

## What Deuteronomy Teaches Us about Memory *Shabbat D'varim 5778*

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“Do you remember when you first learned of the space shuttle Challenger’s fatal mid-air disintegration on January 28, 1986.”<sup>i</sup> Most who were adults then are likely certain that we do remember exactly when, where, and from whom we heard the news.

What we didn’t know was that researchers studied the matter, asking individuals on the day of the disaster to tell them how they had heard the report. The scholarly investigators then asked the same question of the same people two and three years later, and “found that by 1988 and 1989, not one of their 44 subjects remembered the Challenger’s explosion the same way they had in its immediate aftermath.”<sup>ii</sup> The *New Yorker’s* report of the study indicates that: “When the psychologists rated the accuracy of the students’ recollections for things like where they were and what they were doing, the average student scored less than three on a scale of seven. A quarter scored zero. But when the students were asked about their confidence levels [that their later memories were correct], with five being the highest, they averaged 4.17.”<sup>iii</sup> In other words, they were nearly certain that their incorrect memories were accurate.

*Christian Science Monitor* reports that one student who had participated in the memory study wrote: “When I first heard about the explosion, I was sitting in my freshman dorm room with my roommate and we were watching TV. ... It came on as a news flash and we were both totally shocked.” A year and half earlier, though, “just 24 hours after the tragedy, ... she wrote, ‘I was in my religion class and some people walked in and started talking about [it]...I didn’t know any details except that it had exploded and the schoolteachers’ students had all been watching which I thought was so sad.”<sup>iv</sup>

How can our memories be so unreliable?

Moses seems to have a similar problem. At the outset of Deuteronomy, Moses’s retelling of the events of desert wandering, he says, “Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and

bring back word...”<sup>v</sup> However, when the same story is told in the Book of Numbers, presumably contemporaneous with the events, we read: “Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Send men to scout the land of Canaan, ...’”<sup>vi</sup>

So, which is it? Did the people demand that the spies be dispatched, or did God command it? The answer matters, because the results are disastrous. Ten of the spies claim that the Israelites will face giants and impenetrably fortified cities when they attempt to conquer the land. The other two scouts, Caleb and Joshua, nevertheless encourage the people with faith that God, who has redeemed them from Egyptian bondage, will bring them victory as they enter the Land. The people nevertheless refuse to budge, provoking a severe punishment: forty years of desert wandering, during which all the generation of the exodus will die, save Joshua and Caleb.

Does God hatch a plan, ending in disaster? Or are faithless Israelites the instigators?

Medieval commentator Sforno imagines that the people said, “‘We ourselves want to appoint these men and dispatch them.’ [But] This was something God did not approve of, and this is why God told Moses [in Numbers], ‘you dispatch them.’”<sup>vii</sup> In Sforno’s mind, then, Moses’s report is accurate, and not in conflict with the way the story is told in Numbers. The people demand that the spies be sent. Then, Moses seeks God’s instruction, which he receives and records in Numbers. Midrash goes even farther, contrasting the Israelites’ approach to Moses at Mount Sinai with their demand for spies: “When you came to the Mount [-- that is, Sinai --], you did not all come willingly. Here, though, you came altogether – men, women and children.”<sup>viii</sup> Every single Israelite, then, is responsible for setting in motion the course of events that would lead to the forty years of desert wanderings. God, it would seem, enters the story only after the fact, the account in Numbers notwithstanding.

Methinks the rabbis protest too much. Based on what modern psychology teaches us about memory, we may reach a different conclusion. Numbers tells the events as they happen: God commands that scouts be sent, perhaps to test the Israelites’ faith. Almost forty years later, Moses recalls the events differently, colored not only by time but by the incident’s impact. Dispatching the spies has caused such unmitigated disaster that Moses cannot imagine God’s suggesting it.

Moreover, Moses's purpose in Deuteronomy is to instruct the people before they enter the Land. He delivers a clear message: Putting God to the test will end only in disaster. By contrast, trusting God, yields blessing.

Moses's memory lapse doesn't end with the outset of the story. A few verses later, he claims: "Because of you, Adonai was incensed with me too, and said: You [Moses] shall not enter [the Land] either."<sup>ix</sup> We know better. Moses is punished for an entirely different sin, well after the incident of the spies. When the people are without water, they complain bitterly. God tells Moses to take his staff, to speak to a rock, and the rock will yield water. Instead, Moses harangues the people and smashes his staff on the rock. God replies: "because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."<sup>x</sup>

Ramban, another of our medieval commentators, tries to smooth out this second contradiction. He points out, accurately enough, that Moses wouldn't be in the desert all those years later if not for the sin of the spies. He suggests that Moses is saying, "Had you not sinned then and continued to sin, I would never have gotten into the trouble that kept me out of Israel."<sup>xi</sup>

Again, failure of memory is a more helpful explanation than suggesting than convoluting Moses's words. Perhaps this time, Moses mis-remembers more willfully, eager as he would be to forget his own misdeed. Again, though, he may have a purpose, which is to teach the people the broad consequences of their actions, lest they repeat them.

Relying on memory can have disastrous consequences. Most of us believe our own memories, and we lend tremendous credence to other people's recollections. The worst abuses, even if unintended, are in criminal proceedings. *Scientific American* reported in 2010: "Since the 1990s, when DNA testing was first introduced, Innocence Project researchers have reported that 73 percent of the 239 convictions overturned through DNA testing were based on eyewitness testimony. One third of these overturned cases rested on the testimony of two or more mistaken eyewitnesses."<sup>xii</sup>

Let us learn from Deuteronomy and let us approach our own memories more humbly. There's a reason that different members of each family tell varying versions of the same story. None of us is lying. We're all just remembering differently. In that newfound humility about memory, let us assure that our imperfect recollections are never a curse, but only a blessing, to the people we encounter briefly and to the loved ones who share our lives.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Fabien Tepper "Where were you when the Challenger exploded? Why your memory might be wrong," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 28, 2014. Accessed July 20, 2018 at <https://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2014/0128/Where-were-you-when-the-Challenger-exploded-Why-your-memory-might-be-wrong>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Maria Konnikova, "You Have No Idea What Happened," *The New Yorker*, February 4, 2015. Accessed July 20, 2018 at <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/idea-happened-memory-recollection>

<sup>iv</sup> Tepper.

<sup>v</sup> Deuteronomy 1:22.

<sup>vi</sup> Numbers 13:1-2.

<sup>vii</sup> Sforno to Deuteronomy 1:22.

<sup>viii</sup> Midrash Aggadah, Deuteronomy 1:22.

<sup>ix</sup> Deuteronomy 1:37.

<sup>x</sup> Numbers 20:12.

<sup>xi</sup> Ramban to Deuteronomy 1:37, paraphrased.

<sup>xii</sup> Hal Arkowitz and Scott O. Lilienfeld, "Why Science Tells Us Not to Rely on Eyewitness Accounts," *Scientific American*, January 1, 2010. Accessed on July 20, 2018 at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-the-eyes-have-it/>.