

Freedom Needs Patience

שלח לך

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Whose idea was it to send the spies?
According to this week's sedra, it was God.

The Lord said to Moses, "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders." So at the Lord's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran.

Numbers 13:1-3

According to Moses in Deuteronomy, it was the people:

Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to." The idea seemed good to me; so I selected twelve of you, one man from each tribe.

Deut. 1:22-23

Rashi reconciles the apparent contradiction. The people came to Moses with their request. Moses asked God what he should do. God gave him permission to send the spies. He did not command it; He merely did not oppose it. “Where a person wants to go, that is where he is led” (Makkot 10b) – so said the Sages. Meaning: God does not stop people from a course of action on which they are intent, even though He knows that it may end in tragedy. Such is the nature of the freedom God has given us. It includes the freedom to make mistakes.

However, Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed III:32) offers an interpretation that gives a different perspective to the whole episode. He begins by noting the verse (Ex. 13:17) with which the exodus begins:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Reed Sea.

Maimonides comments: “Here God led the people about, away from the direct route he had originally intended, because He feared that they might encounter hardships too great for their present strength. So He took them by a different route in order to achieve His original object.” He then adds the following:

It is a well-known fact that travelling in the wilderness without physical comforts such as bathing produces courage, while the opposite produces faint-heartedness. Besides this, another generation rose during the wanderings that had not been accustomed to degradation and slavery.

According to Maimonides, then, it was irrelevant who sent the spies. Nor was the verdict after the episode – that the people would be condemned to spend 40 years in the wilderness, and that it

would only be their children who would enter the land – a punishment as such. It was an inevitable consequence of human nature.

It takes more than a few days or weeks to turn a population of slaves into a nation capable of handling the responsibilities of freedom. In the case of the Israelites it needed a generation born in liberty, hardened by the experience of the desert, untrammelled by habits of servitude. Freedom takes time, and there are no shortcuts. Often it takes a very long time indeed.

That dimension of time is fundamental to the Jewish view of politics and human progress. That is why, in the Torah, Moses repeatedly tells the adults to educate their children, to tell them the story of the past, to “remember”. It is why the covenant itself is extended through time – handed on from one generation to the next. It is why the story of the Israelites is told at such length in Tanach: the time-span covered by the Hebrew Bible is a thousand years from the days of Moses to the last of the prophets. It is why God acts in and through history.

Unlike Christianity or Islam there is, in Judaism, no sudden transformation of the human condition, no one moment or single generation in which everything significant is fully disclosed. Why, asks Maimonides (Guide, III:32), did God not simply give the Israelites in the desert the strength or self-confidence they needed to cross the Jordan and enter the land? His answer: because it would have meant saying goodbye to human freedom, choice and responsibility. Even God Himself, implies Maimonides, has to work with the grain of human nature and its all-too-slow pace of change. Not because God cannot change people: of course He can. He created them; He could re-create them. The reason is that God chooses not to. He practices what the Safed Kabbalists called *tzimtzum*, self-limitation. He wants human beings to construct a society of freedom – and how could He do that if, in order to bring it about, He had to deprive them of the very freedom He wanted them to create.

There are some things a parent may not do for a child if he or she wants the child to become an adult. There are some things even God must choose not to do for His people if He wants them to grow to moral and political maturity. In one of my books I called this the chronological imagination, as opposed to the Greek logical imagination. Logic lacks the dimension of time. That is why philosophers tend to be either rigidly conservative (Plato did not want poets in his Republic; they threatened to disturb the social order) or profoundly revolutionary (Rousseau, Marx). The current social order is either right or wrong. If it is right, we should not change it. If it is wrong, we should overthrow it. The fact that change takes time, even many generations, is not an idea easy to square with philosophy (even those philosophers, like Hegel and Marx, who factored in time, did so mechanically, speaking about “historical inevitability” rather than the unpredictable exercise of freedom).

One of the odd facts about Western civilisation in recent centuries is that the people who have been most eloquent about tradition – Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott, T.S. Eliot – have been deeply conservative, defenders of the status quo. Yet there is no reason why a tradition should be conservative. We can hand on to our children not only our past but also our unrealised ideals. We can want them to go beyond us; to travel further on the road to freedom than we were able to do. That, for example, is how the Seder service on Pesach begins: “This year, slaves, next year free; this year here, next year in Israel”. A tradition can be evolutionary without being revolutionary.

That is the lesson of the spies. Despite the Divine anger, the people were not condemned to permanent exile. They simply had to face the fact that their children would achieve what they themselves were not ready for.

People still forget this. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were undertaken, at least in part, in the name of democracy and freedom. Yet that is the work not of a war, but of education, society-building, and the slow acceptance of responsibility. It takes generations. Sometimes it never happens at all. The people – like the Israelites, demoralised by the spies’ report – lose heart and want to go back to the predictable past (“Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt”), not the unseen, hazardous, demanding future. That is why, historically, there have been more tyrannies than democracies.

The politics of liberty demands patience. It needs years of struggle without giving up hope. The late Emmanuel Levinas spoke about “difficult freedom” – and freedom always is difficult. The story of the spies tells us that the generation who left Egypt were not yet ready for it. That was their tragedy.

But their children would be. That was their consolation.