

An Offer They Couldn't Refuse

Allow me to return to last week's Torah portion, a perfect one for our Retirees Shabbat. The generation of Israelites who had been brought out of slavery are given an offer they couldn't refuse: to wander aimlessly for forty years in the desert until they die off and a new generation will take over. Because the spies were in the desert for forty days, the people were punished a day for a year, bearing the burden of their iniquity for forty years.¹ Not exactly the cheeriest picture. Imagine if you knew you were going to wander from place to place for thirty-eight years, not finding rest or meaning in it until reaching your final resting place in the desert. I'm guessing you would think "What's the point?" or bitterly "What did I do to deserve this?"

Why should the Israelites as a whole have been punished for the bad reports of the spies, the many punished for the deeds of the few? Aren't we against collective punishment? Rashi emphatically states that we are not, asserting תשא אה עונותיכם, "you must bear your sins" (as a nation), continuing שתי עונות-של עגל ושל תלונה, "two sins: that of the calf

¹ Numbers 14:34

and that of the complaint.”² Yet why does the entire nation of Israel have to bear these sins? The classical answer given is that the entire people were stilted by being slaves in Egypt so a new generation which had never known slavery had to emerge in order to conquer the Promised Land. Is this accurate however? Certainly there were Israelites who were glad to be free and moving towards their own land.

Kli Yakar asserts that the spies were only punished for forty days but that it was one day per year (Tisha B’Av), stretching out that punishment over forty years.³ On Tisha B’Av the Israelites dug their own graves and lay in them, with many not waking up the next day. After forty years they all woke up and realized that the punishment was over. Not the most appealing image.⁴ Nowadays we punish ourselves on Tisha B’Av by fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes, reading *kinot* (dirges) and lamentations.

² ד"ה ארבעים שנה Rashi on Numbers 14:33

³ ד"ה יום לשנה Kli Yakar on Numbers 14:34

⁴ Eicha Rabba Peticta 33.

The answer that I prefer, however, is from Tosafot Yom Tov,⁵ who asserts that the forty years was actually an act of kindness. After all, G-d said to Moses ואוריִשְׁנו בדבר ואוריִשְׁנו, “I shall smite them with the plague and annihilate them.”⁶ Moses pleaded with G-d, which caused G-d to have mercy and allow our ancestors to live for forty more years. Each individual twenty and up died at age sixty (now an age at the prime of one’s life-makes us feel grateful for our length of years ☺).

Today we honor our retirees, many of whom are working part-time or full-time as volunteers for the Jericho Jewish Center, attending minyan, planning programs and serving on our Board of Trustees. Research demonstrates that retirees who stay busy doing what they want to do tend to have greater longevity and greater health. As a matter of fact, the Lubavitcher Rebbe viewed retirement as worse than death, stating “I don’t understand the word ‘retirement;’ it’s not in my vocabulary,” and “How can a person even think of retiring from life?”⁷

⁵ Tosafot Yom Tov Sota, Chapter 1 Mishna 9

⁶ Numbers 14:12

⁷ Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), p. 129.

That's why so many of our retirees stay busy doing things that they enjoy, and the Jericho Jewish Center is one of the many beneficiaries.

Thank you to all our retirees who make JJC into the strong, enriched place that it is. We are so grateful that you joined us for this Shabbat and wish you a summer filled with only warmth, joy and spiritual fulfillment.