

Mattot- Mas'ei 2018

Here we are at the end of the Israelites' formative narrative. The wilderness experience is coming to a close, and the Conquest has begun on the east side of the Jordan River.

Often, people do not look forward to the double-*parashah* we read today. Not much happens. It feels slow. The instructions given do not feel particularly relevant and to some of us they feel offensive. But the rabbis devote as much time and energy to mining the verses as they do to other parashot.

One spot where the rabbis put their attention is the recounting of places where the Israelites camp and where they provoke God's anger and Moses' frustration. Each stop is named in painstaking poignancy. A famous midrash compares this week's recounting of stops in the desert to a king who has a son who is very ill. When the son recovers, the king recounts every crisis and event along the road to the specialist who cures him as a way to enhance their mutual appreciation for what they have endured and savor the good fortune that has come. My problem with that analogy--and I share this critique with the biblical scholar Aviva Zornberg--is that in the case of our parasha, Moshe is not talking to the same people who have made those stops and incurred that anger. 38 years have passed since the incident of the spies. An entire generation has dropped into the sand. It is their children whom Moshe now leads. And so his recounting of the steps their parents took along the way is a bit puzzling. Of course, there is overlap of years and encounters, but it pays to note what the text does not make explicit: The Israelites' wilderness, while continues for the whole, is not continuous for the individuals whom Moshe now addresses. He recounts the journey as if they have lived it, but many of the events occurred before they were born, or when they were too young to be responsible. Moreover, Moses and the nation will never experience that longed-for moment of entering the land together and reflecting back on all that brought them to that point, for they will enter the Land without him. Yet I do think there are lessons to be learned from the recounting.

Shortly before his death, Moshe again recounts their wilderness experience, but there, it comes as a clear rebuke, and he tells the nation, "God has not given you a heart to know, or ears to hear, until this day," as if

to say that they, those Israelites to whom he is speaking--them, and not their parents--have been incapable of grasping the meaning and purpose behind all of his teaching until the moment when it becomes real for them, when they are poised to cross over the Jordan.

The rabbis of the *midrash* (Devarim Rabbah 3:2) feel Moses's pain over knowing that his work is done and he will not cross over the Jordan and expound upon it. Interestingly, they hold the Israelites partly accountable. In one midrashic text illustrative of that line of imagining, the midrash compares Moshe to a woman who tells her children that their father, her husband, plans to divorce her and marry someone else. She hopes that they will intercede on her behalf, and she will not be divorced, but they do not hear her intent. They accept her words at face value and the divorce proceeds. Likewise, says the midrash, when Moses speaks to Israel of how it will be for them after they cross the Jordan (Deut 11:9), he stresses the words YOU ARE GOING TO CROSS OVER THIS DAY, NOT I" in hopes that the Israelites will rally on his behalf. He believes that if they do, God will relent and allow Moshe to cross over with them.

In another *midrash* (Devarim Rabbah 7:11), Moshe pleads for God to annul the decree against Moshe and allow him to cross over the Jordan. God tells him that this situation will not be like the last time when God annulled a decree, after the Sin of the Golden Calf. God says that Moshe cannot hold the rope at both ends. Either God can pardon the Israelites on Moshe's behalf, or God can pardon Moshe on the Israelites' behalf. Since former pardon has already been granted, the latter is impossible. Moshe accepts that reasoning (although I must say I am still working it out). But in the *midrash*, he does not accept the nation's lack of effort on his behalf, and that is why he rebukes them: "One man saved 60 myriads at the time of the Golden Calf, and yet sixty myriads cannot save one man!" It pains Moshe that they do not even try. And so, in the biblical text, he reproaches them.

Zornberg suggests that what bothers Moshe is the nation's lack of imagination. She writes: "His speech creates a symmetric history in which his 'pleading for mercy' is set against their heartless obtuseness, their failure to find their own words of desire for his survival...They do not understand what is implicit, unspeakable. Their failure is a failure of imagination, which is the quality most vital for their future--the ability to see

through the concrete, the obvious, and to recognize, to bring into full life, what is implicit” (*Bewilderments*, 299).

In other words, the Israelites are too good for their own good at looking backward, and they lack the ability to conceive of what they do not already know concretely. That lack will prevent their flourishing, because if they cannot imagine, they will be unable to build on the Torah he has taught them. They will not be able to breathe new life into it, to see past the letter of the law and build a life of Torah as understandings and conditions change. Moshe fears that that the whole enterprise of the People of Israel will stagnate and fade into the sand, just as the generation just past. It must be particularly aggravating for him to find that lack of imagination handed down to the new generation.

When Moshe finally acknowledges that they have learned to imagine, or at least that they are ready to imagine, alas, it is too late for him to enjoy the benefit of their enlightenment, and that pains him greatly.

In a class I once attended with Rabbi Shai Held, he introduced the mitzvah of imagination, calling it “a new category of *mitzvah* that is deeply important but long ignored.” Let’s explore that a bit. When we look at mitzvot in the *Torah*, some make principles of justice real and concrete. For example, “A person shall be put to death only on the testimony of two or more witnesses” (Deut. 17:6) or “If you open a pit and do not cover it, and someone’s donkey falls in, the one responsible for the pit must pay for the donkey but may keep the dead animal” (Ex. 21:33-34). Those will require interpretation in order to be understood and applied or adjusted as conditions require. Other *mitzvot* are narrative based and require a more affective imagination. Through *mitzvot* like “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:20), we use our experiences to gain empathy, and make moral meaning that we can then apply in myriad ways.

We see Moshe exercise his imagination in today’s reading, when he works out a plan for the tribes of Reuven and Gad and the half-tribe of Menashe to claim land east of the Jordan. Their request may not, in fact have been grounded in a reality of their having more cattle than other tribes--it may not have been justified--but Moshe is able to empathize with their felt need and adjust the plans for conquest and settlement to everyone’s benefit and satisfaction.

God also demonstrates what imagination could look like through the commandment to build *arei miklat*, cities of refuge, for manslayers. What a radical departure from the blood-avenging practices rampant in that time and place! God shows how empathy for the accidental killer can uproot cycles of murderous, family feuds.

Eventually, the Jewish people do learn to imagine, and after the destruction of the Temple, radical imagination recreates the whole notion of what it means for us to be a People of Torah.

What would it mean for us to take the mitzvah of imagination seriously, to regard imagining as a sacred act?

We know what it would NOT mean. The narratives of the Book of *B'midbar* show us that using our imagination to create needless distress, to spread calumny and fear, is *unholy*, sinful, leads to death. But when God and Moshe show their belief in the misbegotten Israelites' ability to rise above their circumstances and enact a whole new way of being in the world such that they may be a light to all nations, when they present our biblical ancestors with a way of life and tell them that they KNOW there will be times when the Law will confound them and the path forward will be elude them, but that all Israelites, then and now, are trusted to make Torah live in us, in our mouths and in our hearts, they are telling us to imagine our ideal selves doing what we would do in a society in which all of us strive for the best possible good, informed by the wisdom of Torah. That is where the mitzvah of imagination lives.

In his book *Life is Now*, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin writes, "People who have created counterproductive mental pictures in the past can decide, "I will use my imagination wisely to the best of my ability from now on." We can ask ourselves, "If I could create any positive quality in my imagination, which quality (or qualities) would I choose right now?" The gift-- or the imperative-- of imagination allows us to access and act on our inner wisdom. Pliskin goes on to suggest that we can imagine that we have an inner coach, to whom we might ask questions like: "What can I say or do right now that could be helpful?" What I like best about his methodology is that after we ask, we wait. In that space of waiting, imagination kicks in. I have not yet tried that inner coach technique, but I can tell you that I sometimes use prayer in that way. Standing in prayer, I ask questions of

my deepest self and I wait for answers. The more I practice that prayer-based imagining, if you will, the more likely I am to receive hints or even direct guidance.

Often, when we find ourselves in a moment of struggle or a challenging or frightening situation, there is a human tendency to become rigid, to develop tunnel vision and diminish our ability to imagine possibilities. We go into a primitive, “fight or flight” mode. The recounting of stops where the Israelites struggle to effectuate their mission in today’s Torah reading gives us pause by reminding us to pause and imagine what it would look or sound like for our next move to be in the direction of helpfulness, goodness, or compassion. I pray that we learn from our ancestors and from the sadness our rabbis imagine Moshe to have carried with him throughout the Book of B’midbar. May we cultivate the sacred gift of imagination with which human beings are endowed and may we hold dear the sacred responsibility and opportunities it holds.