Between several other events - the Friends and Family Shabbat last week, the Jam Band Shabbat next week, and Shabbat in the Park the week after, I have very few opportunities to give a full-length drasha, a full-length reflection on the Torah this month.

Perhaps because of that, I want to reflect tonight not only on this week's parasha, Shlach Lecha, but on a trend occurring throughout the parashiyot of the surrounding weeks in the book of Numbers.

I might not have even noticed this, except for the fact that we have students becoming b'nei mitzvah every weekend in June, and each of them, as they have explored their own Torah portions, have wrestled with a theme that arises repeatedly; not just in this week's parasha, but in last week's, and next weeks and the week after that. That theme is collective punishment. For 5 weeks in a row, we have an episode within each parasha in which our Israelite ancestors collectively misbehave in some way, and a vast number of them are punished - whether with a plague, or by being routed in battle, or as Josh Galpern will describe for us in a few weeks, by being bitten by fiery serpents!

In Shlach Lecha, in this week's parasha, for example, here is the sketch: the Israelites are on the brink of being ready to enter the promised land, after a little over a year of wandering. Moses sends twelve spies to scout out the land. The spies return with a report of an abundantly fertile land, which is inhabited by terribly intimidating giants. The people as a whole are so dismayed that they cannot muster the faith to enter the land, so God decrees that the whole generation that left Egypt will die in the land, before a new generation, born in freedom, can inhabit it. Hence the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

Upon hearing this decree, however, some Israelites immediately regret their loss of faith, and plan to try to conquer the land. God essentially says, “too late!” and they are defeated in battle.

Whew! So Maya is going to talk about one facet of this, particularly the decree of wandering for forty years tomorrow.

I want to take a little more of a meta picture. In our society, we are frequently troubled by stories of collective punishment such as these. Certainly, the bnei mitzvah students who have been studying and preparing to teach us this month also reflect that. One of the first questions each of them has generated about their respective parashiyot is something along the lines of: “If a few people are instigating this, why would God punish so many?” And in general, how can it be that the punishment for lack of faith, or for complaining, is death?

With our students, I praise their moral sensibility, and ask them to notice what lessons our ancestors draw from these experiences in Torah, and how we relate to those lessons today. Those of you who have been attending on Shabbat mornings know that our students generally do a creditable job of taking up the challenge.

Torah itself is a record of the moral lessons our ancestors drew from their own experiences. In their world, a plague, or an animal attack, or a military defeat had to be invested with meaning beyond random chance. Again and again, our ancestors understood what happened to them to be a result of God’s will - but not arbitrarily. Rather, God’s will in response to their own actions. Or ancestors understood the harm that befell them to ultimately reflect their own moral failings.

Consider an example, again from this week's parasha: Medieval Spanish Rabbi Isaac Arama makes sense of Israelite's defeat after their loss of faith by describing their loss of faith as a larger moral failing. "They were retreating from the heights of spiritual glory. "We cannot go up," on the path to spiritual refinement. Rather, they preferred to choose a captain and go back to Egypt, descending into an impure land.

It seems cruel, perhaps to our sensibilities today, to imagine that a plague, or a defeat, or an animal attack is some kind of punishment. And indeed, it is cruel, on an individual scale to imagine that someone who is suffering illness or any other form of tragedy deserves their tragedy. It is also cruel to say such a thing about another collective group of people.

But that isn't what our ancestors were doing in Torah, or in the subsequent generations of commentary. They were instead looking at their own society in moments of crisis, and instead of seeing themselves as victims of chance, they chose to see themselves as agents, and to ask, what was our own collective role, in bringing this calamity upon ourselves?

And this is a profound - and true question. Because as individuals, it's true, the slate of reward and punishment does not balance out with anything like fairness. But the stories that a society chooses to tell when bad things happen really matter.

For this week's Torah portion, it's true that only ten spies instigated the loss of faith. Perhaps there were even many Israelites, a large minority, maybe even a majority, who were still willing to go into the land; who would have been willing to try if someone would lead them. But they didn't organize, so the only record is

of the fear and complaining, of the leaders leading the people wrong. And it matters that Torah recognizes that collective responsibility.

So, too, today: If the Senate succeeds in passing a health bill that repeals the Affordable Care Act, it won't just be a failure of those senators, and goodness knows that they will not face the brunt of the consequences. It will be a failure of our whole society, and the upwards of 20 million people who are projected to lose health care, and the many more who will lose their jobs will deal with the consequences.

Likewise, in a time when we have been plagued by news of shootings and hate crimes all over our country, it matters that we recognize these not just as isolated incidents, and certainly not appropriate consequences for the individual victims, but as consequences for our society's collective failure to address a history of violent racism.

I want to suggest that as archaic as the imagery of a wrathful God sometimes appears to us, Torah is quite astute in its understanding of the nature of collective consequences, in imagining large- scale crises to be evidence of societal failures. Generally, they are.

I almost don't want to mention climate change, because it seems so obvious as to be trite, but here's the thing about it. If we imagine a wrathful God visiting it, than that God seems just that: wrathful, and what's more, unfair, for allowing those who have done the least harm to face the greatest consequences. But when we take theology out of it, we have no trouble understanding that floods and droughts are a consequence of collective failure. We know that what we are seeing is exactly the playing out of consequences on a collective scale.

So it matters the way Torah tells these stories, and I am proud to be from a tradition of people who were willing to look at our own collective failures and derive meaning from them. When crisis hits, it matters not only how we physically respond, but what narratives get preserved, what stories we tell and what meaning we make out of what happens. Do we absolve ourselves? Or do we recognize our own role in a complex web of collective responsibility?