



Parshas Devarim

For the week ending 6 Av 5757
8 & 9 August 1997

Overview

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, 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 vanquishing 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 via the natural way of warfare.

Insights

DIVINE IMITATION

"Because the judgment is G-d's"

'Imitatio Dei' is not a Bach cantata. It's not a fresco by Donatello in the Sistine Chapel. Imitatio Dei is a mitzva in the Torah. We are taught that our actions must emulate those of Hashem: The Talmud says "Just as He clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked... Just as He visits the sick, so you should visit the sick... Just as He comforts the mourner, so you should comfort the mourner... Just as He buries the dead, so you should bury the dead. (*Sota 13b*) Interestingly, all the qualities that are listed in this *gemara* are positive qualities. For example, it doesn't say - "Just as He judges the wicked, you should judge the wicked." Rather, the emphasis is placed on our obligation to perform justice.

Why is that? Because when it comes to the positive virtues we are to be as much like G-d as is humanly possible, to be - 'imitatio Dei'- like Hashem. However, when it comes to judgment, we should know that "the judgment is G-d's". *We are only His agents*.

When we sit in judgment, we are not 'taking the law into our hands'. The law - judgment - stays with Hashem.

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." Allowing the other person to express his problem is therapeutic in itself and may also help him to find a permanent solution.

THE SUPREME COURT

"And that which is difficult to you...." 1:17

Moshe tells the people to bring the *difficult* cases to him to judge. But when Yisro gave advice to Moshe in a similar vein, when he saw that Moshe was being swamped by the volume of legal claims, he said to him that the *large* matters should be brought to Moshe, and the small claims, should be left to a hierarchical legal system.

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We can see from this an interesting distinction between the Jewish and the secular legal system: In the secular world, as personified here by Yisro, a case is judged according to the sum of money involved. Cases involving large amounts often reach the supreme judicial authority even if the law itself is straightforward and not beyond the competence of a regular judge.

However, in Judaism, if the law is clear-cut, it can be arbitrated by any qualified Halachic authority. On the other hand, if the case is "difficult", if it requires fine delineation and deep evaluation, then it will go to the highest Halachic arbiters even if the case involves a paltry sum.

SAND AND STARS

"I am no longer able to carry you by myself. May The Lord, Your God increase you, and place you today like the stars of the Heavens for number." (Chapter 1- 9,10)

The *Bnei Yisrael* are compared to the sand of the sea and the stars of the Heavens. The nature of sand is that each grain is bonded to its neighbour. Completely the reverse are the stars of the sky, which perform are aeons apart from each other and every star is an entire world of its own.

When the Jewish People are united, bonded into one unit, it's still possible for Moshe to carry their weight, but when they are divided and distant one from the other, and each one is a world unto himself, then the strain on the one who has to lead and direct them becomes unbearable.

PLANTING SEEDS

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, concerning the Wilderness, concerning the

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, 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 Eliyahu *HaNavi* 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

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-justifications: "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 Mann; "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 the inherent tendencies that have already brought them into confrontation with Hashem.

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.

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 Eliyahu *HaNavi* 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 un-tithed 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.*"

Sources:

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The Supreme Court - Rabbi Mordechai Perlman

Sand And Stars - Afiki Yehuda

Planting Seeds - Rashi, Chasam Sofer, as heard from Rabbi Naftali Falk

Horse Sense - Tzoare Shalal in *Mayana shel Torah*

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