

We Are All Foot Soldiers
Parashat Pinchas
July 15, 2017
Evie Weinstein-Park
Temple Aliyah, Needham

The writing on largest of the 12 rocks said, **“When your children shall ask YOU in time to come saying what mean these 12 stones? Then YOU shall tell them how YOU made it over.”** (Joshua 4:21-22) We were standing on the banks of the Alabama River, just a stone’s throw away from the spot on the Edmund Pettus Bridge where 52 years earlier, John Lewis and dozens of other protesters had been met by Alabama State Troopers armed with electric cattle prods, whips, and tear gas in a confrontation that would electrify the nation and set it on a course that would ultimately end in the passage of the Voting Rights Act, six months later. This was but one act in a saga that had been stretching on for far too long.

This past February, several members of my family and I made a Civil Rights trip to Alabama. We’d wanted to take such a trip for a while. With our daughter Rebecca spearheading the effort, we decided to visit Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham.

That passage on the rocks is taken from the book of Joshua, and it details the Israelites’ entry into Canaan, making today’s portion an important part of the prologue to that one.

Today’s Torah portion is *named* “Pinhas,” but I want to focus more on what happens after Pinhas is mentioned. To summarize, Pinhas is best characterized as a religious zealot, a fanatic. When we encounter him this week, he has just publically and violently *killed* an Israelite man involved in an idolatrous practice with an idolatrous woman. God



rewards him for this public act of religious extremism, both by ending a plague that was killing thousands of Israelites in the community and more personally “with a pact of priesthood for all time,” for him and his descendants. As a modern reader of the Torah, I find this scene inherently troubling. Violent, extremist, fanatic Pinhas gets rewarded for committing murder in the name of condemning idolatry.

In this same parsha, however, peaceful, steady, observant Moses keeps getting reminded of his punishment. As we read two weeks ago, in *Parsha Hukat*, Moses *strikes* the rock instead of merely speaking to it, to get water from the rock, in front of the whole community. Since that point and throughout this week’s parsha, God keeps on reminding him that he has done wrong and therefore will not be entering the promised land.

But what Moses does, after such a humiliating public rebuke, is truly remarkable and benefits the whole community.

As we continue to read, God commands Moses and Eleazar to take a census of “the whole Israelite community.” God’s intention seems to be to certify that all of the older generation have died in the wilderness. While it is somewhat boring to read through this census, I have come to believe that this census and what it stands for are actually at the heart of this portion and of our lives in general. This census enumerates all of the people in the community and even names the different clans and their numbers. It even names several women – names that are usually lost in the Torah. This census forces us to remember and recognize the thousands of Israelites who are with Moses and are present – the ones who are actually about to enter into the promised land. These mostly nameless but numerous individuals form a movement. Were it not for all of them, all of us would not exist, and yet so much of the way history often gets told focuses on the leaders. This census reminds us that everyone counts, literally – leader *and* community or movement.

And in life, we need to remember that everyone counts – the young and the old, the famous and the not so famous, the powerful and the powerless, the leaders and the community. Everyone has an important role to fill.

Moses and Eleazar take stock of all the people, and this census forces him to remember and recognize each of the thousands of Israelites who are with him. Then Moses does something strikingly beautiful and remarkably poignant, something selfless. Moses asks for one last thing for his entire community. In the past, Moses' requests have come from what God commands him to ask from Pharaoh or from what the people ask of him, but this request is different: It comes from Moses' heart. I believe it comes from Moses' experience of just having counted everyone. And, this request comes in the face of having just been told by God that he needs to climb the mountain to see the land he won't enter – and, once again, God reminds him of why he can't.

But instead of whining and complaining or even pleading with God to change his mind, instead of asking for something for himself or his own family, Moses asks for something for his entire people.

“Let the Lord... appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.”(27:16-17)

That passage is one of the most beautiful passages I have read in the Torah.

It is both heartwarming and heartbreaking to see how much Moses has grown to love his people. For all that they have put him through, and for all their thankless grumbling, Moses does not want to leave them. And he does not want to leave them leaderless. Even if he can't be their leader, he knows that they still need one, in order for them to do and

be their best. Moses' deep and selfless love for and commitment to the people he once doubted *that he even could lead* shines through his prose and throughout this passage. When God responds by telling him to name Joshua as his successor and exactly how to invest him, Moses once again goes beyond what he is told to do.

“Single out Joshua... and lay your **hand** upon him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. ... Moses did as the Lord commanded him. ... He laid his **hands** upon him and commissioned him...” (27:18-22).

Actually, in the strictest sense, Moses again does not follow God's instructions exactly. Instead of laying just one hand upon Joshua, Moses uses *both* of his hands. Luckily this transgression, unlike the prior one where he also went beyond what was asked of him, goes unpunished. In fact, with his humble actions, and with dignity and grace, Moses literally embraces and endorses his successor without any bitterness -- and with complete affirmation. When a leader puts his people first, above himself or his own needs, this is what true, selfless -- and loving -- leadership truly looks like.

But as I've said, the relationship between a leader and his people goes two ways. And this brings me back to the quotation from Joshua on those rocks we saw in Selma: “**YOU shall tell them how YOU made it over.**” That YOU is a plural you. Those rocks remember all of the members of the community who crossed over to the promised land – that YOU refers to all of the *people who are named in the census in our portion* – not just their leaders – and in that later passage, Joshua is reminding them all of that. *Good leadership is important, but it needs to go hand in hand with an active community.*

Just as the enumeration of the census in our parsha reminds us of the entire community of Israelites that it took to get to the Promised land, in each of the stops we made on our trip

to the South -- in Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham -- there was another narrative being told – one that documented and showed that the winning of Civil Rights was a movement, a joint effort – it was not the accomplishment of *only* Dr. Martin Luther King or any other *one* of the leaders.

Even the foresight, determination, and hard work to preserve, document, and share the history of those times in each of those cities, is due as much or more to the members of those communities as to the efforts of government agencies like the National Park Service. There are many sites to visit and learn from – and even some eyewitnesses to hear from still. We learned that, just as important as those who *led* were those who are now called “the Foot Soldiers of the Movement.” These were the ordinary people – the teachers and housemaids and delivery people – who, among many other things, lined up countless times, at great risk, just to try to get the right to vote. The foot soldiers – another name for the people who were counted in our Biblical census today. The modern foot soldiers were risking their livelihoods, for if their employers were to learn what they were involved in, they would have been likely to lose their jobs. And, they were risking their lives, for law enforcement sanctioned the use of electric cattle prods and rifle butts, and they were even implicitly giving permission for their children to risk *their* lives, for countless children, put their own lives on the line.

The National Voting Rights Museum in Selma is a sort of homegrown museum; it has no connection to the National Park Service. It is a museum with a lot of artifacts and a lot of heart. Before you even enter, you see large murals painted outside the building. One proclaims, “Hands that picked cotton can pick our presidents.” While this was the first place where we encountered the term “*the foot soldiers of the movement*,” it would not be the last. In this museum, along with artifacts sharing information about several better known activists, there were also plaster casts of the actual feet of those who walked along

on the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in March of 1965, several weeks after Bloody Sunday. In another museum along the march route, there were shoes. All of these people – the ones who actually walked, the ones who supported them in many other ways, like a museum volunteer we met, who as a 6th grader, with his classmates, had helped out at a campsite that had been a way station for those actually marching to Selma – all of them counted, all of them had played a role in the movement.

In Montgomery, at the Rosa Parks Museum, we learned not only or even mostly about Rosa Parks but of the solidarity, organization, and sheer will of *the entire* African American community that it took to make the Montgomery Bus Boycott work, from start to finish. Sitting in Dr. King's Dexter Street Church, we heard about the years and years of efforts made by countless congregants in countless Black churches like the one we were sitting in. At the Southern Poverty Law Center, the 48 people who were named in its beautiful and powerful memorial to the *many* martyrs of the movement were both familiar and unfamiliar – leaders and foot soldiers. And in Birmingham, we visited places that memorialized the youngest foot soldiers of the movement: the 16th St. Baptist Church -- where on a Sunday morning in September, 1963, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Addie Mae Collins were brutally killed by a KKK bomb blast -- and across the street, the dynamic statues in Kelly Ingram Park, a real monument to the efforts of all of the children of Birmingham.

The stones beside the river in Selma, the places we visited in the South, and yes, the census in this week's parsha, all are a testament to all of the foot soldiers. All give voice to the fact that, as Moses knew, a leader alone cannot make change; he or she needs to work in tandem with an army of ordinary people to make up a movement, to do the tasks large and small, to do the work of making 'the arc of the universe bend toward justice.' In the South in the 1960s, it was the struggle to gain the vote and other civil rights. In the

Torah, it was the work of becoming a free people and entering the promised land. Today it is our turn to make positive change, to be like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who ‘prayed with his feet’ when he marched alongside Dr. King, to be the foot soldiers and to see beyond our comfortable bubble, to look around selflessly and to notice, as Moses did, to see what is needed, to stand up and raise our voices for positive change, and to work and to march toward making the differences that ordinary people working together can make to help repair our world. As we learn from the census in today’s portion, every one of us counts.

Shabbat Shalom.