

Rabbi David Wolkeknfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
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### This is What Your Fathers Did

Just a few weeks ago, on a Friday afternoon, Sara and I walked with our children to shul just before our first Shabbat together in Yerushalayim. In the late afternoon on Fridays in Yerushalayim, almost everyone on the street is also walking to shul. I may have mentioned that to Sophie or somehow pointed out all of the people around us who were also walking to shul. Sophie asked, “if they’re walking to shul, why are they walking in a different direction than we are?”

In Jerusalem, you can’t walk more than three blocks in any direction without finding a shul. In Lakeview, not so much. Nothing in her experience until then had prepared her for that sort of environment. She, quite rationally, used her background and prior experiences to evaluate what she saw around her. But she was in a new and different environment quite unlike what she had known.

There is always a risk when we experience new things that we will mischaracterize them based on our prior experiences.

Just prior to the conquest of the Land of Israel, the tribes of Reuven and Gad, later joined by half of the tribe of Menashe approach Moshe with a curious proposal. They wish to receive their tribal allotments of land on the eastern shores of the Jordan river outside the core heartland of the land that God had promised to Avraham. They have large herds of animals and the land on the eastern shores of the Jordan are particularly well suited for grazing animals.

Moshe responds in anger and outrage:

הַאֲחֵיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ כֹּה:

“Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the LORD has given them?”

And then Moshe reveals what has really worried him:

כֹּה עָשׂוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּשַׁלְחֵי אֹתָם מִקֶּדֶשׁ בְּרַנְעַ לְרֹאשׁוֹת אֶת־הַאֲרָץ:

"That is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to survey the land

Moshe interprets the request as a repeat of the most consequential sin in Jewish history, the sin of the spies. Forty years earlier, also on the cusp of entering Eretz Yisrael, the frightful report of the spies spooked the population and dissuaded them from attempting the conquest of Eretz Yisrael. On the 9th of Av, the original day which would live in infamy, we sat on the ground and wept at the prospect of entering and settling the Promised Land. The consequence of the sin of the spies, (which is really the sin of the people who listened to the spies), was quick and devastating. An entire generation was condemned to die in the desert. Rejecting our very identity, by rejecting the direction and goal of the exodus itself, was punished in a more severe way than even embracing a golden calf and worshipping it with abandon.

וְהִגַּה קַמְתֶּם תַּחַת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם תַּרְבוֹת אֲנָשִׁים חַטָּאִים לְסַפּוֹת עוֹד עַל תְּרוֹן אֶרֶץ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“And now you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to the LORD’s wrath against Israel.”

But Moshe was wrong! The tribal representatives who were negotiating with Moshe immediately correct him:

They will build enclosures for their herds and cities for their civilian populations, but they will join with their brothers of other tribes in the conquest of Eretz Yisrael:

לֹא נָשׁוּב אֶל-בְּתֵינֵנוּ עַד הַתְּנַחֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ נַחֲלָתּוֹ:

“We will not return to our homes until each Israelites inhabits his portion.”

They commit to fighting in the frontlines. They are not undermining the national identity of the Jewish people or our collective telos focused on returning to Eretz Yisrael. Once Moshe is convinced, the negotiations easily conclude.

This is not the first time that Moshe misreads an event involving the second generation after the exodus in light of his experiences with their parents. Tragically, in Numbers 20, in Parashat Hukat, Moshe overreacts to the people’s thirst following the death of Miriam. They complain, Moshe falls on his face in prayer, and God instructs him to speak to a rock and bring forth water from within. Instead, Moshe lashes out in unprovoked anger, striking the rock, and yelling at the people:

שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הַמְרִים הַמִּוֹדֵפְלֵעַ הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם:

“Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you from this rock?”

In the prior generation, God had told Moshe to strike a rock to relieve drought. But not now in this next generation. The people weren’t rebellious, they were just thirsty and frightened. Moshe understood that moment in light of his earlier history and responded in an exaggerated way. So too when he first hears the proposal of the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe. He hears their request in light of his own history with their parents and assumes they are asking something far less decent than the reality. Moshe was not the last successful leader who fails to recognize and adapt to changing circumstances.

Or, perhaps Moshe was entirely correct. Maybe the request of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe was every bit as shameful and irresponsible and deplorable as Moshe had assumed and only Moshe’s severe and dramatic reaction pushed the negotiators to come back with a more moderate and reasonable counter-offer.

Notice how the tribal representatives emphasize, in a truly despicable way, their financial interests in the good grazing land on the far side of the Jordan river:

Their opening statement is not a request at all, just a statement of fact - as though their petty pecuniary obsession was self-evident to Moshe:

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִנֵּה הִיא לְפָנֶי עֵבֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מְקַנָּה הִוא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מְקַנָּה.

“The Land that the Lord has smitten in the face of the Congregation of Israel is a land that is very good for herds of animals...and your servants have herds of animals...”

Moshe doesn't bite. He makes them spell out their request and he responds - quite appropriately - by reminding them how truly disastrous it was when the very tribal leadership itself expressed reluctance to participate in the conquest of the Land of Israel. Chastened, the tribal representatives switch tactics and present a fall-back position. They will participate in the conquest but will first take care of the needs of their flocks and children.

Moshe accepts this counter-offer but he is not fooled. Whereas the tribal representatives prioritize, even now, their flocks and herds over their own children, **וְעָרִים לְטָפְנוּ: צֵאן נִבְנְיָה לְמִקְנֵנוּ כֹּה וְעָרִים לְטָפְנוּ:** we will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children, Moshe reverses the order in his rephrasing of the proposal and insists that the tribal representatives speak that way too: **בְּנוֹי־לְכֶם עָרִים לְטָפְכֶם וְגִדְרֹת לְצֹאֲנֵכֶם וְהִצֵּא מִפִּיכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ:**

In conclusion, this episode from this morning's Torah reading is a story of an accomplished leader who fails to see how times have changed, for the better, and that he is not fighting the same enemy and confronting the same challenges as before. In fact, by seeing contemporary reality through the prism of the past, this leader demonstrates why he is not the one who can successfully lead the new generation.

Or, in conclusion, this is a story of a leader with the historical perspective necessary to see just how much danger exists in a seemingly innocuous proposal. It is only Moshe's vigilance, fueled by hard-earned historical consciousness, that prevents a second disaster from occurring.

Some people always revert to the past for guidance and use their personal and communal memory to evaluate current threats and opportunities. Others, find it easier to see the discontinuity between contemporary struggles and the struggles and achievements in our past. As we have seen, neither approach is guaranteed to be successful and each approach can be dangerous when misapplied. Wise and discerning leadership is defined by knowing when to deploy each technique.

We face this choice as parents. We face this choice within relationships, and we face this choice as a congregation and even as a nation. Did Moshe misapply the lessons of the past and demonstrate he lacked the flexibility to lead or did Moshe recognize incipient danger before it could metastasize?

The Jewish calendar and the mourning season of Tisha b'Av which is upon us push us to confront these historical questions. Tisha b'Av is never experienced in the same way as it was in the past because the meaning and resonances that we derive from Tisha b'Av and the tragic elements of Jewish history change from year to year. Having just returned from three weeks in Jerusalem, a gorgeous city bursting at the seams, I am somewhat removed from the more evocative language in the Tisha b'Av liturgy that describes a desolate city. (There are no kinot that bemoan the city's contemporary afflictions: like absentee landlords fueling gentrification displacing middle-class families). On the other hand, the threats inherent in diaspora Jewish life and our vulnerability to antisemitism is far more palpable than last summer.

May we all learn what we need to learn this Tisha b'Av about our tragic past in order to chart the best path forward.