

## Black Lives Matter – Parashat Shelah 5780

Rabbi Michael Safra

What are facts? The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is credited with saying that people are entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts. We like to cite Sergeant Joe Friday's imperative to search for "just the facts, Ma'am." But what are facts? Do facts necessarily lead to particular conclusions? Some simple examples:

- It's raining outside. That's a fact. But what does it mean that it's raining? Some say: It's raining, so I will stay home today. Some say: It's raining and I don't care; I will get wet. Others say: It's raining; better bring an umbrella.
- Take one that's more complicated. Drinking alcohol impairs judgement and can lead to dangerous decisions. There's a broad consensus that we should never drink and drive. We agree that people under a certain age should never drink alcohol. But for the most part, different people respond to the fact that alcohol impairs judgment differently. Some refrain from alcohol entirely while others try to navigate a path to be responsible about the risks. And lots of us make mistakes
- Or the pandemic. It is a fact that COVID-19 is a highly contagious disease for which there is no vaccine and no cure. It is a fact that health, safety, and life take precedence in Judaism over all other values. And yet, reasonable people disagree about how best to mitigate risk or what activities might be considered essential even in the face of risk. And I'm talking about reasonable people, not the extremists we watch on TV. The debate is not over the facts, but over their interpretation.
- Or with "the other virus." Yesterday on Juneteenth, we announced that our congregation will soon display a banner proclaiming that "Black Lives Matter." Those three words are not free from controversy. It is a fact that in 2016, the Movement for Black Lives took a position declaring Israel an Apartheid state. It is a fact that Jews are a minority and antisemitism still exists. It is a fact that not all Jews are white. And it is a fact that racism is a persistent and festering problem in this country, built into the system in a way that it is not just avowed racists and white supremacists who perpetuate it. I'll come back to that.

Our Torah portion today (and, by the way, it took longer, but how great was it to actually hear the Torah being read for the first time in more than three months!) described the disagreement between the ten scouts who disparaged the Land of Israel and the two – Caleb and Joshua – who spoke positively. All the people are punished for accepting the evil report. Caleb and Joshua are rewarded for sticking to their principles even when unpopular. And it is important to recognize that both groups had the facts on their side. The Ten spoke glowingly about the giant clusters of grapes and huge pomegranates and figs. The Two did not dispute the existence of giants who made the scouts feel as grasshoppers. The facts were not disputed. The question was what the facts should mean.

Instead of asking how to properly take the dangers into account, the ten scouts asked whether the mission was worth it. The people were punished not for acknowledging the facts, but for misinterpreting them in a vile way.

There is a midrash, based on a grammatical incongruity in the text, that says Caleb broke away from the other scouts while they were touring the Negev. Caleb peeled off to Hebron and visited the Cave of the Patriarchs, Me'arat Hamachpelah. It was upon seeing the graves of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that Caleb was reminded of the history of the promise that our people would settle in the land. And that small history lesson determined Caleb's interpretation of the facts. It reminded him of the imperative of the journey. This was a good land that had to be settled; the cause was just, regardless of the difficulties that lay ahead.

Which brings me back to those three words: "Black Lives Matter." We dare not ignore disturbing facts regarding the intersectionality of Zionism, antisemitism, and racism. But we have to interpret those facts in light of this moment. This moment calls upon us to remember how our history began with liberation from oppression. Zionism itself is a liberation movement. We have to remember how Jews once stood on the front lines of the Civil Rights movement because we saw ourselves in the struggle. This moment calls upon us to acknowledge that our community has changed. Not all Jews are white, the percentages of Jews of Color are growing, and the old binaries of Jews and Blacks don't necessarily work; and, at the same time, we must recognize that many non-Jews in the African American community look at the Jewish community and all they see are Whites.

This moment calls upon us to educate ourselves.

This moment calls upon us to pursue justice.

This moment calls upon us to change ourselves ... change our community ... change the world.

The organized Jewish community cannot stand on the sidelines to wait for the issue to resolve itself. Black Lives Matter. They matter too much.

One of the classical questions on today's Torah portion is why God commanded Moses to send the scouts in the first place. If God was going to lead the battle, if God was going to conquer the land, why was it necessary for the people to prepare at all? Why was it necessary to scare them with the facts?

And the answer is: אין סומכין על הנס, We do not rely on miracles. As the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Rabeinu Bahya ben Asher put it, miracles come after nature. First the people have to make appropriate preparations; they have to do everything within their power by natural means, and only afterwards will the miracle come. The arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, to paraphrase Dr. King, but it doesn't get there by itself. We have a sacred duty to get involved in the fight. We have a responsibility to do more.

It isn't just proclamations. Dialogue is important ... and that means listening. Organizing is important ... and that means learning. As chair of our Faith Community Outreach Committee, Marla Schulman is helping to organize study about racial equity. We are reaching out to people who have been

doing this work for much longer than we have to find out what we don't know, to connect to programs that are already out there and making a difference, to find the best ways to get more people involved in a ways that are more impactful than just showing up. Words are important, but it is actions that really count.

And faith. And hope.

Our ancestors were punished not for acknowledging the facts, but for giving up hope. In the same commentary, Rabeinu Bahya asks why Moses was punished by not being allowed to enter the land. We say it was because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it, but really? Is hitting an inanimate object really so wrong? Bahya says Moses was punished for something else. Not hitting the rock, but giving up hope. And not in the wilderness, but already back in Egypt.

At the very beginning, Moses returned to Egypt and spoke before Pharaoh; and things didn't go well. Pharaoh told the Israelites they would have to gather their own straw, the people rebelled against Moses, and Moses was ready to give up. "Why did You bring harm upon this people?" Moses asked God. "Why did You send me? Pharaoh has only made matters worse and You have not delivered Your people."

It was at that moment, says Bahya, when Moses was ready to relinquish his responsibility to lead the liberation to freedom, that his fate was sealed. "Then the Lord said to Moses: 'You shall see what I will do to Pharaoh.'" You will see what I will do to Pharaoh, says Bahya, but not what I will do to the Canaanites. Only those who are prepared to fight, only those who are willing to press on with the pursuit of justice in spite of the challenges and in spite of the facts, only those on the right side of history will experience the miracle.

My friends, this is our moment, and we must be prepared to answer the call. Because it matters. For the moral fabric of our country ... for the sake of our sacred values ... because our lives, all lives, Black Lives Matter.

Shabbat shalom.