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Pinchas, Numbers 25:10–30:1. July 10, 2020.

In a revolutionary moment in biblical history, the five daughters of Zelophehad petition Moses that they be granted the portion of the land which had belonged to their father, who died without sons; God accepts their claim as just, grants their request for inheritance, and modifies the inheritance law in the Torah accordingly. It's striking that these women effectively stand up against this example of gender inequality, and insist on a solution. Their progressive petition to Moses rights this injustice and now will help all other women in a similar circumstance. These daughters are change makers. They are brave, and they are leaders.

More on leadership: God then says to Moses: “Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was.” While Moses could look down on the Promised Land, having led the Israelites on an arduous 40 year journey to the border, it wasn't going to be his job to lead them further. That job would belong to the next generation.

In response, Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, “Let the LORD, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the LORD's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.”

Moses wants to protect the Israelites, and, as a shepherd would, ensure their safety and welfare. It is said that a true test of character comes not when you expect a light at the end of a tunnel, but when you see no light coming. In this powerful and moving Torah moment, Moses' true character is revealed. He is focused on the Israelite's plight, rather than his own. His request of God shows compassion and empathy, love and kindness, vision and generosity.

One of the soundest pieces of advice I was ever given, came from my sister two years ago while I was going through a very difficult time. Knowing my

struggle, she suggested I “pray for clarity”. Well, as I have experienced it, crisis begets clarity. That is, there’s nothing like a crisis to make things crystal clear. Stress testing gets us to return to the fundamentals of who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. Clarity is born regarding what’s essential and what’s not, what’s productive, what’s not, what’s meaningful, what’s not. And this clarity is good. Clarity brings focus and purpose, which propel us forward.

When I read this passage, when I read Moses’ response to God, I see a man who is likely no stranger to crisis. Maybe it’s that 40 years of wandering in the desert with thousands of rebellious and stricken Jews—sounds like a crisis to me. He wants to ensure a genuine and benevolent leader, someone who’s “got your back” and leads from the front. Moses emerged from crisis with clarity, focus, and purpose.

And the LORD answered Moses, “Single out Joshua, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him. Have him stand before (Eleazar) the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority” Moses did as the LORD commanded taking Joshua before the priest and before the whole community. He laid his hands upon him and commissioned him—as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

So, Moses empowers Joshua, a man who will understand and respect the differences between people, to succeed him and lead the people into the Land of Israel. I was most struck by how God commands Moses to lay one hand on Joshua, but Moses uses both hands, “filling him generously”. Moses’s actions inspire us to absolutely and whole-heartedly show similar generosity of spirit to that which he showed when laying both hands upon Joshua.

The horrors of human suffering and death during the COVID pandemic, as well as the most recent—but not in any way isolated—brutal and racist attacks on our brothers and sisters of color, have put many of us into crisis mode, me included. As a two and a half decade frontline Internal Medicine provider and medical educator in The Bronx, wrestling through these crises has given me some clarity—I see several truths and the consequent actions that need to occur. I hope we can all unite, inspired, and see the uniqueness of every human being and our world and help repair it. Let’s NEVER go back to normal.

*Pirkei Avot* teaches, “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it”—just as Moses didn’t complete the work of bringing his people into the Promised Land, it’s not always our job to complete the tasks, but we all must begin in order to propel forward. Let’s all work together to replace obstacles with opportunity and create a just and sustainable future.

So here’s MY clarity:

1) We cannot deny science.

Our natural environment, our climate and our alarmingly shrinking biodiverse species in their habitats are in need of drastic and immediate respect, protection, and rebuilding. The human contribution to climate change is real, and YES, I am a MAD scientist. Signed up or not we are all in this and we all need to take action. Not just talk. Real action. There is some ironic justice in that the COVID pandemic is rooted in human failure to heed scientific truth regarding our natural environment, and in particular an unwise disrespect for other species and the sanctity of the habitats those species occupy.

My clarity in action: We all must make a critical paradigm shift to live WITH rather than ON this earth. We need work very quickly toward a zero carbon footprint and conservation of our natural environment, which entails changes at both the societal and personal levels. On the personal front, we can become vegetarians, use alternative sources of energy, work from home, and of course recycle—everything—just to name a few ideas. We should advocate for and support, and create programs, policy, and legislation that will protect the health of our world and all of its species. We need to carefully heed scientific truth.

2) We cannot deny the many severe disparities that exist and that adversely affect human health.

While COVID is ruthless, taking the lives of many younger healthier and richer patients, it has a special predilection for disadvantaged communities of color, not explained by population density or even comorbidities. These communities ARE my patients. Structural racism and other social determinants of health which tend to cluster with skin color is showing its ugly hand in selectively striking out this community. OVER HALF of people in some areas of The Bronx have

tested positive for SARS CoV2 infection. In the U.S., blacks are 13% of the population but 34% of the COVID deaths. But COVID is simply yet another, in a very long list, of afflictions besieging The Bronx and similar populations. Social disparities and structural racism are real, and need to be eradicated.

My clarity in action: We need to support and mentor URM, in medical education and other professions. We need to develop, implement, and disseminate drip and integration curricular methods in antiracism and social disparities for all levels of learners. And we need to listen. And we need to stand up and assert justice and change. White Coats for Black Lives: My brothers and sisters of color and patients clapped for me, I and we can kneel for them. Systems need to stop killing my patients and we need to be the change makers for social justice, just like the daughters of Zelophehad.

- 3) We cannot deny the enormous human horror that this continuing pandemic has brought.

The body trailers I see studding the streets surrounding my hospital as I slick my hair back with hand sanitizer each morning certainly have disavowed me of any and all notions that we are, as signs like to say, “healthcare heroes”. Quite frankly the label “hero” is estranging and isolating. A war, yes. Hero, no. It’s a gruesome fight, one we both did and didn’t sign up for. We didn’t sign up to go into this war unprepared, without the tools we needed to help our patients survive and protect ourselves. We didn’t sign up for the trauma of bearing witness—but able to do little beyond that—to the fate of dozens and dozens of patients every day breathless and suffering cardiac arrests, dying isolated and alone, frightened. Many never in a hospital before, NOW knowing they are about to die, as we their providers know too. We didn’t sign up to die from this disease ourselves, but many of us have. Worse yet, we didn’t sign up to bring this infection home to our loved ones to see them suffer and possibly die as well.

My clarity in action: We need to be much better prepared for this and work hard to beat this thing back. At work, inadequate personal protective equipment and lack of environmental controls—simple things like closed doors to rooms that contain ventilated COVID patients—must be resolved. If these protections are not available it must mean for us NO ENTRY. We

can't help our patients when we're dead. In public, for ALL of us, it means masks and social distancing, and quarantining and isolating when indicated. NO exceptions. EVER. ALL OF US. ALWAYS. We need to live each day with our cups overflowing with compassion and emotional vulnerability. We need to live and work mindfully—to be present—to preserve the dignity and beauty and essence of life in the midst of this horror. Like Moses, we need to show compassion and empathy, love and kindness, and display vision and generosity. Our challenge is for us to show the generosity of spirit that Moses shows when he lays both hands upon Joshua. This will take all of us, figuratively laying both hands onto each other, healthcare workers included, because the losses in life are ours, too—losses as humans not heroes—as we all mourn in synchrony. And let's together, in action and in spirit, as Moses did, shepherd in a better and more sustainable new world.