

Parshat Chukat- 2019

As I have spoken about before, there is a rise of what is now called "social genetics", where individuals look to companies such as Ancestry.com or 23&Me to identify their ethnicity markers. There seems to be a rabid curiosity about which group defines your heritage, and the fact that prices for these assays have dropped considerably has only intensified this personal hunt.

With the exception of those who were adopted, who might be trying to find their birth parents, the vast majority, it seems, are looking to learn the complex, even exotic nature of their genetic backgrounds, or, more and more, they are using these tests to prove the purity of their "whiteness".

Two sociologists, Aaron Panofsky of UCLA and Joan Donovan of Harvard, addressed an interesting phenomenon in their recent paper in the journal, *Social Studies of Science*. They followed a blog-site, *Stormfront*, in which white nationalist discuss the results of their ethnicity DNA tests. The problem, it seems, is that Stormfront's policy is that unless you are "all white", you will be kicked off the site, yet more and more, users are learning that they all have some amounts of Native American, Hispanic or African genetic markers.

Rather than reject them, their fellow white nationalists looked to console their fellow members, rationalizing the results as untrustworthy because of some twist of bad science or bad statistics, and of course, that the companies are owned by Jews who seem to have a global multicultural agenda. Most surprisingly, they argue to their "peers" about alternative means to measure "whiteness", such as the lore passed down by their grandparents.

Rather than consider that they *are* some of the groups they like to hate, they bent over backwards to help each other see *what they wanted to see*. As quoted in a New York Times article about this phenomenon, Jonathan Baron, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania stated, "People go to extraordinary lengths to maintain beliefs to which they are committed." Hugo Mercier, a cognitive scientist, coined this phenomenon "dissonance reduction". He studied a group of people who planned their future on the belief that an alien space ship would arrive on a specific day

and time to rescue them from earth's apocalypse, but that when the aliens failed to show, they nonetheless stayed and found reasons to explain their failed prophecy.

Last week, we read the parsha, Korach, which essentially starts with a rebellion against the leadership of Moses. Korach, a Levite with equal pedigree to that of Moses and Aaron, assembled 250 men of prominence, and as the Torah recounts, וַיִּקְמוּ לְפָנָי הַמֶּשֶׁךְ, literally, they got up in Moses' face. Their beef? רַב-מְלָכְךָ, you have too much power, and moreover,

כָּל-הָעֵדָה כֹּהֲנִים קְדוֹשִׁים, וּבְתוֹכָם יְהוָה; וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ, עַל-קֹהֵל הַיְהוָה?
All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them; and therefore, why do you lift yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?

To give some context, the Children of Israel in the previous chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, בְּמִדְבָּר, are literally lost in the desert, being directed by G-d during the day with pillars of smoke, and by night with pillars of fire. They are dependent on their daily rations of *manna*, with a double portion on Friday so that they don't work to gather it on the Shabbat. Although the *manna* is said to have tasted to whatever each individual wanted, the people seemed rudderless. More than that, Moses, they complained, seemed to be leading them in circles. Where was the land of plenty they were promised?

Indeed, when Moses tried to reason with some of Korach's rebellion party, that G-d was preparing them for their promised land, they shot back by saying, "why have you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey only to kill in the desert?"

It seems as if the rebels and those they represented were in full-on *dissonance reduction*, because as we know, life for them in Egypt just months before, was anything but a land flowing with milk and honey. It seems that once they had gotten used to liberty, to the fact that they did not have to make and haul bricks for the pyramids, once they the comforts of steady food, shelter and even protection from marauding desert tribes, once freedom set in, they became complacent and forgot the conditions that they came from. They forgot they were once slaves.

In the late 70's there was a wave of Soviet Jews who came to the US as part of the Jimmy Carter-Breshnev agreement. My mother, who is fluent in Russian, volunteered to translate for some of these families who the local Jewish Family Service was placing in apartments. It seemed that each of them was a doctor or a dentist back in the Soviet Union, but here, they were happy to drive a taxi in New York City or to wash cars. True to their entrepreneurial spirit, within 3 years, they were owning some of the taxi companies or the car washes. To my surprise, many of the immigrants of my parents generation, having come to the US only 20 years before, looked askance at these newcomers, as if they were somehow mooching off of *their* land flowing of milk and honey.

This is why we read in the Haggadah every year, "you were a stranger in the land of Egypt" and if the Holy One had not freed your ancestors, you and your children and your children's children would still be slaves in Egypt."

Friends, the crisis at the southern border is a complicated issue that many presidents and congresses have argued over. What is the best solution for this seemingly intractable problem is not simple or straightforward. But one thing I can say: that the day that we as American forget where we came from originally, that we all in some way were migrants fleeing unlivable conditions, the day we forget this and replace it with *dissonance reduction*, such as a justification for separating children from families and putting them in cages; that day will be when we lose our soul.

Avadim hayinu b'mitzraim.

And for those who have been swept up in arguing about the definitions of what are the camps, I refer to a quote by Deborah Lipstadt, a Professor of Holocaust Studies at Emory University: "Talk about the horrific conditions & not historical analogies. Don't give those who are behind this policy a chance to piously claim they are being wrongly accused. Use of Holocaust analogies to condemn US immigration policy is a distraction."

So, what was the fate of the 250 rebels against Moses? In their presence, Moses lit a container of incense and stated that G-d would decide who was the true leader. Indeed, in a showing that typified the "Old Testament" G-d, the ground opened up and swallowed up all the rebels. Case closed. There

was no wiggle room to argue: those who forgot where they came from , how they had been liberated, their complacency would not be rewarded; in contrast, they were immediately punished.

Friends, unless you are a member of the local Haudenosaunee Seneca nation, your ancestors came to these shores of their own will to flee oppression, famine, rape, or they were brought here in chains against their will to work as slaves. It is our obligation as Americans and as Jews to not turn a blind eye of dissonant reduction to those who, in their current day desperation, look to our country as a place of refuge, a place to find freedom. Let us always remember that each one of us was at one time "a stranger in a strange land."

Shabbat shalom