

This week's parashah, Devarim, sees a generation of Israelites poised at a time of opportunity and anxiety. We open the book of Devarim, Deuteronomy, literally, "Words," with the Israelites assembled before Moses as he gives his final speech to them before transferring authority to Joshua, so that they can part ways: he to ascend Mt. Nebo to die, they to enter the land of Israel. The whole book of Deuteronomy is Moses's ethical will, his recounting of his experiences as leader of the Israelites.

He does not begin by discussing, as one might expect, the exodus from Egypt. Instead, the first major event he recounts is one that we read about only last month, in Parashat Shlach Lecha, when the Israelites, almost forty years prior, were poised to enter the promised land. But that generation had balked, as Moses reminds the new generation in chapter 1, verses 26-28, "You would not go up, rebelling against the instructions of Hashem your God, murmuring in your tents, "has God hated us, and brought us from the land of Egypt to give us over to our enemies to be destroyed?"

Moses reminds the people that because of their ancestor's timidity, that entire generation lost the opportunity to enter the land.

Now, at this moment, there are many instances that Moses could have recalled: not just the Exodus, but the Golden Calf, perhaps, or the rebellion of Korach. But 19th century commentator David Tzvi Hoffman points out that instead of speaking chronologically or in orders of magnitude, Moses draws the attention of the current generation of Israelites to an exactly parallel situation: You are, he points out to the new generation of Israelites, faced with the same opportunity that your ancestors rejected. Don't mess it up this time!

In fact, Moses would not have been giving this speech at this moment had the previous generation responded differently. The Israelites Moses was addressing might have been raised in the promised land, rather than in the wilderness, and a whole host of stories might have unfolded differently. There might have been no Korach rebellion, or plague. But also, the daughters of Tzelof'chad might not have been inspired to make their feminist case for female inheritance. We might not have the text "ma tovu" from the blessing given by prophet Bilaam.

For her bat mitzvah drash back in June, Maya Rayor discussed whether or not the decision not to let the previous generation enter the land was a punishment. The plain text of Torah indicates that it was, and Masechet Taanit teaches that one of the calamities that occurred on Tisha B'Av was that very decree.

But Maimonides taught, "It is not consistent with human nature for the one reared in slavery, bricks and mortar and the like to be able to make a sudden transition, cleanse their hands from their dirt, and sally forth to do battle with giants. . . Divine wisdom ruled that they should wander round the wilderness till they became schooled in courage, since it is known that marching through the wilderness under difficult conditions , deprived of natural comforts, toughens. . . Besides, another generation arose not accustomed to degradation and bondage."

In any case, punishment or wise and compassionate Divine story, we have the narrative we have. It didn't play out differently. And so there is a new generation, tougher, raised in the wilderness, determined not repeat their parents' mistakes.

Nechama Liebowitz points to another set of instructions, also in this week's parashah, that indicates, perhaps how far they had come.

Chapter 2, verses 4-7, instruct the Israelites that when they pass through the lands of the descendants of Esau, they should not make war against them, should not plunder them, but rather, as the text states, “They will be afraid of you, therefore take care how you interact with them. You must buy food from them for money to eat, and buy water from them for money to drink.”

In other words, you may not plunder their land. As commentator Nechama Leibowitz puts it, “A reverse test faced the children of those who had died in the wilderness, that of the strong versus the weak, that of resisting the temptation to take advantage of their superior strength by harassing their weaker neighbors.” Hence the instructions not to abuse their strength, not to imagine that they could just bulldoze through the territory of their neighbors.

Navigating the lessons of those who came before us is tricky business. Moses reminds the Israelites of their parents’ mistakes, implicitly warning them against repeating those mistakes. And in the same parashah, with the verses I just mentioned, Moses also warns against making the mistakes that their parents could never in fact have made, because of how different in temperament those generations were. The new Israelites had to grow beyond their parents’ timidity. But they had to fear the other extreme as well, of becoming bullies. . .

And isn’t that the classic challenge for all of us, as we struggle with the legacies of our parents and ancestors?! We strive to learn from their mistakes, and not to repeat them. But how often do we take ourselves to other extremes!

The story of Jews in America perhaps maps the challenge, although on a different trajectory. Jews came from the old country, with their Yiddish and Ladino, oppressed, ethnically distinct, used to being despised.

The next generation saw the opportunity to let go of their parents' burden, to be strong, to be proud, to be normal, rather than weak or ethnic. They dropped the practices that the dominant culture showed them were archaic, whether that was living in Jewish community, keeping mitzvot, shabbat, prayer.

It is useless to regret the decisions made by the generations that came before us. They weren't our decisions to make, and we don't know what it felt like to be faced with them. But I think that for many of us in the third, fourth, fifth generation - the reason we are here at Temple Beth Israel is that we are seeking some sort of reconciliation between two extremes. We are seeking to find a relationship with Judaism that is neither based in fear nor in scorn. And just as our ancestors needed course correction from generation to generation, this, too, is a process that takes generations.

We must remember, as I hope that generation of Israelites, poised at the threshold of a new land could remember, that those who came before us were doing their best with the conditioning they had and the situations they encountered. With our own conditioning, we face different challenges, and we hold different advantages. We are neither better nor worse than our ancestors, but we can honor them, by learning from their successes, and from their mistakes. It is possible that no generation will ever get to the Promised land, so to speak. But we can do our part to get closer.