



When the Story Changes

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To be a Jew is to believe in impossible dreams.

To be a Jew is to believe that slaves can become free. It is to believe that the senselessness of this world can be disrupted by divine words that break through the barrier between heaven and earth.

It is to trust, even on our darkest days, that we are part of God's dream.

We call the dream different things: redemption, the messiah, the world-to-come. But all of them, at their core, mean the same thing. There is a story being told through the chaos of this world, if we know how to read it. And we have been promised that the story leads somewhere good.

So much of the Torah, until Parashat Shelah, is about all the ways we fail to believe in the dream. The story of the *egel* (golden calf) and the story of the spies are different accounts of failures of faith, but in both the people share that in common: an inability to believe in the dream, a distrust of the possibility that their lives, their history, their journey may lead



somewhere good, an inability to imagine that things might ever be different than what they have been.

With the aftermath of the story of the spies, the focus shifts. We are no longer concerned with lack of belief in the dream. Instead, we are faced with what is possibly an even more frightening question: what does it look like to believe when the contours of the dream have shifted in ways that make it unrecognizable?

In the aftermath of the spies report and the people's faithlessness, God tells the Jewish people that they are facing exactly that scenario:

במדבר יד:כח-כט

²⁸אָמַר אֱלֹהִים חַי אֲנִי וְנָאֵם ה' אִם לֹא כְאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם בְּאָזְנִי כֵן אֶעֱשֶׂה לָכֶם: ²⁹בְּמִדְבַּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פְגָרֵיכֶם וְכָל פְּקֻדֵיכֶם לְכָל מְסַפְרְכֶם מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶּם עָלַי:

Bemidbar 14:28-29

²⁸“Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says God, ‘I will do to you just as you have urged Me. ²⁹In 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, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you.’”

The story has changed, God tells us. Its basic contours are the same—a people freed from slavery headed to the Promised Land where they will live in covenant with God—but in the details, everything is different. Instead of being weeks away from entering the Land, the Jewish people of this generation will die in the desert. The story, as far as they are concerned, has changed beyond all recognition.



What does one do when the story that shapes everything you had imagined your life to be heading towards changes? What happens when the way you imagine the divine plan will unfold no longer matches reality?

For some of the Jewish people, the answer seems to be: you pretend that nothing has changed.

במדבר יד:מ-מא, מד

⁴⁰וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ בִבְקֹר וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל רֹאשׁ הַהָר לְאֹמֶר הַנָּנוּ וְעָלִינוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' כִּי חָטֵאנוּ: ⁴¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לָמָּה זֶה אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת פִּי ה' וְהוּא לֹא תַצְלַח: ...
⁴⁴וַיַּעֲפְלוּ לַעֲלוֹת אֶל רֹאשׁ הַהָר וְאַרְוֹן בְּרִית ה' וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא מָשׁוּ מִקֶּרֶב הַמַּחֲנֶה:

Bemidbar 14:40-41, 44

⁴⁰Early next morning they set out toward the crest of the hill country, saying, “We are prepared to go up to the place that God has spoken of, for we were wrong.” ⁴¹But Moshe said, “Why do you transgress God’s command? This will not succeed.” ...

⁴⁴They defiantly (*va-ya’apilu*) went up to the top of the mountain, but the ark of God’s covenant and Moshe did not stir from the midst of the camp.

The *ma’apilim*, the Jews who insist on ignoring God’s decree and attempting to enter the Land immediately, are unable to face a world in which the narrative that shapes their lives has changed. Instead, they try to take the world and forcibly impose the story as they had imagined it.

The Sforno¹ notes that the word “*va-ya’apilu*,” translated above as “defiantly,” literally means “stiffened” or “hardened”:

¹ R. Ovadiah Sforno, commentator and doctor (Italy, 14th-15th century).



ספרנו במדבר יד:מד

ויעפילו - חזקו לבבם כענין ויחזק לב פרעה ולא שמע אליהם:

Sforno on Bemidbar 14:44:1

“*Va-ya’apilu*”—they stiffened their heart, similar to “God stiffened Pharaoh’s heart and did not listen to [Moshe and Aharon]” (Shemot 6:13).

Like Pharaoh, the Jews who insist on defying God’s declaration are unable to face a world that has changed in ways they never imagined. Their inability to adapt comes from an active decision, like Pharaoh, to make themselves rigid rather than supple. Like Pharaoh, who ignores the evidence before his eyes as his nation faces disaster because he is too frightened of what this new reality might mean, the *ma’apilim* try to force the world—and God—to accommodate the story as they had imagined it.

Others, however, abandon the story altogether:

במדבר טו:לב

ויהיו בני ישראל במדבר וימצאו איש מקושש עצים ביום השבת:

Bemidbar 15:32

Once, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, they came upon a man gathering wood on the Shabbat day.

The story of the wood gatherer (*mekoshesh eitzim*) is enigmatic. Who is this man who decides to go out on Shabbat to gather wood and why is his story told here, so soon after the story of the spies? Perhaps the answer is because the wood gatherer, like the *ma’apilim*, is reacting to God’s declaration that this generation will die without seeing the Land. His action, public violation of Shabbat, is, in the context of the Torah, a public declaration that he does not



accept our covenant with God. Unlike the *ma'apilim* who try to use force to ensure that the old story and its dream of their arrival in Israel will not change, the wood gatherer abandons the story altogether. If the story will not play out in all its details as we had once imagined, he declares through his actions, the story is meaningless. The dream is over, and with it, the covenant.

But the vast majority of the Jewish people does not take the option of either the *ma'apilim* or the *mekoshesh*. Instead, they do something that, within the narrative, seems unremarkable: they accept that the story is different from what they imagined while continuing to believe in its promise.

Most often, when we read Bemidbar, we ignore this decision. But what the Jewish people do in continuing to follow Moshe and God is actually an act of tremendous courage. Day after day, for 40 years, the Jewish people wake up and continue a journey whose destination they know they will never see.

In the unnamed mass of generation of the wilderness, we encounter a third option: the choice to believe in the story even when it is longer, and messier, and more complicated than you could have imagined. This is the choice our ancestors, buried in unmarked graves in the wilderness, made with every footstep as they followed God through the desert. Knowing that they would never enter the Land, they raised children who, they trusted, one day would. They taught their children to believe in a promise they knew they would not live to see. And in doing that, they planted the seeds that would allow their descendants to continue to traverse an interminable wilderness of time, trusting in the story our ancestors taught us.



This is the path of the wilderness that our ancestors bequeathed us. It is a path of faith that says: I will not pretend that the world has not changed, but I will also not say that that change means the story is over.

It is a path for those who say: the story may be longer, and more complicated, and sometimes more beautiful and sometimes more tragic than I ever imagined. And I do not know if I will live to see how the story ends.

And still I will walk forward in the desert, and teach it to my children.

And somehow, step after step, and word after word, together, we will create a world where the story's promise is true.

