

cherished and trusted leaders might be influenced by what they want to remember, or what they want their followers to remember, in their narration of disturbing and significant events. Even beloved leaders such as Moses and Joshua can make nation-alteringly bad decisions, yet they, or their followers, may have preferred the version of history that lets them come across as heroes. As we in the US grapple with the process of taking down monuments, changing the names of buildings and institutions, and otherwise reckoning with the narratives told by and about America's own past leaders, let us remember the lesson of Devarim's retellings: no leader is without flaws, and no historical narrative is completely objective. To learn to retell, and to retell again, even while knowing that no version will ever get it quite right, is part of what it means to grow as a people and draw closer to the Promised Land.

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דברים תש"ף



## Retelling the Past

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Since the wave of protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, Americans have begun to reckon with the narratives many of us have taken for granted about our national past. As part of this national awakening, the legacies of some formerly beloved past leaders are being revisited. Demonstrators in Portland, Oregon, toppled a statue of Thomas Jefferson, a “founding father” who also owned hundreds of slaves; the statue of Teddy Roosevelt in front of New York City’s American Museum of National History, which portrays him on horseback next to an African and a Native American man, has been removed. Although this is an unprecedented moment of introspection for the United States, we can turn to the Book of Devarim for some insight on what is at stake in telling and retelling the past.

Parashat Devarim begins with Moses preparing the Israelites to finally enter into the Land of Israel after forty years in the desert. He does so by recounting some of the significant events they have experienced thus far in their journey. One of the first events about which he chooses to remind the Israelites is the story of the twelve spies, which was also recounted in Bemidbar chapters 13 and 14, back in Parashat Shelah Lekha. Yet his telling here doesn’t reproduce the account in Bemidbar exactly. What might explain the differences between the two stories?

According to the story in Bemidbar, which is told from a third-person omniscient perspective, God tells Moses to send spies to scout out the Land of Canaan. The spies return after forty days and report that the Land is excellent—flowing with milk and honey—but the people who live there are powerful, both physically intimidating and well-positioned in fortified cities.

One of the spies, Caleb, insists that the Land can nonetheless be conquered, but the other spies ignore him and continue to spread word of the inhabitants' fearsomeness. The Israelites are devastated and demand to return to Egypt. Then Caleb and his fellow spy Joshua try to convince the Israelites that the Land is good and worth conquering, arguing that God will protect God's people against its inhabitants. The Israelites, unconvinced, are about to stone Caleb and Joshua, who are saved by Moses stepping in to deliver a rebuke. Finally, God declares that this faithless generation must wander for forty years before their descendants can enter the Land.

In Devarim, however, the story is rather different. In Moses's first-person account, the Israelites, not God, told Moses that they want to send spies to scout out Canaan. The spies returned and said, "It is a good land that Adonai our God is giving us" (Deut. 1:25)—no mention here of fearsome inhabitants, of internal disagreement among the spies as to how to proceed, or of Caleb and Joshua's attempt to salvage the situation. Despite the seemingly positive report from the spies, the Israelites "sulked in their tents" (1:26) and refused to go, claiming—apparently falsely—that the spies have reported that the inhabitants are too strong. Moses reassures the people that God will protect them, and again, God announces that the Israelites must wander for forty years in the desert as a consequence of their disbelief.

Some classical commentators attempt to harmonize the two stories, suggesting that Moses's account of the spies' report refers only to Caleb and Joshua's statements, or pointing out that all the spies in the earlier account did admit that the Land was good, even if most thought it was unconquerable. Still, we are left wondering why Moses would have left out both the spies' "calumnies" (Num. 13:32) and Joshua and Caleb's attempts to protest against the prevailing attitude of despair, instead painting all the spies in a favorable light and the Israelites as utterly faithless for no apparent reason.

In her recent novel *Trust Exercise*, winner of the 2019 National Book Award for Fiction, Susan Choi explores the complex role of memory in the narration of past trauma. The first half of the novel takes the form of a third-person narrative about teenagers at a performing arts high

school. It recounts the students' internal drama and their relationship with a charismatic teacher, focusing on the romantic entanglements of two main characters, David and Sarah. Midway through the novel, the narration switches to the perspective of one of the students, Karen. "Karen"—not her real name, as we quickly learn, though she continues to call herself that—is now an adult and is very upset about the novel her friend Sarah, a successful author, has just published about their performing arts high school. She points out ways in which Sarah has left her, Karen, out of the narrative, unfairly shifted blame to some people, and unduly protected others. The narration begins to shift back and forth between a close third-person narration of Karen's thoughts and a first-person narration in Karen's voice. The reader is compelled to wonder: is Karen's account more reliable than Sarah's? What reasons might each of them have for preferring different versions of the story? Both Karen and Sarah seem to have been hurt in different ways—but do they want to remember what has happened to them? Or do they want to tell the version of the story that is most beneficial to them?

Perhaps we can understand the differences between the two spy stories as similarly exploring themes of narration, memory, and trauma. Both stories provide an account of why an already traumatized generation of former slaves had to endure a secondary trauma, wandering for the rest of their lives in the desert instead of entering a land where they could settle and make a home. Yet the two accounts provide contradictory perspectives on who contributed to this trauma and in what way. In the account narrated by Moses, there is no one to blame but the Israelites themselves, and no hero besides Moses, the ever-forgiving leader who alone tells the Israelites that God will protect them. Moses's narrative even protects God from bearing any potential blame, since it is now the Israelites, not God, who requested the scouting mission in the first place. On the other hand, the third-person account in Bemidbar is an almost too-good-to-be-true account of Joshua's loyalty, proving that he is the right person to be chosen as Moses's successor.

These two divergent stories cannot definitively tell us who played what role in this disastrous event in the Israelites' history. Yet they can nonetheless teach us an important lesson about how even our most