

Tov Lanu B'Mitzrayim: Rosy Retrospection and the Fear of Failure

A trip to Europe. A Thanksgiving vacation. A three-week bicycle tour in California. In 1997, social psychologists Terence Mitchell and Leigh Thompson interviewed groups of subjects about their levels of enjoyment participating in each of these experiences, comparing how favorably individuals rated such events before they happened, while they were taking place, and a week after their conclusion. What they found has since been dubbed “rosy retrospection” - the all too human tendency to remember episodes in the past more fondly than we felt about them while they were taking place. It seems that as the days tick forward, some of the particular disappointments, frustrations, and hurts of an experience begin to fade while the positive impressions remain, leading us to see past events as qualitatively better than they really were at the time. Rosy retrospection helps to explain why we might feel desperately homesick for a job or house or relationship that we didn't actually much enjoy while living through it. Rosy retrospection can also help us to understand some very strange behavior in our *parasha* this morning, Parashat Beha'alotcha.

By this point in the Book of Numbers, we know that *b'nai Yisrael* has a tendency to devolve, on occasion, into a nation of insufferable kvetches but, even so, our ancestors' actions this morning hit a new low. After being delivered from the wretchedness of slavery in Egypt, witnessing the parting of the sea and God's reassuring presence in the pillars of cloud and fire; after being fed each day with manna which tasted like rich cream and gifted a set of holy laws upon Mount Sinai, in our *parasha* today the people suddenly cry out “*Tov lanu b'Mitzrayim* - We were better off in Egypt!” (Numbers 11:18). The reason for this change of heart? The Israelites want meat and longingly remember the fish they used to eat, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic - all these delicious foodstuffs that they once consumed *chinam* - “for free,” the irony of this particular word choice not at all lost on us as readers. “Why did we ever leave Egypt?” our ancestors moan. Meanwhile, even the most passionate carnivore amongst us will marvel at our ancestors' sheer ingratitude and audacity.

Many commentators are quick to assert that *chinam* here cannot mean free in an economic sense for it is unlikely that the Egyptians, who wouldn't even give the Israelites straw to make bricks, would have willingly fed them for naught. Drawing on the midrashic compilation the Sifrei, Rashi explains that the word *chinam* in our *parasha* should rather be understood in an ethical sense - while in Egypt, the Israelites were free from moral obligations, free from the yoke of the *mitzvot* having not yet received Torah.

Other scholars and sages disagree, indicating that it is possible that the Egyptians indeed provided sustenance to the Israelites while enslaved, all for the purpose of keeping them strong and well-nourished enough to perform the manual labor that had been imposed upon them. The medieval commentator Ramban points out that the particular foods mentioned in Parashat Beha'alotcha are both plentiful and inexpensive, essentially "peasants' food," and so it is plausible that the Egyptians fed their slaves these items or at the very least let them forage for them without penalty. The 18th century Italian Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto claims that the Greek historian Herodotus describes an inscription on one of the Egyptian pyramids attesting that the king who erected it had expended 1600 measures of garlic and onions on food for his workmen, further evidence that provisions of this sort would not have been out of the ordinary. Either way, we recognize that food - free or not - is thin compensation for the many and terrible indignities of Egypt and that to prefer slavery to freedom is both preposterous and deeply insulting to the God who took such great pains to emancipate us from it. As rosy retrospection demonstrates, however, having such cognitive biases is also very human.

This morning we mark Graduation Shabbat, celebrating the extraordinary achievements of the young people in our congregation - from pre-K students entering school for the very first time to college students beginning their adult lives, newly minted professionals pursuing their careers of choice and everyone in between. We kvell and swell with pride, not only the parents and grandparents amongst us who have encouraged, supported, and often sacrificed so much to help these accomplishments come to be, but all the rest of us too - uplifted by the

promise and optimism of youth and marveling in one of community's many blessings, the opportunity to watch children not our own grow and blossom. "It takes a village," the wise proverb says or perhaps it takes a *kehillah* - a sacred community. We share the bittersweet poignancy of simultaneously being thrilled for our students as they continue to develop and chase their dreams while lamenting the passage of time and the distance that these milestones carry them away from childhood and home.

The graduates that we fete this morning have had the added challenge of pursuing education in the Covid years - having plans interrupted without warning, being forced to adapt to radically changing circumstances, missing out on many of the social and experiential parts of being a student, contending with mental health struggles, learning losses, and a future that still feels uncertain. The determination, discipline, flexibility, and courage that have brought them to this point have, I know, been hard won, but I believe that it is these very qualities - while developed through a set of experiences that no one would ever have wished upon them - that also puts them in uniquely strong standing to face the next phase of their educational and professional journeys.

Like the Israelites, most of us, at some point in our lives, will have a *tov lanu* moment - a feeling that it was once better, easier, more comfortable, less scary wherever it is that we were before. We hit a particularly difficult class in our studies or find ourselves in a new job that stretches us further than we've ever been stretched previously. We take on a project at which we're not entirely sure we can succeed or start studying for a test we're not entirely sure that we can pass. We feel the nerves in our stomach before facing our first class of students, or our first time in front of a jury, or our first client meeting performed solo. We move to a new place where we need to make new friends, establish a new community, create a new life.

There is so much comfort in what is familiar - the things we know that we can do well, the people who love us unconditionally, the places that feel like home - that when times get difficult, it is natural to wish to go back -

even without rosy retrospection's misleading pull. And yet, so much of educational and professional advancement is about taking on increasingly larger and harder tasks - moving on to that skill we perhaps don't quite have yet just as we've finally mastered the slightly easier version that we now perform effortlessly. Success lies in knowing that we can do hard things and persevere through the times when our own confidence flags or when others criticize or doubt our abilities. It may feel easier to go back to Egypt where we're free of pressure, expectation, and the possibility of failure. Moving forward, however, will ultimately bring us to a Promised Land of growth, satisfaction, and triumph.

While the Israelites' desire to return to Egypt may initially have seemed extreme, it perhaps feels just a little bit less so when we think further about our ancestors' experience. In the years since crossing the Red Sea, they had to face battle with nations like Amalek, wait with anxiety for 40 days for their leader Moses to come down a holy mountain, witness traumatic events such as the deaths of Nadav and Abihu. They were inundated with laws - *mitzvot* at Sinai, directions for erecting the Mishkan (Tabernacle), instructions for performing the priestly rites. They were fed by manna which spoiled with maggots if kept until morning, wandered through a spare and unrelenting desert wilderness, attempted to create relationship with a God they could neither see nor touch. Most importantly, they know that what lies before them is a very large task indeed: to enter and settle an inhabited land and create nothing less than a holy community that serves as a light unto the nations embodying highest ideals of religious and moral behavior. Rashi's understanding of *chinam* as free of obligation helps us, perhaps, to understand the Israelites' longing for Egypt: a place of misery but not one of *responsibility*. Sometimes fearing a lack of success can feel even more overwhelming than fearing a lack of freedom.

And so, I speak to our graduates this morning: We are so proud not only of what you've accomplished but more importantly of the personal qualities of character and strength that have brought you to this point. We know

that you will go on to do incredible things – to touch peoples’ lives in extraordinary ways, to advance human progress and society, to heal some of the mess that previous generations have unfairly left you to clean up, to add to our world’s vast bastions of knowledge, literature, and culture.

We also know that you will hit bumps along the way, as we all inevitably do, that there will be times when you will say *tov li*- I was better off taking the easy route, staying where I was confident and comfortable and knew I could do it rather than trying, striving, and sometimes failing at things that are hard and unknown. In those moments, I hope you will remember rosy retrospection and the fallacy of food “for free” – the extent to which our minds can play tricks to keep us looking back rather than moving forward and how our fear of failure can overwhelm even our deepest capacity and yearning for success. Few things in this world are truly *chinam* – without cost. But the price we pay to realize our dreams is almost always more than worth it.

I now ask for our graduates to come onto the bimah and for their siblings, parents, and grandparents to stand in their place as we mark this sacred moment with blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Annie Tucker