

Parshat Devarim
Memories and Journeys
Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez - Class of 2018

When I was four years old, I said I wanted to be a pediatrician so my doctor could go on vacation because she was always there when I had to see her. For the next thirteen years, this memory was brought up time and again whenever someone asked, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” and I would answer “a pediatrician.” If my parents were nearby, the story would often be re-told, but even if they weren’t the idea had permeated. As an adult, I do not remember this, but I can still retell the story as if it is a concrete memory. This is what Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, a psychological scientist I once worked with at University of California Irvine, calls a “false memory”. Dr Loftus studies human memory - specifically how facts, ideas, suggestions, and other post-event information can modify our memories. This can be from something as minor as whether there was a stop or yield sign at the scene of an accident to wrongly identifying criminals in sentencing.

This is why Moshe spends the time as the Jewish people prepare to enter Israel to retell the story of the journey, as we read:

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן

These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan. (Devarim 1:1)

Moshe is investing in creating a communal memory so that we do not develop false memories of our history. He’s getting us all on the same page, so to speak. As you may recall, the entire generation which left Egypt has died by now. All that is left of the beginning of the journey is the memory. And Moshe, being the amazing leader that he was, knew that leaving us all to what glimpses we had gleaned from our tribes as we wandered was probably incomplete. So rather than risk the false memories, he gathered us all to hear as one.

Moshe begins his (very long) speech with a reproach and the story of the spies. To many readers and commentators, this feels like an odd place to begin. One might expect it to begin with the brit avot, the covenant with our fore-fathers, or the exodus from Egypt. One might even accept the sin of the golden calf if a reproach was truly the most important opening to this collective memory creation. But alas, that is not where we begin. We begin with the story of the spies, a story that begins in the same place - at the bank of the Jordan with the people ready to enter Israel. Moshe wanted the community to notice that there were standing on the same precipice as their ancestors had been 38 years prior. The Jewish community had

this opportunity once before, and it was through the fault of the spies that they were still on the “other side of the Jordan.”

Despite all the jokes about the Jews being lost for 40 years, this moment is a reminder of what happened. That 38 years prior the community had been ready to enter the land but ultimately lacked the total faith necessary.

This point gets made again at the end of our parsha:

וְאַתְּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ צִוִּיתִי בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר עֵינֶיךָ הִרְאִית אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְשָׁנֹי
הַמְּלָכִים הָאֵלֶּה כִּן-יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לְכָל-הַמְּמַלְכוֹת אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹבֵר שָׁמָּה:
לֹא תִירָאוּם כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא הַנִּלְחָם לָכֶם: (ס)

I also charged Joshua at that time, saying, “You have seen with your own eyes all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings; so shall the LORD do to all the kingdoms into which you shall cross over. Do not fear them, for it is the LORD your God who will battle for you.” - Devarim 3:21-22

Perhaps this is also the first enactment of the proverbial “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it in the future.” Before we enter the land of Israel, we must absolutely know that it is our destiny and we must make it happen despite the difficulties we may face. We must have clarity on why we’ve been in the desert, in both a physical and spiritual way, so that we can move forward as a unified community with a communal memory.

Perhaps, the point of the spies is not to serve as a reproach, but rather to clear the air about why we’ve been in the desert for the past 38 years. If we listen carefully, we’ll know that it is not because anyone got lost or because we had poor leadership, one generation was punished for their sins and the next had to be ready to start anew. Moshe had to have the opportunity to cultivate our communal memory in order to ensure that for all the generations to follow we would not have to wonder if we had generated false memories of our journey.



Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez combines her personal, professional, and educational experiences to establish meaningful Jewish experiences wherever she goes. Melissa manages the Jewish Camp Initiative for the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and serves on the Clergy Advisory Group for MACoM (Metro Atlanta Community Mikvah) and the leadership team for Limmud Southeast. Melissa received semikha (rabbinic ordination) from Yeshivat Maharat in 2018 and is a proud member of the Atlanta Rabbinic Association (ARA), Torat Chayim, and the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF).