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 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 immorality 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 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)
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 selflessness. ‘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 unrelied litany of selflessness. 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.

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

Rabbi Yochanan got his name — “ben Taursa” (son of an Ox — Taurus)

The command for observing the Shabbos in the Ten Commandments heard at Sinai was given in double form —

This is hinted to in this verse:

“Blessed is everyone who looks forward to receiving that double reward.”

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

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