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Recognizing Responsibility

This week's portion kicks off the last of the Five Books of Moses.

Most of the book is Moses' final speech to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land, in which he recaps their travels, battles and the various miracles they witnessed.

One of the most interesting parts of this portion is Moses' use of language. In particular, he frames his storytelling as: "I did this, and then you (collectively) did that." What's strange about his choice of language is that the people he's addressing were not alive for a good chunk of his historical accounting; and if any of them were, they were under age 20 at the time any of the reported events took place.

Yet, he chooses to address the collective as having been present and as having been responsible for the victories and defeats the nation faced along the way while wandering in the desert.

While the new Israelite generation might have appreciated being lumped in with their parents when their parents did things right, I have to imagine that they struggled when they were chastised and lumped in with their parents when it came to their parents' shortcomings.

Can any of us honestly say we'd be comfortable being held accountable for the faults of our parents?

Why would Moses lump the current generation in with the past one? Frankly, we shouldn't be surprised, given the other instances we've found of such grouping in the Torah. For example, we should remember that God (as portrayed in the Torah) isn't always happy and smiling and is willing to hold children accountable for the sins of their parents:

"You shall not bow down to them [idols] or serve them; for I am a jealous God, punishing the children of those that hate me unto the third and fourth generation [paraphrase of *Exodus* 20:4]."

So, too, we're reminded that the exodus from Egypt did not happen just to/for our ancestors: "And you shall tell your son on that day: It is

Parshat D'varim:
Deuteronomy 1:1-
3:22; *Isaiah* 1:1-1:27.



**Rabbi Dan
Horwitz**

because of that which God did for me when I went out from Egypt [paraphrase of *Exodus* 13:8]."

(Sound familiar from Passover?) We're meant to view ourselves as having gone out of Egypt and experiencing what our ancestors did, and so, too, we're potentially held accountable for the actions of those who came before us. What gives?

What are the benefits and shortcomings of a collective, cross-generational identity? Much has been written about the hyper-individualism that permeates contemporary American life. Perhaps for those who came before us, who experienced struggles different (and arguably greater) than our own due to being Jewish, the collective identity piece was a bit stronger ...

Do you think the way we currently act in our lives and communities would be different if we envisioned ourselves as part of a collective spanning generations rather than as individuals?

This week, let us reflect on our identities and how we view ourselves in relationship to others.

Are we learning from the successes and mistakes of those who came before us? Are we living lives that our children, and theirs after them, will be inspired by and seek to emulate?

Let us commit to leaving legacies that our descendants are anxious to inherit, and to transmitting the collective narrative of our people in such a way that they willingly and joyously adopt it as their own. 🌟

Dan Horwitz is the rabbi and founding director of The Well, a pluralistic Jewish community-building, education and spirituality outreach initiative of the Lori Talsky Zekelman Fund at Temple Israel geared to the needs of young adults and those who haven't connected with traditional institutions in Metro Detroit. For information, visit www.meetyouatthewell.org.