far Eastern, Jewish—no surprise there—And I suspect that one of the reasons for that is the extensive time that I spent with my grandparents growing up. My grandparents were master story tellers. It's not that they were teaching me the history of the world as I sat and listened on their laps, it's that they were telling me the history of *their* world. *Their* experiences growing up on the Lower East Side of New York, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Hagerstown...their great westward migration...to Cleveland, OH! I loved listening to my grandparents talk to me about their grandparents, and relate stories to me about a world that seemed so distant, so different from my own reality. They were my time machine, you see. Through their vivid descriptions of their lives, their challenges, the circumstances of their world, I was transported back in time, and I felt that ever so briefly, I was able to inhabit their world—their past.

As time went on I became more and more enchanted with Jewish history. Although I was studying Jewish history in rigorous undergraduate and graduate school settings, there was always something personal about it. I felt that by studying the history of my people I gained much deeper understandings of myself...it was like studying a diary of my great-great grandparents over the expanse of many centuries. And I always play this little game with myself...even to this day. Particularly when reading about an especially trying time or challenging circumstance, I always ask myself: What would you have done had you been living then--Had you been faced with this decision or that ordeal? Would I have had the courage or the wisdom or the foresight to do what was right or courageous or informed by faith, or would I have, so to speak, failed the test? Would I have been part of the generation that made it possible for Judaism to continue to live another day, or would I have buckled under the pressure or the fear of what I was facing? Think about this in your own mind: Would you have walked out of Egypt into the hot, dry, unknown wilderness, following a self-proclaimed prophet named Moses on the 14th of Nisan, some 3,000 years ago? Or would you have stuck with the devil you knew instead of the devil you didn't know, and stayed back in Egypt? Would you have taken the first step into the waters

of the Reed Sea, not knowing if they would swallow you up or open up so you could cross through to safety? Would you have responded with an enthusiastic “Yes!” when Moses appeared from the top of Mt. Sinai holding a covenant of mission and purpose or would you have said, no thanks, I don’t need that kind of regimen or expectation in my life? And how about in our parasha this week: Would you have sided with the ten spies who said that entering into the promised land was just too dangerous, too risky, too crazy! Would you have said, ‘You know, the east side of the Jordan River suits me just fine...I’ve heard all the stories around the camp fire about how God promised every generation since Abraham to bring us into the land of Israel, but now that I see it with my own eyes, I’m not sure it’s such a good idea.’ Or would you have had the courage to side with the minority report...with Joshua and Caleb...and said, ‘Actually God has a perfect track record so far. He has delivered on every single promise...brought us safely out of Egypt, gave us the Torah, protected us and fed us in the wilderness, and brought us to the threshold of the Promised Land...I’m pretty sure God’s not going to all of a sudden stop delivering on all His promises. Let’s go for it!’ As much as I’d like to think I would have been on the right side of history in these and so many other circumstances, sometimes I wonder what I would have done if I actually had to face them.

Have you ever wondered if our ancestors faced similar questions or internal struggles? Sometimes they seem so pure and righteous, right? After all, they’ve seen explicit miraculous intervention...some of them even heard the voice of God! You’d certainly think that would make things much more clear cut, right? Well, not so fast. There is evidence in our parasha that this kind of inner struggle occurred to at least one of the spies on the mission we read about this morning. How do we know this? If you closely examine Numbers 13:22 you’ll see what I’m talking about (it’s on page 842 in the Etz Hayim Humash). This is one of those situations where it helps to know the Hebrew...

The Torah says: *Va’ya’alu va’yaturu et eretz midbar Tzin ad R’hov l’vo Hamat...*The spies—**plural**—went up and scouted the land, from the wilderness of Tzin to Rehov at Levo Hamat. Then it says, *Va’ya-alu va-Negev*, and they—again **plural**—went up into the Negev. But then all the plural verbs abruptly switch to singular! *Va’yavo ad Hevron...*and **HE** came to Hevron. “He,” who? It seems that one of the twelve spies peeled off and went alone, singularly, to Hevron. Then the text returns to all the plural verbs until they return to Moses, Aaron and the

Jewish people several verses later. So of course the Rabbis notice this odd detour of one unnamed spy to Hebron, and they offer the most beautiful explanation for what is happening there...

What do we know about Hebron, already at this point in the Torah? We know that it is the site of *Ma'arat Ha'mahpelah*, the burial cave of the ancestors. It is the oldest Jewish burial ground in the world—just 20 miles south of Jerusalem. It was purchased at top dollar from Ephron the Hittite by Abraham when he needed a place to bury Sarah; and Abraham himself was also buried there, along with Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah. Some people consider Hebron to be the second holiest site to the Jewish people after Jerusalem, and hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit the site every year to this day. So which spy, according to the Talmud, detoured, left the rest of the scouting party, to stop at Hebron, which was also a holy place even in that generation? The Talmud teaches¹ that it was none other than Caleb. *Melamed she'peirash kalev mei'atzat meraglim, ve'halach ve'nishtatach al kivrei avot*. It teaches that Caleb separated from the company of the spies, and went to prostrate himself upon the graves of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Can you imagine this...here is this clandestine scouting party, making their way under the radar, through enemy controlled territory, and one lone spy breaks off from the group to go and find a sacred family crypt from hundreds of generations earlier in order to pray at that particular place?! *Avotai*, Caleb cried out—Holy Ancestors! *Bakshu alay rahamim she'enatzel mei'atzat meraglim!* Intercede for me—pray on my behalf—that I will have the strength to be delivered from the council of the spies. In other words, Caleb sees where this expedition is going. He can tell that the mood among the spies is negative. Part of him probably agrees with them. *It is* a land of fortress cities and forbidding locals. The stakes *are* high. *It is* frightening. And perhaps Caleb even felt himself being swayed by their arguments! So where does he go to restore his faith? To refocus his values? To find solace and reassurance? He goes to commune with his ancestors. He goes to that sacred place to remind himself of all the promises that were made to them; of their extraordinary faith and courage; of their sacrifices and heroism so that he and his generation would be able to be the recipients of the ancient promise that after years of wandering and slavery and homelessness, the Jewish people would finally

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 34b

settle in their ancestral homeland. And he returns from that place fully confident, and reports accordingly to the Jewish people.

I am so moved by this account. Truly whenever I worry about the welfare or fate of the Jewish people, I often meditate on and draw spiritual sustenance from the incredible feats of my ancestors/our ancestors. If they were able to maintain their faith, to transcend oppression, and to live up to the highest ideals and values of our tradition, then surely our generation can...surely you and I can. As my teacher and friend Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger (whom I introduced many of you to several months ago) wrote:

“Our life and the length of our days is to be found in our deep sense of identification with our history, with the Jewish leaders of foregone days. We may rise up and become greater than ourselves when we experience ourselves to be standing on their shoulders. But this requires that we take affirmative action as [Caleb] did, that we know our history, that we actively seek out connections to our people’s past and that we integrate that past into our own sense of self, thereby becoming part of the larger tapestry. Then we may find ourselves able to draw from its wellsprings at times of need, and be energized into heroic action as [Caleb] was.”²

My incredible, pious wife has a little custom that although sometimes we kid her about, is actually very inspiring. Her grandmother, Toby Shkarofsky (of blessed memory), who emigrated to Canada from Poland just in the nick of time, used to kiss the mezuzah not once, not twice, but three times before leaving her home. It is likely that her mother, and grandmother, and ancestors did the same thing. Ever since I met Sari some 20 years ago, I noticed that she too kisses the mezuzah not once, not twice, but three times before coming and going. I know that this little family custom brings brings her into communion not only with her grandmother, but with the strong legacy of Jewish faith and perseverance that is a precious part of her family history. So think about it dear friends, what do you know about our sacred past? What do you do to keep alive the traditions of our ancestors? How do you derive faith and sustenance from their deeds and their courage? May we all discover those invaluable reminders in our lives and live with even greater faith and greater hope because of them.

Shabbat Shalom

² Parshat Shlach, “Fortified by our Forefathers,” Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, June 13, 2014/15 Sivan 5774