



The Tragedy (and Hope) of the Book of Numbers

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There is something profoundly tragic about the book of Numbers: A people liberated from slavery, protected by a faithful God, and promised a good life in a land flowing with milk and honey, simply cannot overcome its fears, its lack of faith, and its inability to trust. Instead of journeying forward, it looks backward again and again, grumbling and complaining, longing for Egypt, and eventually succumbing—again—to the lure of idolatry. What should have been a story of a triumphant march to the Promised Land becomes something else entirely—a dreadful tale of distrust, disloyalty, disappointment, and, ultimately, death. Yet according to the Torah, God’s love and faithfulness do not readily accept defeat. And so even amidst sorrow and devastation, old-new possibilities emerge: Despite everything, Numbers urges, God’s hopes and promises will yet be fulfilled.



In the first ten chapters of Numbers, everything about Israel’s life proceeds according to God’s plan. Numbers 1-10, one scholar writes, is “an almost monotonous rehearsal of preparations for the wilderness journey that God orders, Moses mediates, and the people dutifully obey.”¹ Indeed, Israel’s compliance with God’s command is the major motif of these chapters: Phrases such as “the Israelites did just as the Lord had commanded” appear at least

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a dozen times in these chapters.² Bible scholar Terence Fretheim writes that in these crucial chapters, “a somewhat idealistic picture emerges: A community ordered in

¹ Dennis T. Olson. “Negotiating Boundaries: The Old and New Generations and the Theology of Numbers,” *Interpretation* 51 (July 1997), p. 230.

² Cf. Numbers 1:19, 54; 2:34; 3:16, 42; 8:4, 20, 22; 9:5, 18-19, 23; 10:13.



all ways appropriate to God's dwelling in the center of the camp; the human implementation of the divine command precisely observed throughout... One is given to wonder how anything could go wrong."³

Yet go wrong it does. After an abundance of meticulously executed preparations, the people are finally ready to move forward. What happens next is jolting, even shocking. In an instant, "the people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord" (11:1). Dissatisfied with the sustenance God provides them, the people are soon remembering Egypt's delicacies with unbridled longing (11:4-6). Conflicts emerge—between the people and God, between the people and their leaders, and between the leaders themselves. With stunning rapidity, everything falls apart: "Obedience to God's command turns to rebellion; trust becomes mistrust; the holy is profaned; order becomes disorder; the future of the people of God is threatened."⁴ If the first ten chapters of Numbers testify to remarkable fidelity and compliance on Israel's part, the next fifteen tell a sordid story of "rebellion, resistance to authority, idolatry, and death."⁵ Reading the opening of Numbers, we had expected something very different, something much better. The best laid plans of God and men...

In one of the most painful episodes in the Torah, even as Moses and God commune on Mount Sinai, the people below begin worshiping the golden calf (Exodus 32). A great deal has transpired since then—the tabernacle has been erected and its appurtenances prepared; the order of sacrifices has been put into place; the camp, and the people within it, have been prepared for the journey; and God's presence has been made manifest, ready to lead the way. And yet, despite all this, things deteriorate to such an extent that the people return to where they began—worshiping an idol, this time Baal-peor (Numbers 25:1-9). Fifty-nine chapters of

³ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (1996), p. 140.

⁴ Fretheim, *Pentateuch*, p. 140.

⁵ Olson, "Negotiating Boundaries," p. 231.



the Torah have passed since the golden calf episode, yet it seems that the people have not grown at all. “In a real sense,” one Bible scholar writes, “Baal-peor is but an extension of the golden calf.”⁶ “The striking similarities between the Baal-peor apostasy and the golden calf story suggest,” another adds, “that these two stories function as bookends for the experience of the old generation from Mount Sinai to the edge of the promised land.”⁷ With Moses’ steadfast assistance, God has tried to give the people new life, but they have resisted. In the wake of this culminating moment of infidelity, the last of the generation liberated from Egypt die in a terrible plague (25:9). The recalcitrant older generation will not inherit the land.

And yet it is another, earlier story that arguably captures the very heart of Israel’s failure.⁸ Parashat Shelach tells of the spies whom Moses sends, at God’s command,⁹ to survey the land and to take the measure of its inhabitants. The men Moses sends report that the land is as wonderfully fertile as has been promised. But the people who dwell there, they ominously warn, are powerful. and their cities fortified. They conclude, silencing the dissenting voice, that “we cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we” (13:31). Those who dwell in the land are giants, the spies insist; in their presence, we felt like mere grasshoppers. The people take the words of the spies to heart. They begin to cry, and they turn on Moses and Aaron with a vengeance: “‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt,’ the whole community shouted at them, ‘or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is the Lord taking us to that land to

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (1990), p. 211.

⁷ Olson, “Negotiating Boundaries,” p. 233. For a brief analysis of the parallels between the two moments, cf. Olson there.

⁸ According to the Torah, two of the older generation’s many sins stand out: The apostasy of the golden calf (Exodus 32-34) and the faithlessness of the spies Moses sends to reconnoiter the land (Numbers 13-14). Only in these two instances is God so enraged that God considers destroying the people (Exodus 32:10 and Numbers 14:12). Accordingly, when Moses recounts Israel’s prolonged journey through the desert in Deuteronomy, he lays special emphasis on these two transgressions in particular (Deuteronomy 1:22-45, 9:12-25).

⁹ The simple meaning of the story as recounted in Numbers indicates that the spies are sent at God’s initiative (12:1-3). Deuteronomy, in contrast, describes the initiative as coming from the people (Deuteronomy 1:22, 37).



fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!’ And they said to one another, ‘Let us head back for Egypt’ [or perhaps, ‘let us appoint a leader and head back to Egypt’]” (14:2-4).

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“From Exodus 1 to the mission of the spies,” Bible scholar Gordon Wenham writes, “there is but one plot: How Israel was brought out of Egypt to the borders of Canaan. Now within sight of their goal they suggest giving it all up.”¹⁰

How deep is the betrayal? From the very first moment, it is clear that something is amiss: When the spies return, they speak of the land “you [i.e. Moses] sent us to” (13:27). “Usually, when the land is qualified by a relative clause, it is described as the land ‘which the Lord swore to give them,’ or something similar (cf. 13:2, 14:16,23,30,40, etc.). Whenever the spies describe the land, they pointedly avoid this phraseology.” Although they affirm that the land “does indeed flow with milk and honey” (13:27), they question God’s promises, insisting that “the presence of the other nations is an insurmountable obstacle to entry.” (So profound will the treachery become that the people will soon describe Egypt rather than Canaan as a land flowing with milk and honey!—Numbers 16:13.) The Torah also specifies that the spies journeyed as far as Hebron (13:22), a highly significant detail: “It was near Hebron[,after all,] that God first promised Abraham that he would inherit the land (Genesis 13:14-18).”¹¹ The report the spies bring back is thus nothing less than a repudiation of the divine promise.

Reading closely, we discover that there is in fact nothing all that surprising about what the spies report. God had promised Israel that the land was good (Exodus 3:8, 17) and had committed to protecting it from powerful foes. As the people had departed Egypt, God had

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (1981), p. 135.

¹¹ Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 134, 133.



convincingly demonstrated how easily God could dispense with massive, terrifying armies, and the people had praised God for reducing formidable enemies to quaking fear (Exodus 15:14-16). Nevertheless, in this fateful moment—as so often for the former slaves—fear displaces trust, and faithlessness carries the day.

The story of the spies contains another subtle but tragic indication that existentially, at least, the people have not traveled anywhere at all since leaving Egypt. As God redeemed them from slavery, Exodus tells us, “God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, ‘The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt’” (Exodus 13:17). Now, despite the heroic acts of God they have witnessed, the people act just as God had predicted. They panic and announce their intentions to head back to Egypt after all.¹²

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What is the nature of the spies’—and by extension, the people’s—failure?

Ultimately, the question posed by the text is whether what we imagine possible is limited to what we see before us, or whether

we can discern possibilities not immediately apparent to the eye. In more traditional theological language, the challenge is “whether to trust the bare word of God’s promise or to have [our] vision limited by one of the observable realities before [us].” Note the ways that the majority report of the spies differs—and the ways it doesn’t—from the position taken by Caleb (and Joshua), on the other. The latter do not dispute the facts communicated by their colleagues; “they perceive the same threats and obstacles as the majority of the spies, but they trust... God... who is with them and who will give them the land.”¹³ So frustrated is God

¹² Cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (1993), p. 363.

¹³ Keith Condie, “Narrative Features of Numbers 13-14 and their Significance for the Meaning of the Book of Numbers,” *Reformed Theological Review* (December 2001), pp. 123-137. Passages cited are on pp. 126, 136.



with the spies that they die immediately (Numbers 14:37); so disappointed is God with the generation which “spurns” God time and again that God issues a decree: All of them shall die before they arrive in the land (14:21-23).

In many ways, Numbers serves as a kind of counter-weight to some of the ways Jews tend to talk about *teshuvah* (repentance). In celebrating (and encouraging) the human capacity for change and transformation, some Jewish thinkers wax almost rhapsodic about the power of *teshuvah*. They speak of it as an act of self-creation, which they describe as nothing less than “a severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous ‘I’ and the creation of a new ‘I,’ possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, [and] goals.” *Teshuvah* is, on such accounts, a “creative gesture” which results in “the emergence of a new personality, a new self.”¹⁴ As motivational discourse, such talk undoubtedly has its place. But Numbers introduces a far soberer note: For all its centrality in Jewish thought and spirituality, change is extremely—and sometimes excruciatingly—hard to achieve. The Israelites trek through the desert and end up... right where they started. Numbers reminds us that “one can take the people out of Egypt, but it proves [far] more difficult to take Egypt out of the people.”¹⁵ (To be clear: Sounding a sober note about the possibility of human growth is decidedly not the same as deeming it impossible. Following Numbers, a Jewish theology can do the former, but it cannot do the latter without undermining the very heart of Jewish piety and spirituality.)

This is, needless to say, a sad and dark tale. God has tried to breathe new life into the people, but they have been unable or unwilling to receive it. And so they die

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¹⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (trans. 1984), pp. 110, 112.

¹⁵ Fretheim, *Pentateuch*, p. 137.



before God’s promises are fulfilled. Had Numbers ended there, we would be faced with an unmitigated and irredeemable tragedy. Crucially, though, covenantal crisis is not the end of the story. After the people’s second collapse into idolatry, when the last remaining adult members of the older generation have died out, something remarkable happens: Numbers launches into a census of the new generation, the people who will—despite everything—conquer and inherit the land (Numbers 26). In stark contrast to what has happened until now, in the last eleven chapters of the book, we encounter “no death, no murmurings, no rebellions against the leadership.”¹⁶ Something genuinely new seems to have emerged.

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There is something deeply Jewish about this story. Human stubbornness and sinfulness take an enormous toll—on the people themselves, on their leaders, and even, ultimately, on God. And yet the Torah does not give these human failings the last word. “The Israelites’ determination to sin is more than matched by [God’s] determination to

bless... [God] will fulfill [God’s] promise—of that there is no doubt. The only open question in [Numbers] is ‘Who will be the recipients of the benefits of that promise?’”¹⁷ The reader of Numbers is invited to imagine herself as part of a new generation poised to enter the Promised Land. Will we see only what seems impossible and thus spurn God and the possibility of genuine faith? Or will we trust in God, and thereby discover the hope and possibility that God continues to make possible?

Shabbat shalom.

¹⁶ Fretheim, *Pentateuch*, p. 139.

¹⁷ Condie, “Narrative Features,” p. 137.

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