

Toxic Water

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

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In the context of a wedding I officiated some years ago, I met a man who I thought had one of the most difficult jobs in his peer group. His name is Rabbi Yisroel Weingarten and he is the Chabad emissary in Flint, Michigan. It must be difficult to establish Jewish life in a town that is synonymous with blight and depression, in a city that Michael Moore turned into the emblem of the failure of the American dream, and it must be impossible to raise funds in a city whose residents are synonymous with urban poverty. Rabbi Weingarten admitted to me that he does have a difficult job, but there are certainly Chabad emissaries that have it worse. There are those who are sent, for the rest of their lives, into actual Siberia, with no kosher food, no mikvah and no other Chabad children for a time zone in each direction. His children, Rabbi Weingarten told me, wgo to Chabad schools in Detroit, only an hour away. That was a few years ago, and no doubt Rabbi Weingarten is right. I've been thinking about him this week, though, as the water crisis has unfolded in Flint. When the city of Flint changed its water source in 2014, complaints began mounting about the taste, smell and appearance of the water. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality insisted that the water was still potable, but a local physician tested local children and discovered that they had elevated levels of lead in their blood. An independent investigation revealed that the water in the new supply was exceedingly corrosive and was causing lead from pipes to leech into the water supply, something that the city knew about, should have tested for and completely disregarded. On top of everything else, it may be that the conditions in the Flint River also contributed to an outbreak of Legionnaire's disease. Through a toxic combination of arrogance, corruption and ineptitude, an entire city now lacks drinking water- a situation that is not without precedent, as the Torah describes a similar situation in this morning's Torah reading.

The Jewish people have just emerged from one of the most exhilarating, transformative experiences possible- the splitting of the sea. And despite witnessing the kind of miracles that no one had ever seen before, they meet with two tests: First, they wander around for three days in the desert without water.

וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵיַם סוּף וַיִּצְאוּ אֵל מִדְּבַר שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם. וַיִּבְאוּ מֵרֶתֶה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִמֶּנָּה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מָרָה. וַיֵּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַה נַּשְׁתָּה. וַיִּצְעַק אֵל יְהוָה וַיֹּרְהוּ יְהוָה עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֵל הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שֵׁם לֹ חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשֵׁם נִסְהוּ. וַיֹּאמֶר אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִיִּשְׂרָר בְּעֵינָיו תַּעֲשֶׂה וְהֶאֱזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתָיו וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל חֻקָּיו כָּל הַמִּחְלָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא אֲשִׁים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה רַפְּאֶךָ

Finally, they arrive at a water source, and they are unable to drink the water because the water was bitter. God shows Moshe the way to remedy the situation- by casting a tree, or a branch, into the water, and the water became potable once again. If only something like this existed in Flint, Michigan- a magic panacea to make any water drinkable. But something remarkable happened at Marah, and the sages of the Medrash debate what exactly it was. There is a debate among Midrashic works as to the identity of this mysterious tree. The Zohar identifies the tree as Moshe's staff, which was made of wood, as the tree God instructed him to cast into the waters and calm a complaining nation. But the Mechila quotes Rabbi Natan's assertion that it was a different tree, one with much earlier biblical precedent. God showed Moshe the *Eitz HaChaim*, the tree of life that blossomed in the Garden of Eden, and told Moshe to break a branch off of it and cast it into the water. These are rich, vivid images but the Midrash is not meant to be a literal account of historical events; instead, it is a work of homily designed to teach us a life lesson. What is the message of the identity of the tree?

Perhaps we can suggest that each opinion represents one of the major impediments that block the future. There was a danger- one that later proved eminently valid- that the Jewish people would remember only the later period of their enslavement, when conditions were comparatively manageable. As the Netziv and others explain, the restrictions of slavery eased considerably as the plagues advanced, even though Pharaoh refused to take the ultimate step of freeing the Jewish people. For many Jews, redemption from Egypt was never a desire or a goal; it was the reformation of Egypt. God had to make *Kerias Yam Suf* happen so that the Jewish people would come face to face with their oppressors as they actually were, and not an idealized version of the past. The physical manifestation of that slavery was Moshe's staff, which symbolized a chronology of oppression. The response to a rancorous people was to show them that they were pining for a world that didn't exist, that their squabbles were petty manifestations of a slave mentality and that the single biggest impediment to their success was their yearning for the Egypt Moshe's staff symbolized- and that he was now casting dramatically into the water.

Egypt was terrible, to be sure- and we needed to be free of any illusions about it. But the *Etz HaChaim*, the tree of life, represented a different impediment to the future- that of lost potential. Remember that there were *two* trees in the Garden of Eden- the tree of knowledge, the *Etz Hada'as*, and the tree of life, the *Etz Hachaim*. Adam and Eve tripped on the *Etz Hadaas* and succumbed to its temptation before they could reach the tree of life, so they never realized what God *really* had in store for them. In showing Moshe the tree of life, God was giving the Jewish people a chance that they had never had before- a chance to redeem humanity in a way that had never been done.

These two opinions symbolize the two factors that often hamper the progress of individuals and of communities as well. Often, we are stuck in the past, pining for abilities we think we used to have, people we used to know and eras that are long gone and were probably not ever as great as we think they are. I

remember once watching a documentary about the Carpathian mountains, the region in which my grandfather *zt"l* grew up in a small town called Zadnye. My grandfather used to wax idyllic about his life as a young boy- he grew up in a family of eight children in a home where there was very little money but always enough food, as they were self sustaining, in an area surrounded by pastures where children played freely. After I watched this movie, though, I realized why so many people are *from* the Carpathian mountains. The Carpathian mountains of today are polluted, impoverished and depressing and it's not clear how wonderful life ever was- but that was the way my grandfather remembered it, and that's what matters. It's not just individuals who are impaired by living in the past; communities do as well, pining for good ol' days that were actually particularly good and as a result, failing to move forward in constructive ways.

But the past is not the kiss of death in every situation; there are many people and many communities who recognize that their pasts may be toxic, unproductive and best relinquished. But even those people are susceptible to the other pitfall, the one the *Eitz HaChaim* was meant to correct. The future, by definition, is a place we've never been before, but we don't usually think about it that way. In his magnificent book *Stumbling Upon Happiness*, Daniel Pink identifies two aspects of this mistake. The first is what he calls *presentism*, where one projects the present onto the future. A person who is miserable now, is financially unsuccessful now, is religiously inspired or uninspired now, is healthy now- will think that is always the case. The second is *rationalization*, in which imagination tends to fail us by not recognizing that things will look different once they happen. An event that we may be dreading won't make us feel as terrible as we thought it would, and an event we think will make us ecstatic may also not live up to the hype. Both of these fallacies impede the future, and that is what the Jewish people were complaining about. They were hungry, tired and thirsty and they projected that they would always feel as despondent as they did then.

Moshe threw the *Eitz HaChaim* into the water to show the Jewish people that they were getting bogged down in the present, grasping for the tree of knowledge when the tree of life is within reach.

The lesson of the casting of the tree is a critical lesson for us to learn as well, as individuals and as a community. The challenge for us is not to live in the past in times that may or may not have existed, and not to project the present onto the future. This is especially true when it comes to our own spiritual vitality and that of our institutions, particularly when it comes to our ability to produce engaged, observant and knowledgeable Jews- and to become those kinds of Jews ourselves. Settling for the present and living in the past, dreaming small dreams and praying small prayers- those are an insult to God. Let us cast the tree into the waters, and in time, we will reap the reward.