

## Numbers 13

The central drama of this parshah is well-known. As they are about to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites decide to send out a group of spies to learn more about the land and its current inhabitants. The spies return with good news and bad news. The good news is that the land is bountiful, filled with milk, honey and grapes. The bad news is that the people who inhabit it are large and fierce and they live in well defended cities.

The Israelites panic and despair. The Lord, in turn, becomes very angry with them. After the intervention of Moses, He decides on their punishment: those afraid to enter the Promised Land will never be allowed to do so. Instead, they will spend the next 40 years wandering around in the desert until they have all passed away. Then presumably a new generation will emerge that will be worthy of entering the Promised Land.

In the Torah, The Lord makes some decisions that trouble us; these decisions seem cruel and unfair. Examples include the killing of Aaron's two sons for no apparent reason and His refusal to let Moses enter the Promised Land. But in this case the Lord's judgement strikes me as eminently fair. These Israelites have no courage or faith, they panic easily and they have forgotten everything God did for them. Their memory of the past is selective, going so far as to discuss going back to Egypt – Egypt, where they had been enslaved and where their children would be enslaved - except for their male offspring who would be drowned. It is humbling to think that these Israelites are our ancestors!.

This raises an important question: why did they have no faith or vision? Why were they so fearful, so easily panicked? Why was their memory of the past so distorted, ignoring both their suffering as slaves in Egypt and the Lord's extraordinary efforts to liberate them from slavery? The Lord had enabled them to triumph over the mighty empire of Egypt; why should making it possible for them to settle in the Promised Land be beyond His ability?

One approach to answering these questions is to consider how we as Jews differ from these Israelites in the desert. We are a people of the book. We understand our people's history because we have the Torah and many other books to instruct us. Of special significance, we have the holiday of Passover, when we read and reread a story that describes our trials, tribulations, tragedies and triumphs. We end the Seder with a hope for the future when we recite, "Next year in Jerusalem." By contrast, those Israelites had no tradition to fall back on, no religious texts to read or study (Passover would not be celebrated for more than a thousand years). For them, there would be no "next year in Jerusalem." Rather next year, they would be still here – wandering in the desert, until death.

I now want to move forward some 4,000 years. Thirteen and one half years ago an elderly black woman was leaving the polling booth in North Carolina when she fainted. Her family and friends gathered around her and sat her down. When she recovered, they asked her if she was okay and what had happened. She replied “I never thought I would live long enough to vote for a black person for President of the United States.” Her astonishment at Obama’s candidacy and his subsequent election as President was well founded. Throughout the history of the United States, no one had ever imagined this nation, with its long history of racial discrimination and injustice, would have a black man moving into the White House with his black wife and two black daughters and living there for eight years.

Obama’s election was indeed an historical event – a major blow against racial prejudice and a highly visible step forward toward racial equality. To appreciate its importance, imagine how we, sitting right here in this congregation in Berkeley, California, would feel if a Jewish person was or had been elected president of the United States? (an event which I do not expect to see) Would this mean that there was no longer any anti-Semitism in the United States? Of course not. But it certainly would signal that America had become a more religiously tolerant society. And it would make us very proud of both our religion and our country.

During the last three years, the United States has undergone an intense, extensive, and often heated discussion of racial injustice. This discussion has raised important issues. Reasonable people can and do disagree about how much progress we have made and how much farther we have to travel to reach the Promised Land of racial justice and equality. But what strikes me – and here is the relevance to the Parshah – is that Obama’s election and what it might tell us about the progress we have made in race relations in the United States – has been largely forgotten. No one ever seems to remember it or discuss its significance. Like the Israelites, we have focused our attention on the challenges that are before us – which are certainly considerable. But like the Israelites who apparently had forgotten about the Exodus, we have paid insufficient attention to what we *have* accomplished – which certainly includes the election and reelection of the nation’s first black president.

When our memory of the past is selective, when we forget the progress we have made – either by God or by the American electorate in 2008 and 2012 – it makes it harder to face the challenges of the future. To be Jewish is to have faith in the future. The Israelites did not have that; but we, who can benefit by learning from their example, should have.

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July 26, 2022