

There's a Hebrew saying כל התחלות קשות all beginnings are difficult.
Feels relevant, right now

In Shemot/Exodus Parashat Yitro the recently freed Hebrews don't have the mindset or experience to take full responsibility for their own lives in a radically new environment. They need miracles like manna falling from the sky and water shooting from a rock, and their strong leader is only now learning how to delegate tasks so he doesn't burn out. They are also about to receive the Torah on Mt Sinai. Exodus 19:5 says in part

ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה
God says – Now if you obey me and keep my covenant you shall be my special treasure.
Rashi interprets this to mean - If now, you accept upon yourselves (the laws and covenant) it will go well for you from here and onward. For all beginnings are difficult. **The** mitzvot and the relationship with a caring God will provide necessary structure to their lives. **But** the process will be incremental and challenging.

The theme of **our** parsha is another new beginning. In the 40 years in the wilderness B'nai Yisrael have been formed into a people, received the Torah, built the mishkan, learned from the golden calf more about what God expects from them and from the Korach rebellion about the struggle of self governing. The slave generation had died off and the Israelites have a new mentality.

However - Now they were going to leave the protective womb of the desert. There would be no more supernatural meal plan and dry cleaning, no pillar of fire over them at night, no Moses. Instead they were entering a new land (in conquest) as a people among other peoples who have their own identity, their own gods and worship practices. Truly, all beginnings are difficult. The training wheels are off. How do they face this challenge?

Moshe (and God) say: Re-eigh SEE YOU singular need to recognize your reality has changed as have you.

ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה

I God am putting before YOU plural TODAY A blessing and a curse. Already each person is aware that he/she has inherited a shared destiny which demands something of them. The concept: כל ישראל ערביין זה בזה

all Israel are responsible to and for one another comes from this challenge. What I do plays a role in determining if the future as of today is a good one or not.

The blessing that you will hear/integrate today are God's commandments – which you already know from the desert but now you are asked again to consciously take them on.

The curse is if you on purpose decide not to listen to God's commandments and turn away from the derech/the way and go after other Gods.

There's a midrash in Sifrei which likens the blessing to choosing life, and the curse to choosing death. In it a man is sitting at a crossroads = one road begins smoothly but ends in a thicket/thorns, the other begins with a thicket but ends smoothly. He advises passersby to take the path which begins with thorns. The idea is for a short while the way will be difficult to navigate but soon will become clear. The opposite applies to the initially clear path. The message is it might seem that not listening to God's rules has no negative consequences – but actually this ease lasts only a short while and they will forfeit their life in the world to come, The ones who take on the apparently onerous approach are rewarded with a long life in the world to come.

I want to alter the midrash. I think the choice of the early smooth road stands for choosing a life without the demands of the commandments or values which ask us to treat each other with decency. It starts easy but contains its own seeds of destruction: soon people who are only in it for themselves turn against each other and break the social contract. The road which starts with thorns is one where people decide to take on the commandments and values like כבוד הבריות respect for the humanity of all and מחלוקת לשם שמים disagreement for the sake of heaven which take effort but provide a way for people to engage with each other to create a safe and supportive society which becomes a blessing. It is demanding but in it free people choose life for and with each other.

We read Re-eigh before the new month of Elul every year. Its message helps us to prepare for **our** annual new beginning at Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. We are each asked to commit or recommit to the mitzvot and Jewish values found in our texts and our shared history. Just like in Re-eigh each one of us is asked to see clearly where we, the Jewish people and the greater world are **today**. Our teshuvah and resolutions may be different than they were last year to fit the demands of this present moment and mine may be different from yours. The liturgy asks us to pay attention to how we talk to and treat each other.. We have the power to make new choices to become a better and more effective version of ourselves. While Yom Kippur is our most introspective holiday many of the confessionals are in the we voice. It reminds us that all Jews are responsible to and for each other. I join you in your confession and atonement and you do the same for me. We can learn to value and benefit from our different viewpoints and experiences.

כל התחלות קשות All beginnings are difficult but the opportunities are great. It is an obligation and privilege to try again, to begin again.. Shabbat Shalom.