



## VA'EIRA

### On the Shoulders of Giants

"They don't make them the way they used to." We have all heard this comment with reference to all sorts of things, usually tools and utensils. Despite all the technological advances from which we benefit, we often are convinced that certain things were of superior quality in the old days. We believe that the old hammer Grandpa once used was stronger, and the snow shovel he wielded more effective, than the newfangled "throwaway" junk that they produce nowadays.

We even extend this belief of things being better back in the old days to human beings. Today's leaders cannot be compared to those of old, and today's athletes are cheap imitations of the Babe Ruths and Ty Cobbs (and Willie Mayses) of yesteryear.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept of NITKATNU HADOROT, "the generations get progressively smaller". Talmudic sages are no match for biblical heroes, and the great rabbis of recent times cannot

compare to the rabbinical leaders of centuries ago.

Like any other belief, this one requires a healthy dose of skepticism. Surely technological progress has provided us with tools that are superior to those we once used. And, whereas every generation has its outstanding heroes, not everyone in the past was a perfect person. Furthermore, there are plenty of people today who can stand up to the best of previous generations in their courage, in their erudition, or in their piety.

In this week's Torah portion, Va'eira, we encounter what might be the first example in history of the comparison of a current personage with previous ones in which the former comes off poorly.

Rashi shares with us, and ultimately rejects, the Talmud's version of what the opening verses in our Parsha tell us. The Talmud understands these verses in the context of the concluding episodes of last week's Torah portion, wherein Moshe challenged the Almighty and asked Him why He has "mistreated this people", thereby questioning his very mission. Indeed, somewhat earlier in last week's portion, he asked God, "What will I tell the people if they ask me for Your name?"

With this background, the rabbis understand the opening verses of this week's Torah portion as

follows: God compared Moshe to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. From this perspective, the patriarchs were much more trusting in God and demonstrated greater faith than Moshe. They did not question God in spite of their frustrations. Moshe did.

"A pity that they are gone and no longer to be found." This statement, which the rabbis attribute to the Lord, closely resembles the opening statement of this essay, "They don't make them like they used to."

Personally, I have come to appreciate the opinion of those other commentators who defend Moshe and who point out that Moshe challenged God, not out of faithlessness, but out of a profound and powerful empathy for the suffering of His people.

Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov were individuals. At best, they were heads of families, whereas Moshe held the role of a leader of a large nation. In his circumstances, blind faith would have been irresponsible.

When comparing later generations with earlier ones, we must take into account the changed circumstances of those later generations. We must judge them, not by the standards of those who came before them, but in their own contexts.

In the reading that I do about the Holocaust victims and survivors, I often ask myself whether I could possibly have struggled to remain alive in the conditions of torture and horror that they experienced, retaining their will to live. And I am certain that had I personally suffered the Holocaust experience, I would not have been able to emerge from it with the faith commitment of so many of the survivors who came to these shores with recreated families, practicing their faith punctiliously, and reconstructing vibrant religious institutions.

I believe that it is not that we are innately inferior to them. Rather, our circumstances have softened us, whereas their circumstances strengthened them.

There is indeed a theme in our tradition that sees a generation as diminished in comparison with the previous one; the later generation in fact becoming "smaller".

But our tradition also encourages us to realize that later generations have one great advantage over previous ones: We stand on their shoulders. We benefit from their precedent.

Moshe had this advantage: He could learn from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov and could model his faith and leadership capacities upon them.

From this view, Moshe's confronting the Almighty in defense of his people was simply something he learned from Avraham, who similarly confronted God in defense of the people of Sodom.

It might be true of us that "they don't make them the way they used to", but that need not stop us from asking ourselves, as our sages did, "When will my deeds approach the deeds of my fathers?" For we have the deeds of our fathers to learn from as we build our own spiritual lives.

We stand on the shoulders of long generations of giants. Perhaps future generations will similarly look up to us. 📌