# Trans-generational Thinking: Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

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In the Spring of 2015, Baltimore erupted in protest. Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man, had died due to injuries sustained while in police custody. People took to the streets to protest this injustice, and within days, there were tanks rolling down the streets of downtown Baltimore. People screamed for justice, politicians promised change, and all of us hoped that this time we would finally exorcise the racism still haunting our society once and for all.

It is five years later, and the situation today is eerily similar. After the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, protesters have flooded the streets of hundreds of cities to protest police brutality and advocate for criminal justice reform. Once again the National Guard was deployed to patrol the streets of American cities. I can't fail to notice that creeping sense of deja vu. Has anything changed? Does racial injustice not endure? How do we go on when there is seemingly no end in sight?

In this week's parasha, Shelah Lekha, following the sin of the spies, the Israelite nation is exiled to wander for 40 years in the desert. The people are told that every member of the current generation (with the exceptions of the two good spies, Joshua and Caleb ben Yefuneh) will die there; it will be their children and grandchildren who enter the land of Israel. How did the people of Israel go on after being told they would never reach their destination? If they were not going to reach the land of Israel themselves, what could they possibly accomplish? Was their journey not the epitome of futility?

This feeling of futility, of struggling against the immovable stream of history, that in the broad scheme of things, we have nothing to contribute, was not lost on the rabbis. In Pirkei Avot (2:16), Rabbi Tarfon states, "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it." Rabbi Tarfon maintains that a

validation of the overwhelmingness of the world's problems and the belief that each individual can effect change are not mutually exclusive.Yet while this Mishna encourages individuals to continue to labor to effect change despite its seeming insignificance, when read in light of an earlier passage of Pirkei Avot (2:2), Rabbi Tarfon's statement takes on a deeper, more inspirational meaning. Rabban Gamliel states:

And all who labor with the community, should labor with them for the sake of Heaven, for the merit of their ancestors sustains them, and their (the ancestors') righteousness endures forever.

While the changes we as individuals make may be minimal now, the meaning they take on when placed in the context of history is exponentially greater. It is the efforts of the past that "sustain" the changes of the present, and the changes of the present that grant meaning to the efforts of the past. So too do the efforts we make now sustain the progress of future generations. When the merits of our ancestors before us and our descendants yet to come are seen as one, we realize that our actions matter, that we cannot divorce our own efforts from the narrative being played out through history.

I would suggest that the Israelites wandering in the desert were able to press on because they maintained this view of history. They saw themselves as part of a story that transcended any one generation, recognizing that their role preparing their children to enter the land was vital to the success of their descendants. Intergenerational connectedness ensured that the wandering Israelites would not desist from their work, even with no destination in sight. This is how their "righteousness endures forever."

Similarly, the fight against racism in America has been long and arduous. Many have devoted their lives to civil liberties and equality for African Americans, and yet we have once again been reminded that there is much work to be done. In the words of the great Martin Luther King Jr, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." May we merit to help the arc bend a little bit more.

Angel for Shabbat