

There's No Going Back
Message to Graduating High School Seniors
Rabbi Melanie Aron
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There are some events that everyone remembers.

For those old enough, it may be where you were when you heard that Prime Minister Rabin had been assassinated, or how you learned of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center on 9-11.

There are personal events that we remember too. I imagine for many of us that includes our high school graduation.

For this year's class, the memory of graduation will be that much more indelible as it is embedded in memories of the coronavirus crisis and of the current outcry with its potential to be a turning point in American racial politics. Your class had to finish high school in a virtual manner and has been deprived of special rites of passage, including senior class trips, prom, all-night graduation celebrations, family get-togethers, and in person college orientations. But you have also had a front-row seat on history as it is being made.

The book of Numbers, from which we are reading at this time of year, includes several rebellions against Moses's leadership, the most dramatic being in this week's portion, the story of Korach. He is a Levite, like Moses—in fact he is Moses's nephew—but that doesn't stop him from leading a rebellion that almost results in Moses and Aaron's lynching by an irate mob.

Why all these stories, all these challenges? Wouldn't one or two stories of rebellion have sufficed?

One of the commentaries explains that the large number of these stories reminds us that Moses's job as leader in the desert was "not merely transporting people from here to there, but growing them," transforming them into what will become the Jewish people.

I find that interesting in thinking about what this period of time may become in American history and also in thinking about the next four to five years of your lives.

It has become clear that getting through Covid-19 is going to be more than living to see the vaccine. It is no longer just about getting the people from here to there. What Covid-19 has made visible in our society, the effects of systemic racism in illness and economic dislocation—and what the tool of this time period, the cellphone video, has made visible to all—is a not-pretty picture of what has been there all along. But with pictures, once one has seen them, they are difficult to un-see, and so in a variety of ways, from CEOs of large corporations promising to give people paid time off for voting, to communities passing laws against police abuse, the ground is shifting.

We are still very much in the middle of the story, but there are indications that in some way our views on race could be transformed, and America, at the end of this period, might be, God willing, different from before.

On a more personal note to our graduating seniors, I hope that the next chapter in your lives will also be transformative—that you will find college more than amassing credits and getting credentialed to be successful in your chosen field. Whether you chose for next year a gap year, a period of employment, an apprenticeship, or college in your high school bedroom, I hope that it can be the kind of experience that expands your life and horizons.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to bless you as you make this transition and to offer words of prayer for your parents as well.