Rabbi Mishkin DVar Torah - June 19, 2020

Sometimes the mail delivers an unexpected jolt. The other day I received a hand-written eight page letter sent from a friend and congregant who had lived in Sarasota, Florida and with whom I was friendly while I was the rabbi there. You may think to yourself, who today writes a long-hand letter numbering eight pages? And while you may think that it could be a writer, the fact of the matter is, that in most instances it probably is someone who just does not have access to a computer or a tablet. And that is the case, of course when one finds himself in a Federal Correctional Institute.

You see, this friend of mine whom I had been out-of touch with for well over seven years, had written me from his “home” for the last one and a half years, a medium, minimum security facility. He will be released at the end of December of this year, having paid his debt to society for a financial crime. He accepted full responsibility for his wrongdoing and is looking forward to his release. Fortunately it seems that he landed in a pretty fair place, as prisons go. He describes his dormitory as open, with no cells and bars and it houses thirty-six men. He is sixty-three and feels fortunate that the upper and lower bunks in his dormitory are only filled on the bottom so that “we old guys don’t fall off and break a hip.”

Now while this letter should have depressed me, it did not. As my friend describes his journey, it appeared that he was very diligently going about trying to do his own form of personal “teshuvah.” He wrote, “Since my arrival in June of 2019 I conduct all the Jewish services here for Shabbat and all the holidays. We get great assistance from the Google Institute. I was able to get a Shofar for the holidays and a lulav and etrog for Sukkot as well as a small sukkah that blew down during a storm. The coronavirus caused the cancellation of our communal seder but I led one in the dorm. Remind me to tell you about prison Jews another time.”

He also tells me he is on the certified kosher meal plan, mostly beans and sardines. He puts on t’fillin every day, studies and prays. As you might have guessed, he is an educated, had been an attorney, and so he tutors men who are unable to read, write, assists them in writing letters and helps them understand the legal issues they face. He is saddened by the number of illiterate people in prison and has taken this on as part of his teshuvah and acts of chesed, so, as he puts it, “I devote hours a day helping others.”

To say that I was moved by this letter is an understatement and it led me to consider the plight of the Israelite people that we read about in our Torah portion this Shabbat. As we remember the story of the scouts sent to look over the land, we might ask ourselves, what exactly was the wrong that the scouts committed that prevented them and their generation from entering the Promised Land. We know that they misstated what they had witnessed as they came upon the land, but was that really the cause of their demise? It’s not quite so simple.

When confronted with the challenge of overtaking the land, they deny God’s promise to them and believe that they are not capable of victory. The Torah states after the outcry among the scouts, “Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it. But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack the people, for it is stronger than we.” They they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there - the Anakites are part of the Nephilim - and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

What is the sin of the scouts? As one modern commentator reads it, “the spies failed not by misstating the truth about the Land, but by their own interpretation of what they had discovered. True, the nations of Canaan were powerful. But the self-perception of the scouts was what brought about their downfall. Caleb announced that they would succeed against the inhabitants; the others proclaimed that they would fail. Surely both Caleb and the ten doubters had scouted the same land, seen the same things. But the doubters stated, “all the people that we saw . . . are men of great size . . . and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” (13:33) This is the most telling line of all. In their own eyes the Israelite spies were weak. It was a failure of their own self-understanding, not the reality of the situation that was the problem.

Interestingly enough, the Torah in verses 13:21–24 never tells us what the spies actually saw. We only learn what happened from the participants themselves. Truth, the Torah suggests, is the perception of reality that each individual brings. If, as the midrash Pesikta deRav Kahana tells us, each person at Sinai received the revelation in his or her own individual and appropriate way, what we have in this week’s parashah is the terrifying other side of that midrash. Each person can doubt God's power in his or her own individual way. Thus the story of Parsahat Shelah Lekha forms a kind of undoing of the revelation at Sinai which we celebrated just a few weeks ago at Shavuot. The people were condemned to die out in the desert because they had failed God’s expectations—having experienced Sinai through the power of each individual soul, they fail God by their very human weaknesses.”

The point is, my friends, that all of us face significant challenges. The vast majority of us will most certainly, I hope, not face a prison sentence, but it is the way we **perceive** our reality, whatever that may be - not the **reality itself** that will measure our worth when times are tough. And that is true for my friend and new pen-pal. His reality is fraught with challenge but he has chosen a path other than self-pity and self-destructive behavior. Instead he has turned to God and his faith and pledged to be of service to others. I don’t know what the future will hold for him, but clearly he doesn’t see himself as a grasshopper surrounded by giants, and neither do I.