



Parshas Devarim

For the week ending 4 Av 5756
19 & 20 July 1996

Summary

This Parsha begins the last of the Five Books of The Torah, *Sefer Devarim*. This Book is also called *Mishne Torah*, literally "the Repetition of The Torah" (and hence the Greek/English title of Deuteronomy). *Sefer Devarim* relates what Moshe told the Bnei Yisrael during the last five weeks of his life, as they prepared to cross the Jordan into *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe reviews the *mitzvos*, stressing the change of lifestyle they are about to undergo: From the miraculous, supernatural existence of the desert under his guidance, to the apparently natural way of life they will experience under Yehoshua's leadership in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The central theme of this week is the sin of the spies, the *meraglim*. The Parsha opens with Moshe hinting to the sins of the previous generation who have died in the 40 years of wandering in the desert. He gives the Bnei Yisrael a description of what would have happened if they hadn't sinned by sending spies into *Eretz Yisrael*. He tells them that Hashem would have given them all of the land from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates including the lands of Ammon, Moav, and Edom without needing to fight. He details the subtle sins that culminate in the sin of the spies, and reviews at length the sin of the spies, and the results of that sin: The entire generation was to die in the desert, that Moshe would not enter *Eretz Yisrael*, but rather they would be led by Yehoshua Bin Nun. He reminds them that their immediate reaction to Hashem's decree was to want to "go up and fight" to redress the sin. He recounts how they wouldn't listen when he told them not to go because they no longer merited to vanquish their enemies miraculously. They ignored him and suffered a massive defeat. They were not allowed to fight with the kingdoms of Eisav, Moav or Ammon — these lands were not to be part of the map of *Eretz Yisrael* in the meantime. When the conquest of Canaan will begin with Sichon and Og, it will need to be in the natural way of warfare.

Commentaries

PLANTING SEEDS

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, concerning the Wilderness, concerning the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tophel and Lavan, and Chatzeros and Di Zahav." (1:1)

When you want to convey to someone something unflattering about themselves, the worst way you can do it is by a direct confrontation. The listener will immediately rise against the perceived attack with all manner of self-justification: "I couldn't help it" "You think you could have done better?!" Better by far is to allude to the matter at hand, subtly planting an inference into the subconscious mind of the listener. In this way, his front-line early-warning defenses aren't triggered, and the idea lodges in his subconscious to grow like a seed.

This is what Moshe does in the opening lines of the Book of Devarim. The place-names that are mentioned here are locations of various sins and rebellions of the Jewish People: "*concerning the wilderness*" — i.e., their lusting for the flesh pots of Egypt; "*concerning the Aravah*" — their immortality with the daughters of Moav; "*opposite the Sea of Reeds*" — their lack of trust in Hashem at the crossing of the sea; "*between Paran and Tophel and Lavan*" — their complaints about the miraculous food, the *Man*; "*and Chatzeros*" — Korach's rebellion, "*and Di-Zahav*" — the golden calf.

Moshe is addressing the Bnei Yisrael in the last five weeks of his life. He wants to leave them a strong and lasting message: To beware of inherent tendencies that have already brought them into trouble.

Rather than tackle them directly and risk rejection, Moshe plants the seeds of self-examination into the collective psyche of the Jewish People, so that long after his departure, they will still bear fruit.

(Rashi, Chasam Sofer, heard from Rabbi Naftali Falk)

THE ART OF LISTENING

"...And whatever is too difficult for you, bring it to me and I will hear it." (1:17)

'A problem shared is a problem halved' runs the adage. It is a well-know psychiatric fact that part of the process of helping people with their problems is to encourage them to verbalize them. Being listened to is in itself a relief, even if the problem itself still remains.

The Rebbe of Gur notes that this idea has its origin in what Moshe says here "*And whatever is too difficult for you, bring it to me and I will hear it.*" Moshe doesn't say "I'll solve the problem for you" rather "I will hear it." By allowing the other person to express his problem is therapeutic in itself and may also help him to find a permanent solution.

(Adapted from Rabbi Abraham J. Twersky)

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TODAY, I AM A FOUNTAIN PEN

“Listen amongst your brethren and you shall judge fairly.” (1:16)

A judge may not listen to one litigant in the absence of his opponent.

— Sanhedrin 7b

A little baby. Nothing could be purer. Nothing could be more innocent. Nothing could epitomize goodness more than a baby. Or maybe not...

From the moment a baby opens its mouth in its first cries, it is expressing an unopposed selfishness. ‘I want to eat! ‘I want to sleep! ‘I *don't* want to sleep!’ ‘I want *more* to eat!’ A baby’s life is nothing more than an unrelieved litany of selfishness. Twenty-four hours a day. Until the age of 12 or 13.

When a child become *Bar* or *Bas Mitzvah* — the best present he gets is not a fountain pen, or a computer. The best present he gets is a *yetzer tov* (positive inclination). For until *Bar Mitzvah*, the *yetzer hara* (selfish drive) rules unopposed. (*Rashi, Koheles 4:13*) Rabbi Yonasan Eybeshitz was a child prodigy. Even as a young boy, he overcame his natural desire to go out and play, immersing himself instead in learning Torah. When he became *Bar Mitzvah*, he was asked how it was that he had been able to ward off the *yetzer hara* while he was still so young.

The young Reb Yonasan replied ‘The Torah teaches us that it is forbidden for a judge to hear the testimony of one litigant if the other is not present. So, whenever the *yetzer hara* would try to entice me away from my learning, I would say to him that I could not possibly listen to his case until I was thirteen when the other litigant — my *yetzer tov* — would be able to present his side of the case too!’

SENDING OUT SPARKS

“Moshe began explaining this Torah...” (1:5)

When Moshe began to explain the Torah, he did so in all of the 70 root languages. Why was this necessary? After all, the Children of Israel all knew the Holy Tongue itself, and what possible purpose could there be in Moshe translating the Torah into 70 other languages? Hashem knew that the Jewish People would have to wander through a long night of exile amongst all the nations of the world. Thus, Moshe explained the Torah in all 70 languages so that in every language and every nation and land there would be a spark of Torah.

(Chidushei HaRim)

Haftorah: Yishayahu 1:1-27

HORSE SENSE

“The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s trough. “Yisrael does not know, My people do not perceive.” (1:3)

Rabbi Yochanan ben Tausa once sold an ox to a non-Jew. When Shabbos came, the non-Jew tried to take out the ox to plow his field, but try as he might, the ox refused to budge.

He beat the animal vigorously until Rabbi Yochanan came and whispered in the animal’s ear ‘*Let it be known to you that you are no longer under my jurisdiction. You are now under the domain of the non-Jew. You must work now as and when he desires.*’

Immediately, the ox got up and started to work. The non-Jew, seeing what had happened, went and converted. And that’s how Rabbi Yochanan got his name — “ben Tausa” (*son of an Ox — Taurus*).

Similarly, our Sages relate the story of an ox that EliyahuHaNavi gave to the false prophets of *baal*. The ox refused to be slaughtered in the name of the idol *baal* until Eliyahu told it that by letting itself be offered on the altar of *baal*, it too would

ultimately be sanctifying the Divine Name. Only then, the ox gave in and allowed itself to be slaughtered.

Our sages also tell of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair who had a donkey which refused to eat food from which *maaser* (tithes) had not been taken.

All of this is hinted to in this verse: “*The ox knows its owner*” — there is an ox that knows its master — the ox of EliyahuHaNavi who submitted to being sacrificed to idolatry, or the ox of Rabbi Yochanan ben Tausa who wouldn’t work on Shabbos. “*And the donkey, the feeding trough of its master*” —the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair who wouldn’t eat untithed food. However, you, My people, says Hashem, you have sunk lower than the ox and the donkey, for “*Yisrael does not know, My people do not perceive.*”

(Tzoare Shalal in Mayana shel Torah)



INSIGHTS INTO THE ZEMIROS
SUNG AT THE SHABBOS TABLE
THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS.

BARUCH KEIL ELYON-*iuhkg ke I urc*
“BLESSED IS G-D...”

“FORTUNATE IS EVERYONE WHO LOOKS
FORWARD TO A DOUBLE REWARD”

ואשרי כל חכה
לתשלומי כפל

v’ashrei kol choche
l’sashlumi kefel

Everything about the Sabbath, note our Sages, is *double*.

The command for observing the Shabbos in the Ten Commandments heard at Sinai was given in double form —*Zachor* and *Shamor*.

Two animals are brought as the additional sacrifice on Shabbos, and we honor each Sabbath meal by making our blessing over two loaves.

The reward which awaits the Sabbath observer is certainly due to be a double one as well, and that is why we sing of the good fortune of the one who looks forward to receiving that double reward.

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