

The Slaves are Freed! Now What? (Shelach Lecha: 2020)

Free at last! In the Torah, we continue to read the story of our Israelite ancestors who have just been freed from slavery in Egypt. And this week in the United States, we observe Juneteenth, a day commemorating the final, official end of slavery in this country.

An end to the horrific practice of the enslavement of human beings is of course something to be celebrated. Yes, free at last! But the two different stories we consider this Shabbat, that of black people in America and that of our Israelite ancestors, remind us that the release from *physical* bondage is only a first step towards complete freedom.

For black Americans, a full 155 years after the original Juneteenth, and slightly longer after the Emancipation Proclamation, the tragic persistence of institutional and cultural racism continues in our country, impeding opportunity for full equality – and even for physical safety and well-being. Freedom is not fully realized.

Our Torah portion *Shelach Lecha* deals with a different slavery history, and a different set of challenges. As it tells of a first generation of freed slaves, the focus is on questions of identity and perception: how does a people emerging and recovering from slavery *see* itself? *Seeing*, in fact, is central throughout this Torah narrative; the word is used over and over.

The *parsha* opens as Moses sends 12 scouts, a leader from each tribe, to *see* the land that God has promised the Israelites; they report back what they *see*, they describe how they *see* themselves, and how others *see* them. The scouts report that the land is indeed rich and bountiful, flowing with milk and honey as promised. They show the people visible evidence, a sampling of its fruit. *But*, they say, in the land we also *saw* powerful people, giants. They use picturesque images: *We looked* to ourselves like grasshoppers, they say. And that is how we surely *looked* to them – like grasshoppers!

Based on what they *saw*, 10 of the 12 scouts declare that the people should not go forward into the land. The people are swayed and dismayed. They cry out that they should never have left Egypt, they should have remained there as slaves...

Two of the scouts are outliers. Joshua and Caleb saw the identical land and produce and the same 'giants,' Yet they say, absolutely, we should go forward! They have faith that the mission can happen. Joshua and Caleb are rewarded, and in Jewish thought, they became symbols of positive thinking, of having trust in themselves and in God.

The 10 naysayer scouts are condemned in the Torah and thereafter for their lack of faith and for demoralizing the people. After all, they have "*seen*" all kinds of wonders. As God angrily reminds Moshe: How long will this people have no faith in me, despite all the *signs* that I have performed in their midst? In other words, *seeing* should have been *believing*... Yet the scouts still looked powerless in their own eyes, their belief in themselves is weak.

I am inspired by Joshua and Caleb, but I also find myself sympathizing with the 10 scouts and their followers. I think about their history. They emerge from many generations of slaves,

who were subject to cruel labor, a lack of autonomy, and, as the Torah describes it, a “crushed spirit.” At the same time, as slaves they likely knew what was expected of them, and where their next meal would come from. Now they find themselves in a wilderness, a *midbar*, following a God who yes – has shown them “signs,” but who is still a God they *cannot see* ... the future is uncertain, they are afraid, and they do not trust themselves; they feel like grasshoppers.

God condemns the people to wander in the desert for 40 years, as it seems that this first generation of freed slaves is not ready to be pioneers of a new nation in a new land. For them, *seeing* was not believing. The next generation will presumably be better able to see differently, to believe in themselves and to go forward with their mission.

Today in the United States, on this week of Juneteenth, our challenges of seeing and believing are different ones. We all must open our eyes to the realities of racism, and we must believe that we as a nation can and should make changes. We must *see* a vision of equality and the legal and economic reforms that will move us towards that vision. We need to *see*, to pay attention, to the cultural images and attitudes that promote racism in our country and to combat them. It has been heartening to note recent efforts to do that in segments of our society, such as the removal of racist symbols like confederate flags, statues and public place names. Tragically, it took the murder of George Floyd and responses to it to most recently grab our attention, to force our nation to look at itself. But we must continue to look.

Our Torah portion ends – pointedly - with a mitzvah of *seeing*. We are told to wear and look at *tzitzit*, the tassels on our garments or *tallitot*, as a reminder to follow God’s ways. Do not just follow the random desires of your eyes and heart, the Torah teaches, rather, look at these *tzitzit* and remember to follow instead the values and the teachings that God has given us.

Facts are real. ‘*Seeing* is believing.’ But also, “believing is *seeing*.” Joshua and Caleb saw the same sights as the other scouts with different eyes because they saw through the lens of their belief in themselves and in God.

We believe, and then we *see* that every human being is created in the image of God. We believe and we *see* the Torah’s vision of a world in which we care about the rights and the needs of *all* members of society. We envision the world that we want. We look with focus and clarity and then we must act.

And so we arrive at this: Believing is ...*seeing* is.... doing.

Shabbat Shalom