

Parashat Dvarim

Guiding Question

How can we discern when patience and persistence are still doing necessary work, and when they have become ways of remaining stuck?

Torah Text: Deuteronomy 2:3

רַב־לָכֶם סָב אֶת־הָהָר הַזֶּה פָּנוּ לָכֶם צָפֹנָה:

You have circled this mountain long enough; turn northward.

Rashi

[1040-1105, France]

Had they not sinned, they would have passed by way of Mount Seir to enter the Land.

Cantor Elizabeth Sacks

[21st Century, United States]

At certain moments, we have circled enough. We have retold and reanalyzed and reinterpreted enough.

Question

Rashi understands the circling as a consequence of an earlier failure, while Sacks focuses on repetition that has outlived its usefulness. Does change more often begin by understanding why we became stuck or by deciding that we have been there long enough?

Rabbi Francine Roston

[21st Century, United States]

They were stuck in the past, fearful of every threat, imagined or real, and unable to accurately understand the situation before them.

Reverend Dr. Marting Luther King, Jr.

[1929-1968, United States]

“Wait” has almost always meant “never.” I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her

little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to Black children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat Black people so mean?” when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” men and “colored” when your first name becomes *the n word* and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.” when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Question

Who gets to decide when a community has waited long enough, especially when the people urging patience aren’t the ones paying the price?

Annie Duke

[1965-, United States]

When so much money, time, and effort have already been spent on a project, that’s exactly when it becomes so hard to walk away.

Judith Viorst

[1931-, United States]

And these losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go.

Question

What are we protecting when we refuse to leave a path into which we have already poured ourselves?

Susan David

[21st Century, South Africa and United States]

That initial discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.

James Baldwin

[1924-1987, United States]

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

Audre Lorde

[1934-1992, United States]

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.

Question

How can we distinguish the discomfort that accompanies meaningful growth from the discomfort that warns us a path is wrong?

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

[1943-, United States]

Everything can look like a failure in the middle.

Question

How can we discern between a difficult middle that calls for continued perseverance and a closed path that requires transformation?

Rebecca Solnit

[1961-, United States]

Change is rarely straightforward. Sometimes it's as complex as chaos theory and as slow as evolution. Even things that seem to happen suddenly arise from deep roots in the past or from long-dormant seeds. A young man's suicide triggers an uprising that inspires other uprisings, but the incident was a spark; the bonfire it lit was laid by activist networks and ideas about civil disobedience, and by the deep desire for justice and freedom that exists everywhere.

Closing Question

Deuteronomy 2:3 doesn't declare that the years of circling were meaningless. The journey may have protected Israel, formed a new generation, and prepared the people for what lay ahead. Yet a moment arrives when yesterday's necessary journey becomes today's confining pattern. The command contains both judgment and direction: long enough; turn north. Which is harder to hear: that a pattern has lasted long enough or that a new direction is now required?