

Navigating Our Way Through A Left Turn

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5783

Life is a mess. I have found this statement to be resoundingly true throughout my entire life. Things do not go as planned, and nothing is ever as neat and tidy in practice as we might wish it to be. Sometimes, however, it is the unexpected, the unforeseen, even the unfortunate that can teach us some of the most profound lessons.

I read a story once in one of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, that puts a laser focus on this idea. A research scientist who had made several very important medical breakthroughs was being interviewed by a newspaper reporter who asked him why he thought he was able to be so much more creative than the average person.

He responded that, in his opinion, it all came from an experience with his mother that occurred when he was about two years old. He had been trying to remove a bottle of milk from the refrigerator when he lost his grip on the slippery bottle and it fell, spilling its contents all over the kitchen floor—a veritable sea of milk!

When his mother came into the kitchen, instead of yelling at him, giving him a lecture, or punishing him, she said, “Robert, what a great and wonderful mess you have made! I have rarely seen such a huge puddle of milk. Well, the damage has already been done. Would you like to get down and play in the milk for a few minutes before we clean it up?”

Indeed, he did. After a few minutes, his mother said, “You know, Robert, whenever you make a mess like this, eventually you have to clean it up and restore everything to its proper order. So, how would you like to do that? We could use a sponge, a towel, or a mop. Which do you prefer?” He chose the sponge and together they cleaned up the spilled milk.

His mother then said, “You know, what we have here is a failed experiment in how to effectively carry a big milk bottle with two tiny hands. Let’s go out in the back yard and fill the bottle with water and see if you can discover a way to carry it without dropping it.” The little boy learned that if he grasped the bottle at the top near the lip with both hands, he could carry it without dropping it. What a wonderful lesson!

This renowned scientist then remarked that it was at that moment that he knew he didn't need to be afraid to make mistakes. Instead, he learned that mistakes were just opportunities for learning something new, which is, after all, what scientific experiments are all about. Even if the experiment "doesn't work," we usually learn something valuable from it.

We need to not be so afraid of the mistakes we might make in the present or the future that we don't continue expanding our circle of experiences by trying things that are new or different. Sitting in a comfortable blanket of what we already know and understand ignores the reality of the world around us and the marvelous gift of the other people who fill it. And when we do try something that doesn't work, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to scrap it completely. See what you can learn from it and maybe you will find your path toward something new.

How can we do that? How can we look ahead toward a messy, uncertain future with hope and not fear, with our joys and not our pain, with the courage to build and not the timid desire to stop time and refrain from moving forward?

I believe that our parashah this week offers us three different insights into dealing with, and living well in, an uncertain world. We begin Parashat Shelach Lecha with the episode of the spies. In case you've already forgotten, God tells Moses to send twelve spies or scouts, one from each tribe, to observe the Land of Canaan, which B'nai Yisrael are poised to inherit, and report back.

When they do return, we as readers often get distracted by the chaos that ensues: the majority of the spies talk about how impossible it would be for this scrappy band of nomads and former slaves to conquer the land and everyone goes into a panic. The fascinating thing about this episode is that it actually doesn't start out that way. In fact, when the spies return to give their report, they all speak with one voice:

“At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land. This is what they told him: ‘We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negev region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.’” (Numbers 13:25-29)

The facts of their report aren't debated. The spies saw the land together and agreed on the quality of the earth and its produce, on the size of its cities, and on the strength of its inhabitants. Only after they give this report does Caleb urge the entire community to come together, support one another, and keep a hopeful positive attitude, whereas the majority of the spies claim that the facts demonstrate that the task of conquering the land and building a new home is too hard.

No one is arguing the reality of the situation. One group of the spies choose to use fear to make hope seem so very small. We have seen this same tactic used time and time again to create panic and stoke hatred in our own time. Caleb makes another choice. He chooses to believe in people, in their potential, and in their ability to support one another. He doesn't need to know how they're going to get there; instead Caleb focuses on a concrete goal, establishes the values and principles under which he is operating, and then he sets the stage for everyone to be on board in order to reach that goal together.

And together in this parashah really means EVERYONE together. That is the second lesson found in this section of Torah. Later on in Parashat

Shelach Lecha, we learn again about the *ger* (גר, “stranger”) who lives among B’nai Yisrael and is not only afforded rights, but who is to be considered part of the community, though they may not be part of a tribe or part of the Jewish People. This is not a complete stranger who wanders into town for a visit, but rather someone who lives their lives as your neighbor, even though they may not naturally be a part of your clan.

Specifically, this parashah mentions that *gerim* may bring sacrifices to the Temple, whether holiday or voluntary offerings. Elsewhere in Torah, we learn that *gerim* may not eat chametz on Pesach (Exodus 12:19), may not work on Shabbat (Exodus 20:10) or Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29), and must refrain from eating blood (Leviticus 18:26). In fact, the Talmud, in Tractate Bava Metzia 59b, counts thirty-six references to treating the *ger* fairly, making it one of the most frequently reiterated commandments in Torah.

If we take that all seriously, we learn that a community cannot be whole unless we stand up for the whole community. We cannot spend our time only on the people we like the best or those who are closest to us. When someone is in need, or even potentially at risk, reach out to them and help. When we look to building our community better and stronger, look to

include all of our folks in the work. As we are taught in Deuteronomy (10:17-19):

For your God, Adonai, is God supreme and Creator supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the ger (stranger), providing food and clothing.— You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

We can each relate to being the ones on the margins, the ones left out, the ones in need, the ones in harm's way. At the intersection of this moment, we are in the middle of PRIDE Month living in a state that just banned gender-affirming care and the ability to play on sports teams corresponding to their gender identity for trans kids. This weekend, as we commemorate the still recently sanctified federal holiday of Juneteenth on Monday, we are living in a state that is banning books, most of which feature the stories and lived experiences of people of color and LGBTQ+ folks. It is on us to include and welcome everyone, which needs to be an active, focused, and ongoing pursuit.

Thirdly, we read in this parashah about mistakes. Our Torah talks about what to do when, in the course of trying to live a good life and fulfill mitzvot, you make an error. It outlines a whole ritual and practical process to correct

the mistake but the fascinating part to me is that the Torah assumes that mistakes will be made. Numbers 15:22 begins this section with an introduction explaining that this procedure applies whenever you make a mistake: וְכִי תִשְׁגֹּוּ וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל-הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה, “WHEN you [unwittingly] make a mistake and fail to do any of the mitzvot...”

The text itself assumes by using that word “כִּי” that mistakes are not a matter of if you will make any, but a matter of when. Therefore, don’t be so afraid to err that you never step into the new or the uncomfortable. Instead, plan for mistakes that you can see beforehand, so you are ready. Be forgiving of mistakes, both when others make them, and when you make them too. No one is helped by feeling embarrassed or ashamed at mistakes you have made. Instead, learn from what worked and what didn’t and come back stronger the next time.

All of these are lessons we can use in our personal lives: choose a goal and find your way toward it; include, respect, and show up for others; try, fail, learn, and try again because mistakes are unavoidable. But even moreso, these are lessons for us as a community. We have grown so much over the past decade, in ways we sought out and planned for in our shared

vision, and in ways we never dreamed of, but discovered together. If we continue to follow the guidance found in our parashah, we can find new paths for our community to continue to thrive. Keep looking at the facts critically, but not with fear, and take every new thing you learn or experience as another tool to help you succeed. Anticipate, at the very least, that mistakes and missteps will happen, that you will sometimes be the one to err, and don't let yourself be discouraged.

Most of all, believe in people. Take a moment, and look around this room. The people who surround you, even if at this moment they may be “strangers,” are incredible, brilliant, talented, multifaceted, unique, beautiful, wonderful people. Let them into your life and allow them to share themselves, their stories, their frustrations, their hopes, and all that they love with you as well. Love them, as you love yourselves. Love them because you and they are wonderful. Love them because, as God reminded us in Sefer Devarim, you know what it is like to be kept at arm's length, so draw close those wonderful souls that share the path with you.

Long ago, each one of you sensational souls were once strangers to me. Over the past seven years, you have given my family and me so many

gifts. You have allowed us into the highs and lows and mundane moments of your lives, and I have treasured every one of the moments we spent together.

I have so much to thank you all for, but I have a few specific thank yous as well. To Barbara Shamir, Gary Kodner, Randi Mozenter, Sherri Sadon, Mitch Shenker, Pat Cohen, and everyone who has served on our Board and leadership, as well as the volunteers who guide our community: your tireless work, determined passion, and all the incredible heart you have put into this community have helped make this an incredible synagogue to be a part of. There are non-profit organizations, believe it or not, where the professional staff do not get along well with their Board, where conflict and acrimony are the rule, but that has never been my experience here. I have always felt supported in my rabbinate and in my values by this Board, and it is truly a gift that has meant the world to me. I know that everyone who volunteers to serve in leadership will continue to guide this community wisely and compassionately.

To my incredible KoREH teachers: You have each brought life to a school that was once only a dream. The incredible learning, and more importantly

the affirming, loving, and carefully creative experiences you bring to our students and families has created a school that students want to learn in, and given them each their own path toward becoming adults who are passionate about their Judaism. I am especially thrilled to know that this incredible tradition of engaging Jewish learning will be led by my wonderful friend Cindy Kalachek, who has already blown me away with her creativity, thoughtfulness, and focus on the needs of our families. And speaking of our KoREH families, I have learned more from you than I could have ever hoped to teach to you. Your joys have made every minute of hard work to create our learning community valuable and sacred. Thank you for all of the love and care you have shown to me over the years, and for allowing me the joy of teaching your most precious people.

To Liz Collins and our ECC teachers: I may miss your daily presence in my life most of all. I have definitely felt the joy of tiny smiles melt away the stress of my toughest days. You helped raise both of my incredible children, who first learned to be little *menschen* from you. Each of you give so much joy, attention, and positive energy into the rest of our community. You are the jewel in the crown of the Kol Rinah community, our greatest treasure.

To my colleagues on staff: to Stacey Hudson, Nancy Greene, Meir Zimand, and our volunteer staff person, Micki Kingsley: No one will ever fully understand or appreciate how much you do to make our synagogue not only run smoothly, but to be the kind of place that takes the needs of its members seriously and creates a culture of compassion for everyone. You are role models for me of how dedication can create new opportunities and how bringing joy to everything you do, even if it isn't your favorite task, is a choice that always brings rewards in the end.

To Karen Kern: People are not always recognized for their talents and determination, but I have been so proud to see you grow and thrive in new ways year after year. As you have taken on each new project, role, or responsibility, I have watch you continually excel, meeting new challenges with care, creativity, and a work ethic that is unmatched, and even when a human being couldn't possibly have enough energy to do it all, you manage to show up in profound ways. You have been my right hand in so many projects, and I hope you are as proud of yourself and the work you do as I am of you each day.

And to Rabbi Noah Arnow: You and I are both blessed to have so many friends and colleagues who are also congregational rabbis. When I describe the work you and I do together, most are astounded not only at the ways we can be creative, complement one another, and move our community forward, but just the level to which we can work as partners. I know you will not be surprised to learn that there are senior rabbis out there who have a very, “My way or the highway approach” that stifles the creativity and autonomy of other clergy and leaders, but I have been blessed to have just the opposite experience. You and I have been able to build a partnership based on trust, respect, and a genuine regard for the talents and skills we each bring into this work. You have encouraged me to bring my passion for justice work, for music, for education, and for creating relationships to the heart of our community, and helped me grow into the leader and person I am. I value your advice, your friendship, your humor, and your steady leadership, and I am in awe of everything we have been able to build together.

Kol Rinah is a special place. It looks like a synagogue, a place of worship, a space for Jewish gathering, but it has so much more depth and complexity and vibrant life than almost any other place I have been. It has

been an honor and a pleasure to serve this community for the past seven years. I will miss that role, but I am so excited to be able to continue on as an active and supportive member here.

Life is a mess, but we can navigate it by leaning on one another. I have learned from each of you how to build a community, and I am looking forward to the ways we will come together, try new things, and learn from our mistakes as we continue strengthening this community together.

Shabbat Shalom.

Three Big Intersections:

1. The Spies

a. They all agree on the facts:

- i. “At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land. This is what they told him: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negev region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.” (Numbers 13:25-29)

- b. Only afterward does Caleb urge them to come together, support one another, and keep a hopeful positive attitude, whereas 10 of the spies say that the facts demonstrate that it is too hard

- i. Use fear to make hope seem so very small
- ii. Caleb chooses to believe in people
 - 1. Doesn't need to know how they're going to get there
 - 2. Chooses the goal and sets the stage for everyone to be on board in order to get to that goal together

2. The Stranger

- a. The one who is left out cannot be consigned
 - i. One law for all of you
 - 1. May bring sacrifices to the Temple, whether holiday or voluntary offerings. In other parashiot, *gerim* (strangers/outsideers) may not eat chametz on Pesach (Exodus 12:19), may not work on Shabbat (Exodus 20:10) or Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29), and must refrain from eating blood (Leviticus 18:26)
 - 2. Bava Metzia 59b counts 36 references to treating the *ger* fairly, making it one of the most frequently reiterated commandments in Torah.
 - ii. For your God, Adonai, is God supreme and Creator supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the

cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the *ger* (stranger), providing food and clothing.— You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

3. You will make a mistake

- a. If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that Adonai has declared to Moses— anything that Adonai has enjoined upon you through Moses—from the day that Adonai gave the commandment and on through the ages: If this was done unwittingly, through the inadvertence of the community, the community leaders shall present one bull of the herd as a burnt offering of pleasing odor to Adonai , with its proper meal offering and libation, and one he-goat as a sin offering.
- b. וְכִי תִשְׁגּוּ וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל-הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה - WHEN you make a mistake

i. Mistakes are inevitable

1. Plan for them
2. Be forgiving of them
3. Learn from them, and move forward

- c. A research scientist who had made several very important medical breakthroughs was being interviewed by a newspaper reporter who asked him why he thought he was able to be so much more creative than the average person. He responded that, in his opinion, it all came from an experience with his mother that occurred when he was about two years old.

He had been trying to remove a bottle of milk from the refrigerator when he lost his grip on the slippery bottle and it fell, spilling its contents all over the kitchen floor—a veritable sea of milk!

When his mother came into the kitchen, instead of yelling at him, giving him a lecture, or punishing him, she said, “Robert, what a great and wonderful mess you have made! I have rarely seen such a huge puddle of milk. Well, the damage has already been done. Would you like to get down and play in the milk for a few minutes before we clean it up?”

Indeed, he did. After a few minutes, his mother said, “You know, Robert, whenever you make a mess like this, eventually you have to clean it up and restore everything to its proper order. So, how would you like to do that? We could use a sponge, a towel, or a mop. Which do you prefer?” He chose the sponge and together they cleaned up the spilled milk.

His mother then said, “You know, what we have here is a failed experiment in how to effectively carry a big milk bottle with two tiny hands. Let’s go out in the back yard and fill the bottle with water and see if you can discover a way to carry it without dropping it.” The little boy learned that if he grasped the bottle at the top near the lip with both hands, he could carry it without dropping it. What a wonderful lesson!

- d. This renowned scientist then remarked that it was at that moment that he knew he didn’t need to be afraid to make mistakes. Instead, he learned that mistakes were just opportunities for learning something new, which is, after all,

what scientific experiments are all about. Even if the experiment “doesn’t work,” we usually learn something valuable from it.

We need to not be so afraid of the mistakes we might make in the present or the future that we don’t continue expanding in trying things that are new or different. Sitting in a comfortable blanket of what we already know and understand ignores the reality of the world around us and the marvelous other people who fill it. And when we do try something that doesn’t work, don’t be so quick to scrap it and never try it again. Look what you can learn from it and maybe you will find your path toward something new.

What all these pieces of Torah have in common is that they encourage us to step forward into the unknown and believe that the world we are building for tomorrow can be different and also better than the world we are living in today.

How can we do that? How can we look ahead with hope and not fear, with our joys and not our pain, with the courage to build and not the timid desire to stop time and refrain from moving forward?

Follow our parashah. Look at the facts critically, but not with fear, and take every new thing you learn or experience as another tool to help you succeed. Anticipate, at the very least, that mistakes and missteps will happen, that you will sometimes be the one to err, and don't let yourself be discouraged.

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