

Sermon by Rabbi Paula Feldstein

Shelach L'cha 2022

I know I say this much too often but “What a week?!” and “What a day?” Nothing like outlining your sermon on a Thursday night and then having the Supreme Court overturn Roe v. Wade the next morning. Rabbis all over the country were freaking out this morning – for multiple reasons! It’s horrible enough to overturn Roe v. Wade but to do it on a Friday morning is practically antisemitic. Fortunately for us, the Torah has something to say about everything and so much wisdom to offer us.

This week we find ourselves well into the Book of Numbers with a Torah portion called Shelach L'cha. It is a very well known portion with the story of the spies. Let me remind you. Moses and the Jewish people have left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and stood at Mt. Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments. They have been in the wilderness for an unspecified time, weeks? Months? And have received all kinds of laws and the instructions for building the Tabernacle (the portable sanctuary in the desert). They have already rebelled and complained a few times including the little incident with the Golden Calf but God has shown them many miracles and wonders and provides Manna for them to eat every day. They lack nothing. At this point in our story Moses sends 12 Israelites to check out the Promised land. They are sent as spies, if you will, to see what the conditions are there and so that the Jewish people can be prepared to enter the land and conquer it – as God has promised them.

The 12 spies go into the land and when they return we learn that they spent 40 days scouting all over the land. They return with a huge cluster of grapes which is so big it has to be carried on a frame by two of them. Then the Torah tells us, “At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community as they showed them the fruit of the land.” – kind of like the January 6th hearings only wilderness style. And what was the report....well with that many Jews you know there were multiple opinions. Ten of the 12 reported that it was indeed “a land flowing with milk and honey” but “the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large;....” In other words, ten of the spies were afraid and in spite of all the miracles that they had witnessed in the preceding weeks and months they did not have faith that God would help them enter the land and conquer it. Their fear was in charge.

It was then that the other two spies, Joshua and Caleb stepped up and made the counter argument. Caleb said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” The other ten then kept arguing that the enemy was too strong and they should not do it. Then the Torah tells us, “Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted.” By the way, Dictionary.com defines calumnies as, “a false and malicious statement designed to injure the reputation of someone or something.” Sounds more and more like the January 6th hearings every minute. The spreading of these false and malicious statements on the part of the 10 spies spread fear throughout the community and the people cried out and wept all night. They turned on Moses and Aaron and demanded to go back to Egypt. Letting fear drive you backwards....too many parallels.

I would like to turn to the events of this week and try to understand what wisdom the Torah has for us. Let's start with the January 6th hearings. I was trying very hard to ignore them but on Thursday I gave in and sat for several hours, frankly, glued to my television. One of my favorite moments was when Congressman Kinziger was questioning the three gentlemen from the Justice Department. I don't remember which one he was talking to but he asked him to describe one of the conspiracy theories that involved someone in Italy hacking into voting machines and changing votes from Trump to Biden. As the report of this "supposed campaign interference" was being described to Congressman Kinziger it was clear that it was taking all his effort and strength to not crack a smile or worse, start laughing. The Italian conspiracy theory was so absurd that it was hard not to just start laughing. How and why do people believe this stuff? As incomprehensible as this theory was about election tampering, it is even more incomprehensible that people believed it and spread it.

And yet, I thought then about our Torah portion. The Jews had been freed from slavery after 10 plagues, crossed the parted Red Sea and were given the Torah at Mt. Sinai and yet they fell in with the 10 negative spies almost immediately. It certainly doesn't paint a very pretty picture of human nature does it? And yet, just when the whole Jewish story could have come to a terrible ending right there in the wilderness you have Joshua, Caleb and Moses saving the day. So what is the difference between the 10 negative spies and the other 3. One word.....FEAR. Fear is powerful. We have seen it over and over again drive people to do desperate things and to believe things that are patently ridiculous with all their hearts. And seeing this kind of behavior in our country and in our world certainly makes the rest of us give up hope and let our own fears get stronger and stronger. We all know the very famous saying from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

But then we have Joshua, Caleb and Moses. What do they have that the others don't? Hope, optimism, faith and the determination to take action. The antidote to fear is hope. Seeing the good, believing the best is possible. This is my greatest struggle right now. I have always been someone who believed in people and seen the good in them (until they prove otherwise). I have always been optimistic and hopeful about what we are capable of as humans. These last few years (almost 6 to be exact) have made it increasingly hard to see the best in people. On more than one occasion I have thought, "God, what were you thinking when you created human beings? Why?" So on a day like today – when the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, when it feels like things are pretty bleak and pretty hopeless, when our fear starts to rise up inside us what do we do? We do what Caleb told the people to do: we don't give up, we don't lose faith, we move forward, we ACT. We ACT. We protest, we write letters, we vote and get others to vote and we raise our voices up.

My dear friend Rabbi Shira Stern who has been a pro-choice activist for many, many years wrote today: "Let's take the day to mourn, to cry, to rage. Then, let's set out to work on behalf of everyone without a voice, without the means to access healthcare to end a pregnancy, support a pregnancy, prevent a pregnancy. We did this before. We made change happen and we saved lives, countless lives of women who would have died, or might never been able to carry a fetus to term after being butchered. We saved the lives of women and girls who faced unspeakable choices: carrying a pregnancy to term after an act of rape, or incest, or ending the

trauma before a child was born. We can – and must- do it again. On the state and federal level. Speak out, write letters, talk to members of Congress who disagree with you, or who might be on the fence. Go to rallies, reach out to family members and friends and acquaintances. Become a nuisance. Become a pain. Become a hero.”

Jews are a people of action. Our mitzvot – is a system of behavior, what we should do – not what we should think or avoid – what we should do. The fear is real – the January 6th hearings and this morning’s Supreme Court decisions remind us of that. Our freedom, our democracy, our rights are on the table. The question is: Are we going to listen to our fears like the 10 spies or are we going to become Team Caleb and Joshua and stand bravely and act?