

This week's parasha, Sh'lach l'cha is a particularly apropos parasha for the overwhelm of this moment.

It comes at just the time of year when many are feeling overwhelmed by transition - from school to summer, work or break or retirement, planting to harvest. It comes, too, when many of us are feeling overwhelmed by violence – the violence of the terror attacks in Turkey, of the terror attacks yesterday and today in Israel. The violence of America's current political discourse.

And here we have this Torah portion in the book of Numbers, wherein the Israelites are seemingly about to go into the land of Israel. To move from being a wandering people to a settled people. An enslaved people in recovery to a self-determining people.

Some of you are familiar with the story. Moses sends twelve spies into the land of Israel, to check it out and report back the conditions. They come back with a report of abundance, but also of intimidation. The agricultural productivity is amazing - not unlike, perhaps, our own Willamette Valley - but the settled peoples there are powerful and gigantic, terrifying. Some of the spies claim in trepidation that "eretz ochelet yoshveihah hee" - it is a land that devours its inhabitants.

The people lose faith and balk, and God thus determines that this generation will never be qualified to graduate, so to speak. The Israelites are decreed another 40 years of wilderness wandering, so that a new generation, born free, can conquer the land.

And is it still *eretz ochelet yoshveihah* - a land that devours its inhabitants? One hasidic commentator says it is, in fact! Because the word “yoshveihah, typically translated as “its inhabitants,” is based on the word “yosheiv,” to sit. So it could be translated as “a land that devours those who just sit in it.”

Rebbe Yitzchak of Vurke (Rabbi Israel Yitzhak Kalish of Warka (Yitzchok of Vurka) (1779–1848) was the first Hasidic Rebbe of Warka. Wikipedia), the Vurker Rebbe taught the following insight in this verse. **Spiritually, in the holy Land of Israel, there is no room to just ‘sit’ to be a יושב a sitter. You cannot just ‘stay’, at any level. Either you are ascending or you are descending, ‘chas v’shalom’. The land consumes her ‘sitters’.**

So the Vurker Rebbe is saying not that the land is ultimately lethal to all who live there, but that the requirement for living in the land is the one not just . . . sit around. To claim the inheritance, one must be in motion; one must be evolving. I appreciate the elegance of this drash. It justifies both the confidence of Joshua and Caleb, who promise the people that yes, they can enter the land, and the fears of the others. Joshua and Caleb, it seems, were ready to evolve. The others needed a comfortable place to sit.

And so of course it is scary to move into a place that demands movement, that demands growth. It is always scary. And yet, that process of continually moving out of comfort zone is what allows us each to leave the womb, to take our first steps, to learn to communicate. Before we ever have to leave the home, we are wired to grow and evolve. Our lives begin, our tradition teaches, when we are pushed out of that comfort zone of the womb. Of course we cannot survive - as individuals or as a people - without evolution.

A member of TBI, Joanne James, emailed me earlier this week to remind me that in our more recent history, this week's parasha has evolutionary - and revolutionary - associations. The first bat mitzvah in modern history, of Judith Kaplan, the daughter of the founder of the Reconstructionist movement. In 1920, on the day of Parashat Shlach L'cha, Judith was called for an aliyah to the Torah in her father's synagogue in New York City. As she recollected, everyone present was shocked, but "no thunder sounded. No lightning struck." It was a revolutionary moment for Judaism in America, no matter how quiet its effects in the moment.

And 44 years ago, the ordination of the first female rabbi in America, Sally Priesand of the Reform movement, occurred the weekend of Parashat Shlach L'cha. And so American Judaism continued to evolve. 44 years later, women serve as clergy in every Jewish denomination in America, including Orthodoxy.

It does make me wonder what the next evolution of our community will be. I don't know how we create a healthy political system, here or, how we deal with the ongoing violence in Israel, but if the insight of this parasha is any guide, it won't be by expecting to be able to sit comfortably. It will be by acknowledging changing conditions and figuring out how to gracefully live with as much integrity as we can with them. And as the changes come, to embrace them, rather than fighting them, feeling devoured as we try to hold the comfortable place that we have found for ourselves to sit.

The simpler truth is that any land is *eretz ochelet yoshveihah*. Any people who survives long term on any land learns to adapt to changing conditions, to evolve with the needs of the time in the place.

I am particularly struck by the fact that the parasha falls this year, in a week of such violence and upheaval . . . and also on the weekend of Independence Day. For this country is now facing choices about its evolution, choices between fear and violence and regression, and between solidarity, collaboration, and an expanding sense of who is included when we talk about “Americans.”

So the blessing, if we can wrestle a blessing out of this parasha, out of this moment, is for all of us striving to get where we want to go, or to live our fullest lives. It’s a blessing for a community that is striving to be a good community. It’s a blessing for both Israel and America, these nations that we Jews in Eugene claim as ancestral and current homes – as well as for any nation that wants to take the idea of independence seriously.

To be a free people - or to be free people, inhabiting our own space, there can be no stagnancy. We must always be seeking our next growing edge, and embracing it. I bless us that we move towards greater awareness of where we need to grow, moving through the pain, to embrace the growth.