

In this week's parashah, Shelach lecha, we find the Israelites encamped in the wilderness of Paran, very near to the land of Israel, getting ready to enter and conquer the promised land after a little less than a year of wandering.

In preparation, Moses sends a group of twelve scouts, one representing each tribe, to check out the land of Canaan, and to bring back a report. After forty days of scouting, they return with a mixed report. The land is good, bountiful land; a single cluster of grapes the cut was so heavy it needed to be carried between two of them. But on the other hand, the inhabitants are fierce; as ten of the 12 spies put it in 13:33, the last verse of chapter 13, "we saw the Nephilim (angelic beings) there—the Anakites, giants, among the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them."

In chapter 14, the people respond with utter panic and despair, as verses 2 and 3 describe, "All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt," the whole community shouted at them, "or if only we might die in this wilderness! (3) Why is Hashem taking us to that land to fall by the sword?"

You might ask – what are the people so afraid of? Haven't they been in danger and experienced miracles before? Is this not the community who witnessed the plagues in Egypt, the splitting of the sea, the manna in the wilderness? How long before they learn to have faith?!

Incidentally, God feels the same way, and essentially responds, "I am *done* with this generation! You want to die in the wilderness? Fine, die in the wilderness!"

Of course the Biblical text is more eloquent, as verses 28-33 put it, “As I live,’ says Hashem, ‘I will do to you just as you have urged Me. (29) In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me, (30) not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. (31) Your children who, you said, would be carried off—these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected. (32) But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, (33) while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness.”

At face value, it seems that the people simply do not have faith in God, and God is sick of their faithlessness. But there is a commentary that suggests something different. Sforno comments that the question: “Why is Hashem taking us to that land to fall by the sword?” means: “‘What sin did we commit against God that [God] made the effort to bring us to this crisis...?’ They thought that these present troubles were all retribution for the abominable things they had been doing while in Egypt, or on account of some other cause they were not aware of which had caused G’d to hate them. We know that they had concluded that G’d must hate them.”

In other words, their failure of faith is not in God’s power. It is not that they don’t believe that God could bring them into the land. Rather, they are unable to believe that they deserve to enter. As Bob Proctor said in Torah study yesterday, “Guilt is underneath everything. Their own guilt is preventing them from entering the land.”

The Israelites are so paralyzed by some internal guilt, that at any sign of trouble, they assume that their relationship with God has ruptured. And God is done trying to convince them to move forward.

After they hear God's ruling, they are overcome with remorse. And they decide to take action. But they do not repent. They do not ask God for forgiveness. Instead, in verses 40-45, they go forward according to the original plan, as if their complaints and God's decree hadn't happened. They unilaterally attempt to conquer the land, against Moshe's explicit warnings, and they are defeated.

So the responsibility for taking the land passes to the next generation, one that hopefully will not be weighted down by the guilt and trauma of slavery, that will be able to step confidently into its destiny.

Several folks in Torah study yesterday wistfully compared this narrative of this parashah to the fight for racial justice in the US, saying, "As I get older, I realize how little my generation accomplished. We might not see a time of racial justice, but perhaps this new generation will achieve it."

I relate to the yearning to believe that the next generation can achieve what the current generation has failed to do. But we know, in fact, that generations do not step boldly into history unweighted by the traumas of those who came before. We carry the unresolved traumas of our ancestors. For our Torah portion to have any meaning, we must read ourselves into the adult generation, traumatized, guilty, scared. We must not absolve ourselves in our children. There is still work for *us* to do.

And I think we can discern what it is when we compare the two grave mistakes of this parashah. If the first was that the people were so weighted by guilt that they assumed their relationship with God had ruptured, the second was that, once they realized their mistake, they thought they could fix it without conversation, and by going forward pretending it had never happened.

In honor of Juneteenth, I want to say very explicitly that this is the mistake that white privileged folks often make in the discourse about racial justice. First, there is often a tendency to be so paralyzed by our own anxiety that we've done something wrong that we are simply unable to truly listen to what people of color are saying. And then, once we've realized how much harm our absence has caused, there is a tendency to jump in and try to take action right away to "fix it" – again without listening.

I know I don't always get this right. I know particularly, that even in these very remarks, the way I talk about white-privileged folks and use the word "we" might be rendering invisible those of you in our community who do not share the white privilege that I have. And so I am sorry for the ways that I fail. And if you are listening, I hope you will correct me and help me do better in the discourse.

And even though I do not do this well, I am going to try to keep listening, and I am going to try not to let my own guilt, anxieties and remorse keep me from the conversation. Because we cannot fight racism unless we talk about racism, even if we do it badly. And we do not have luxury of just tapping out, returning to the wilderness, and passing this struggle onto yet another generation.