Shifting Stories: When Truth Gets Twisted
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What does it mean to blame someone for something they didn't do—or take credit for something you didn't do?

When retelling a story, not every detail is recalled perfectly, and this can be seen in our Torah portion this week, D'varim. This portion marks the beginning of Moses's retelling of the Exodus story and the events that took place in the desert.

Remember, this is a new generation that did not experience Egypt or the events involving the spies.

Many subtle differences exist between our Torah portion and the *Book of Numbers,* but I would like to focus on three differences evident in the story of the 12 spies.

To recap this story from *Numbers*, God instructs Moses to send 12 spies, one from each tribe.

The spies go on their mission, and the majority return terrified, reporting that while the land is indeed flowing with milk and honey, there are giants—and the Israelites would be like grasshoppers in comparison.

Only two spies, Caleb and Joshua, have a positive outlook; the others bring back a negative report.

The Israelite community then has a panic, lamenting, "If only we had died in Egypt" or "If only we could die in this wilderness."

God becomes angry with them, and their punishment is to wander in the desert until the entire generation dies out, allowing the next generation to enter Canaan.

In Moses's retelling of the story, the first difference appears right at the beginning: Moses claims that the people asked him to send spies, and he agreed; in the *Numbers* account, God commands Moses to send the spies.

Next, in Devarim, Moses blames the people for not wanting to enter the Promised Land, sharing that the scouts "gave us this report: 'It is a good land that our God is giving to us' " (*Deuteronomy* 1:25), completely ignoring the negative reports shared by the majority of the spies in *Numbers*.

Later, Moses blames the people for his own inability to enter the Promised Land, saying, "Because of you, the Eternal was incensed with me too, and God said: You shall not enter it either" (*Deuteronomy* 1:37).

However, we know from *Numbers* that his punishment was for striking the rock instead of speaking to it (*Numbers* 20:8).

These are three examples of how Moses slightly alters the truth, either blaming others for something they didn't do or taking credit for something himself. He takes credit for the spies' mission and blames the Israelites for his inability to enter the Promised Land.

These changes in the retelling could be motivated by a range of factors, such as wanting to maintain a positive image or avoid confrontation.

Similarly, in our own lives, we might shift blame or adjust details in our stories to protect our reputation or avoid criticism.

What does it mean to shift blame or alter the truth?

I know I've probably blamed my sisters for something they didn't do, maybe even for something I did but didn't want to get in trouble for. In those moments, I was looking out for myself, not others.

Have you ever retold a story and shifted blame or changed it a little? Why do you think you did that?

Just like at last week's service, I want you to turn to the person next to you and share your answer to these questions.

Like Moses, I'm sure we've all altered the truth a little in a story; but I hope that moving forward, we can be more mindful—whether it's taking responsibility when things go wrong, giving credit where it's due, or simply being honest when retelling stories from our lives.