

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Korakh

“Man plans and God laughs.” This is a well used Yiddish expression that seems almost more true and universal than even the stoic, “It is what it is.” I try to leave a little early for events, knowing that while it should not take more than “x” number of minutes to get somewhere, I never know what traffic, weather, or other factors might cause a delay. My children don’t follow suit then when something does go wrong, I get the universal response, “But I did not know to plan for that!” Sometimes our lack of planning changes the course of history. Other times, the events that follow remain innocuous. In either case, though, we find that life is a roller coaster whenever we think we are in charge.

With this knowledge in place, I have developed a corollary to the Yiddish adage. I think sometimes that “God plans and man pays no attention.” The result is the same, and acceptance of neither really requires one to have a foundation in theology. The truth is that we do not control nature or anyone else. We just often think that we do but they are beyond us. When we are not intentional in paying attention to our surroundings and the people around us, the result is almost never good.

This week’s Torah portion finds us near the river Jordan. It is two years since leaving Egypt and we have traversed the wilderness. It is time to enter the land promised to our ancestors. According to the text, God instructs Moses to send special men – leaders of the tribes -- into the land (across the Jordan) to see what is there, so we can move in. Just who these special men are is the subject of debate, and part of the debate turns on the literal words of the text. It is in this story that we find the translations to be a real problem. The root Hebrew word used in Torah is “*tav-vav-resh*.” Most every translation, though, speaks of the “spies” that Moses sent. The Hebrew word for spy, though is “*m’ragel*.” The words that stem from the *tav-vav-resh* root really translate as explore, not spy. The people selected were the heads of the tribes, not foot soldiers. God instructed Moses to send the finest from each tribe as an entourage of ambassadors into the land in which we were to dwell. Moses sent them as spies. He instructed them to see if the people of the land were well fortified or weak. The instruction from Moses was simple, “Find out if we can win this war.” Upon their return all but two argued that a battle to obtain the land would be impossible to win. “Giants live there,” they cried. Only Caleb and Joshua held firm; God instructed us to move into the land and we should follow. Of course, we know, these two men lost the vote and the Israelites cowered. The punishment for the nation’s lack of faith was that we were to wander forty years in the wilderness. This would be the time it took for the recently freed Egyptian slave generation, who lacked faith, to pass on so that leadership would vest in those born into freedom.

What went wrong? Was the land too hard to overtake? Certainly, according to the Book of Judges, there were very few battles in our move into the land (yes, the Book of Joshua tells a different story, but debating which is more accurate is a matter for a semester of text study). As I see it, what went array was Moses’ interpretation of God’s instructions. He implemented a plan which was different than the plan God had instructed. The instructions from God were to send these important leaders to “*Yatooroo*,” or “explore.” Instead, Moses instructed them to spy out the land and seek an advantage over the people already there. Of course, most of the English translations of this text do not help us to recognize this.

Linguistics aside, how often are we guilty of reading too much into instructions or things we are told? How many times, not having really paid attention, do we move forward to do something, only to find that doing it “our way” does not work? Bosses and teachers love creativity and initiative, but not when the effort contravenes the intention of the assignment. I remember writing a ten page paper for a class and failing because the assignment was to write a five page paper. More was not better, it was simply, non-compliant. The rationale for the shorter paper was for clarity over verbosity. I failed.

We do this with each other as well. We insist that we know more than each other about whatever the subject matter de jour might be. We think we know more than our government, our clergy, our bosses, and our parents. Conversely, those individuals often think they know more than they really do about the workings, thoughts, and needs of the people they serve. This chasm provides a huge disconnect in our interpersonal relationships and rather than being ambassadors into each other’s lives, we end up being spies who seek advantage in the engagement. And then we wonder, “Why do relationships deteriorate.”

Israel shows her lack of faith in failing to understand that the land was ours to inhabit, not to conquer. The notion that war came first was the mentality of those born in captivity, enslaved to painful oppression. Only those who were free could understand the call for peace. Hence, we wandered for forty years. Our job is to work to heal the world. In order to do so, we must become intentional about paying attention to each other, and do so with a desire to enhance each other’s life and not take control of some piece of it. Shabbat Shalom.