

Finding Meaning in Stories
Parashat Shelach Lechah
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Have you ever thought about why are you here in this world? Is it random or something more? What meaning do you give your existence? I recently read a book entitled “The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness” by Emily Esfahani Smith, a woman raised in the Sufi tradition, who does research at the University of Penn about meaning-making in our lives. She describes four pillars of meaning making: Community, Purpose, Transcendence, and Storytelling. Let’s start with Community: When we investigate our own lives, although we may feel “out of balance” at times, we may notice that being a part of a community, feeling you “belong” is so crucial to a feeling of well-being. We all started out in small family units. As we grew older, we expanded into our chosen families, into work communities, religious communities, avocational communities. What in your sense of community? Does it soothe you?

How about purpose? What makes you feel that you are living a purposeful life? Is it what you do with your family, your children, grandchildren, your work, your synagogue? Perhaps you have thought about this at different times on your life journey. We often do this at life cycle times: on becoming parents, changing jobs, retiring, volunteering and so on. While I won’t be focusing on these first two pillars, I invite you to pause for a few moments and take inventory of your own sense of community and how you define your purpose.

I’d like to explore a bit more the last two on Esfahani’s list of meaning making: Transcendence and Storytelling. Are there moments that you might describe as transcendent? Is it at milestone times? Is it out in nature? At Temple? With your family? Your friends? All of the above? Do you notice and label these special moments as transcendent, or do you take them for granted? I just learned, from a review of the Play, Yerma, about the word, DUENDE, loosely defined by the Jewish musician, Juanito Pascual, “ a spirit that comes over people, an enhanced state of emotion, triggered by art or music.... Whenever something special is happening....” “You can’t capture it,” he goes on to say, “It comes in a moment and can go in a moment, you never know when it’s going to come”. Can we be open to receive these Duende, Transcendent moments? Do we express gratitude when we find ourselves in these moments?

The fourth pillar of meaning making is Storytelling. People have been telling stories since the beginning of time. Melinda Gates, recently quoted in the New Yorker, is quoted as saying “The power of stories opens our hearts to a new place, which opens our minds, which often leads to action.” And Michelle Obama is quoted as saying (I am paraphrasing) “the power of storytelling inspires us, makes us think differently about



the world around us, and helps us open our minds and hearts to others.” What narrative do you tell yourself and others about your life? About the lives of your family of origin? Your family now? Your extended family? Has it changed over the years? While we can’t change “the facts” of our story: ie date of birth, your first job, your children’s birth, dates of death of family members, and other life passages, HOW you tell your story can certainly change over the years. You may exclude, include, emphasize, play down some aspect of your story as you go through your life.

How does this relate to Shelach Lechah, our Torah portion today?

God seems to be very concerned with meaning making. God’s prophet, Moses, is given the task of leading this chosen community of Israelites to Canaan, the promised Land; they had left Egypt eighteen months ago, and have been wandering in the wilderness, complaining at times, grateful at times, fearful at times, angry at times. We are told in Deuteronomy that the people asked Moses to send out men as spies to get a sense of this promised land. God has already told Moses and the Israelites what this land is like, but the people are worried and frightened, and are doubting their leader and doubting God. “Being sent to scout out” contains both the excitement of what the future may bring as well as fear and anxiety about the uncertainty that goes along with it. Shelach Lechah is thought to mean “send out for yourself, Moses as I, God, don’t want to do this”. In Deuteronomy we learn the people want this, not Moses, and not God. This contrasts with Abraham being told by God “Lech Lechah”. “Go and take yourself out, go further, leave all you know behind, go to a land that I will give you”. Instead, in “Shelach Lechah”, Moses is told, “You send these men, have them go even further out and go beyond the boundaries of the wilderness.” Moses instructs these spies to familiarize themselves with the land, this same land that is in the story of their ancestors, the land Abraham was promised, to continue the journey as was commanded by God. Moses also knows the Israelites will have to conquer this land in order to inhabit it.

The Israelites are in this fraught liminal space: in between Egypt, that narrow enslavement space and Canaan, the Land of Freedom and Redemption. The closer they get to Canaan, the more anxious they become. What happens to these twelve “spies”? They are instructed to answer the following questions: “Will this land be good or bad for us? Who are the people already living there? Are they strong or weak? What is the actual land like? Will it nourish us? Will it quench our thirst? Will it feed our souls?” Twelve tribal heads go out, including Caleb and Joshua. We are told they “scout out” actually “penetrate” the land. Returning after 40 days, they make their report. How do they tell their story?

Another brief digression about storytelling: E.O. Wilson, the well-known biologist, naturalist, and author, writes that “when you are a child, you see animals as much bigger than they are”. Now these twelve “spies” were certainly not children, yet the majority of them saw the inhabitants of Canaan as “huge”, as “giants” and unconquerable. They saw themselves as “grasshoppers”, as weak, as powerless. Coming from their enslaved mentality, feeling powerless for so long, has had tremendous impact

on how they perceived the Promised Land. Despite at first reporting about the huge clusters of grapes, which they took possession of to bring back, and the flowing milk and honey, they were deeply mired in the story of their enslavement, and the degradation they had experienced not so long before. When the Israelites heard this story, they believed every word of it, and cried out bitterly to Moses. This enslaved generation is a very complex one. They were told by their slavemasters what to do minute by minute. How ambivalent they must be about Moses and God telling them what to do now.

How does fear, uncertainty about the future, sadness and anger about loss, influence how much risk the Israelites, barring Caleb and Joshua, are willing to take now? Will it be “worth it”? What if God doesn’t deliver these inhabitants to them? Doubt creeps in.

When there is doubt and fear, how well can any of us really “see” what is in front of our eyes? How often has our own story changed when we are fearful? When we are doubtful and frightened, does our faith falter?

Antoine de Saint Exupery writes “It’s only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye”. The enslaved Israelites missed seeing what was essential.

Rabbi Shefa Gold, on Shelach Lechah writes: “We glimpse the Promised Land, but must return to the wilderness of our lives; beneath the mask of suffering there is grace”. “Cheyn,” Grace, is at the center of our storytelling today. This Cheyn is about Transcendence, being able to recall the miracle of the Exodus, the miracle of the manna, the sweet water, the glow of the sun by day and moon by night.

Alas, the enslaved generation will not get to enter the Promised Land. Moses, too, will be punished along with them and does not enter. There is too much doubt, too much memory, too much pain in their narrative. How they tell their story keeps them stuck in the wilderness. Only the next generation will enter. The ones not contaminated by experiencing slavery will be free. The ones who embrace God telling them how to live their lives in covenant will be a Holy People.

We, too, know that our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will enter a world that we will not inhabit. How can we help them “see” what is essential in life?

Back to the 4 pillars of meaning-making in our lives as a Jewish people. When we find ourselves in the wilderness:

May we all reach out to our very precious communities and find purpose.

May we all recall transcendent moments with gratitude.

May we all tell our stories with grace.

Shabbat Shalom