

Don't Play it Again, Joshua

- Basil Herring.

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In a world full of change, some things never change. Generation after generation, some behavior patterns return again and again, defying all logic, perplexing all wisdom, sometimes even to skip a generation, only to return, inexplicably, in the next—driven by a momentum and an impulse of their own. How else explain, for instance, the brutal carnage in our own day in so many places in the world, that confound every attempt at resolution. In Rwanda, where, as we have seen these days and weeks past, the Hutus and the Tutsis engage in appalling horror, slaughtering innocents on the other side, what could be the explanation if not a playing out of the homicidal, if not genocidal, patterns of the past, rooted in multi-generational models, imbibed like mother's milk from parent to child to grandchild and beyond. Or in dismembered Yugoslavia, where Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats invoke the same patterns of tribal, ethnic, or religious warfare against each other, identical to those behaviors that over centuries past their progenitors would engage in—almost as if programmed to relive the past, inexorably, and without escape. Why do things such as these repeat themselves again and again, what is it about people that perpetuates the past even when to do so is so obviously disastrous to themselves or the things they so ardently believe in? Can it be that we are, in the end, ruled by our in-born instincts, and our lower natures?

Now I for one do not believe that such behavior emanates from a cold calculus of benefits to be gained or losses averted; neither are they the result of a dispassionate analysis of religious beliefs, ethnic attachments, or political realities. The roots of such behavior run much deeper than such superficial cause or logic. For in spite of what we'd like to believe, for the most part we are ruled by our passions, not our perspicacity; we are moved more by our instincts than by our insights. As Rabbi Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, once said, the major decisions in our lives are made spontaneously and suddenly, in response to a command that comes from deep within us, and are not necessarily dictated by external considerations or conditions, and not necessarily affected by pragmatic considerations. Most decisions of faith, of marriage, of choice of profession, solutions to financial problems, acts of military genius, and most pivotal resolutions in life, are reached intuitively, without addressing any inquiries to the intellect. Only later on is the practical intellect called upon to justify the decision, to remove inconsistencies, and to plan implementation. (Reflections of the Rav, vol. 1, p. 91.) This intuitive faculty, which the kabbalists call the *ratzon elyon*, or higher will, is, says the Rav, what constitutes man's real identity and spiritual personality, for good or for evil, for better or for worse. And, we might say, these instincts in turn are molded and defined by that which we preceded us, and which accompany us into this world: our forebears and our parents, our history and our culture, attitudes and sentiments that bespeak the accumulated weight of nature as well as nurture, our environment as well as our early upbringing. In this respect man, says the Torah, is like the tree of the field: he is planted in a ground, his roots buried deep down in his past, constantly drawing on an emotional and moral reservoir that sustains and disposes him to act one way or another, in

response to what transpires all about.

Now it is not just on the macro level of politics or communities that such patterns can be encountered. They occur equally in mysterious fashion in each of us, and in our family-dynamics. More and more psychologists have come to recognize that in dealing with personal problems, you have to look not just at the individual who shows certain behaviors, and not only at his or her parents or siblings, but just as important, at what is called “the extended family field,” that goes back generations. For as Dr. Edwin Friedman has pointed out, in examining families over many such generations, particular patterns of behavior, perceptions, and thinking, as well as specific issues, for example sexual behavior, or attitudes towards money, territory, drinking, separation, and health, have an uncanny way of reappearing. These things have a strange way of being transmitted from generation to generation, mostly without the family members most affected even realizing it. As Friedman puts it, “family trees are always trees of knowledge, and often they are also trees of life.” (From *Generation to Generation*, p. 32.) Indeed few would disagree today with the idea that, for instance, those who were abused as children, are more likely to become abusers themselves; or that those whose parents were alcoholics will themselves be disposed to having the same problem. “All in the family,” is more than just a cute phrase—and “family” means more than the nuclear one at that. No wonder our Sages of blessed memory made the following statement regarding Joseph and his mother Rachel: *zerok h'utra la'avira, ve'a-'iakra nafik*: which translates as “throw a branch in the air, and it will land on the ground to strike roots from whence it came.” So with a tree, and so with a man; history is not just prologue; in many instances it is destiny too.

But take note: I said destiny, I did not say fate. Our Torah is not a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, where men or women are caught in the stranglehold of a blind fate, or inexorably bound to repeat the deterministic patterns of yesteryear. Man is not a machine; and our Sages teach us that we can indeed, albeit with great difficulty, and divine help, transcend the patterns and the errors that may have afflicted generations past, in our own families or beyond. The odds may be stacked against us changing the generational progression, but we are in the end, not prisoners of a capricious fortune. Now it is this very principle that finds fascinating expression in our parshah, in the following way. When Joshua is commissioned by Moses to be one of the spies, Moses changes his name from Hoshea to Yehoshua. Rashi, quotes the midrash that explains the change: Yehoshua is an abbreviated form of “Y-ah yoshiakha,” meaning “may God saved you.” From what is Joshua to be saved? Says the midrash: “from the counsel of the rest of spies you are about to join,” i.e., do not be influenced by them to become part of any cabal they may cook up. But why did Moses pray for Joshua more than any of the others? Why was he so concerned that Joshua in particular be tainted with a skewered report of the promised land?

The answer, says Rabbi Barukh ha-Levi Epstein (in *Tosefet Berakhah*), is that Moses was particularly worried that Joshua would repeat the behavior patterns of his long-buried progenitors. Joshua was after all a member of the tribe of Efrayim, the son of Joseph, who was in turn the son of Rachel. What was the aboriginal crime of Joseph, the one that created all his problems? It was, as the Torah put it, *dibbah ra'ah*, the evil reports of his brothers' activities that Joseph brought back to his father Jacob, and that earned him their murderous enmity. It was not that Joseph's reports had made up or distorted their activities; it was the fact that while what he described may have been true, it put them in a bad light in their father's eyes. Indeed we can add

to Rabbi Epstein's insight by noting that Moses had good reason to fear that this same quality of Joseph had been well preserved in Joshua. For in last week's parshah, when this same Joshua hears that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp, he does not hesitate to speak disparagingly of them to Moses, being quick to pass judgement, that Eldad and Medad be condemned for what they did. The young Joshua was apparently not all that different from the young Joseph, when it came to bearing negative reports of others. Moses, anticipating that the spies might return from the Canaanite expedition with similar sentiments, is concerned that his own servant Joshua not be influenced by them, to echo or amplify any negative report or foreboding. Hence he prays to God for divine intercession, and changes Joshua's name, as if to create a new character or personality trait, that would enable him to transcend the patterns of his genealogy.

Does Moses' prayer bear fruit? Does Joshua succeed where his forefather did not? The answer clearly is in the affirmative: to Joshua's undying glory he was able to withstand not only the conforming pressures of his "fellow-travellers," he is also able to summon up the inner resources to overcome the historic influences that had until that moment held sway over him. With the help of God, the encouragement of Moses, and a supreme effort on his own part, Joshua managed to conquer himself. And because he was in that sense a genuine hero, a *kovesh et yitzro*, as the Ethics of the Fathers puts it, he became the *kovesh et ha-aretz*, the one to conquer the land. In this sense, we are taught that, like Joshua, we can indeed have a vital hand in molding our own destiny, and that of our people. We are not condemned, like Sisyphus of Greek mythology, to engage in endless, repetitive, and in the end meaningless patterns of behavior. What our Torah teaches us through the glorious transformation of Joshua that overcame his own inborn instincts, and genetic makeup, in spite of his colleagues and his environment, that we too can do the same, difficult as it is, in the here and now, with our own lives.

Hallevaai it was easier, or that other peoples would be more inclined or capable of, responding in similar terms; be they blacks in Central Africa, whites in Southern Europe, or the yellow peoples of Asia. Sadly, for the most part they seem generally incapable of such self-transcending behavior. And it remains to be seen whether in the Middle East the Arab peoples in our time have it within themselves to transcend their xenophobic and murderous ways, perpetuated over many generations past, not to speak of their dismal record of recent years, in relation to the Zionist State and Jewish people. Sometimes I fear that for us to think that they can put all that behind them represents a triumph of hope over experience. Yet we dare not lose hope, or become so cynical, that by so writing our enemies off altogether, our fears become self-fulfilling prophecies.

As for ourselves, in our families and in our communities, as an ethnic group and as the Jewish people, let us learn from the past certainly; but let us also not be prisoners of its darker aspects. Let us, like Yehoshua bin Nun, gather our wits, marshal our resources, summon our courage to the task of renewal and self-transcendence, with discipline and stamina, humility and pride, echo his historic words, in speaking of that, and every promised land, be it beyond or within us,

Aloh na'aleh, ve'yarashnu oto, kee yakhol nukhal lah!
Let us arise, so that it may be ours, for indeed it is within us to do so!

