

I attended the American Jewish University in Bel Air, California, for undergrad, where I majored in psychology. I continued at that university as a rabbinical student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. So, I spent nearly nine years at this beautiful location in the Los Angeles hills, overlooking some of the most stunning vistas I have ever seen, not to mention the architecture and art of the renovated and updated campus.

The school's setting is outstanding. It is perched atop a hill separating the city from the San Fernando Valley, making it easily accessible to both locations. The mountain is majestic in its natural environment, covered with native plant life.

Unfortunately, a terrible fire destroyed most of the plant life on the hill several years ago. We didn't witness the fires because we had already moved to Chicago after I graduated from rabbinical school. Still, we saw their destruction when we visited Los Angeles for the first time after leaving.

It was depressing to see the lack where there had been plenty, the absence where there had been life, the darkness where it was previously so light, and the grey where it had been green. Driving on the freeway that intersected the hill was a depressing experience.

To our surprise, on our visit a few years later, life was coming back to that hill. Tiny green shoots resolutely stood next to the lifeless plants, and there were so many of them.

A few years later, the hill was even green- alive.

Finally, on our visit last year, the hill looked similar to when I started my undergraduate program.

It's gorgeous, but I can't tell you about this landscape without telling you about its earlier destruction.

This concept of storytelling is essential to the Torah portion we read today.

It's crucial to tell our story honestly. We must own our past missteps, as they are the building blocks that strengthen us and shape our identity.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Re'eh, Moses continues his speech to the Israelites during their final months in the wilderness before entering the land of Israel. As they inch closer and closer to the Jordan River, which they will cross to enter the land, Moses guides them through a retrospective of their journey. According to the rabbinic tradition, Moses spoke for thirty-six days.

This extensive speech is preserved in the Book of Deuteronomy, which we read in our weekly educational cycle. Moses continually repeats the details of their shared history, focusing intently on the community's challenges due to their actions—primarily the people's shortcomings concerning their societal obligations and relationship with the Divine.

Moses discusses the episode of the spies at length. As a reminder, twelve spies entered the land of Israel to return with excellent news about the land they were promised. However, ten spies return with news that terrifies the Israelites about the difficulties they will face to inhabit the land, including the giants and fortified cities. The Israelites react as can be expected, with fear and concern, and plead not to enter this land. God responds to this lack of confidence by ruling that the first generation of Israelites will not enter the promised land. Instead, it will be their children.

Why is this episode important? Well, it was the second greatest sin of the Israelites, just behind the Golden Calf episode. So, why does Moses need to describe this problematic moment from the Israelites' history?

Similar to how I described the hilltop on which my university was perched in the context of the destructive fires, we need to talk about the challenges just as much as the successes. It is helpful to reflect on every part of the journey so we can best move forward carrying the lessons of the past.

Moses tells the story of the Israelites with all of their bumps and bruises and greatest sins because those cannot be ignored, but they do not define the Israelites. Moses does not exclusively castigate the people for all of their misdeeds. Instead, Moses acts as a caring leader who reminds this generation that even the most significant mistakes form who they are as individuals and as a community.

"I told you so," a parent once told their teenager. "You would not have made that foolish mistake if you had used good judgment." The teenager responded, "Well, how do you get good judgment." The parent answered, "By making mistakes, of course."

Often, when we seek to be our best selves, we focus intently on what we should have done differently. This is inherently a Jewish practice. We have an entire day dedicated to reviewing and addressing our past misbehaviors, Yom Kippur. Throughout Yom Kippur, we tap our chests as we express our regret for how we spoke, what we did, and what we didn't do. There is wisdom in dedicating time and energy to moving forward by looking back.

We miss the mark. There is no denying our shortcomings; as essential as those experiences were and are for our development, they do not define us exclusively. That is one of the messages of this Torah portion and our upcoming holiday of Yom Kippur. We have experienced tragedy and triumph—both are essential to our nature and behavior.

Our mistakes can strengthen us and guide us to the best next steps. Like the Israelites, we are on a continuous journey, and each step brings us closer to our ultimate destination. As we enter the Hebrew month of Elul, which comes before the High Holidays, it is a time to reflect on the past and look ahead. We may thrive like that hilltop, growing upwards and outwards, preparing for the journey towards the promised land.