

Parashat Devarim

Moses' History Lesson

INTRODUCTION - THE UNIQUE STYLE OF SEFER DEVARIM

Our Torah reading this week inaugurates a new book The Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy). The content of Sefer Devarim gives it a unique status amongst the books of Torah. It is made up almost in its entirety of Moses' addresses to the nation. The first few verses of the book tell us that Moses began to address the people on the "first day of the eleventh month" of the fortieth and final year in the wilderness. This was just a short time before Moses' death.[1] This book then, is the official collection of Moses' parting addresses to the nation.

Deuteronomy, has a unique style. Of course, in all other books of the Torah, there are sections of "quotes" or reported speech. For example we read passages containing a speech or blessing: Jacob addressing his sons, Pharaoh's dialogue with Moses, Balaam's words. But these quotations are not the backbone, the literary frame of the text. Here in Devarim, the spoken word becomes the overwhelming bulk of the book. In this book – in the opening pesukim – Moses' speech will be introduced, but in this book, the historical and even the legal sections are spoken **by** Moses in the form of a series of addresses to the nation.

TIMING

What does Moses talk about so extensively? Why does an entire volume - one fifth of the Torah - need to be dedicated to Moses' speeches?

Let us pause a little to think about the timeframe in which these events happened. For Moses personally, these were his final days and weeks. The great leader who had led his people from Egypt, who had convened with God at the summit of Sinai for an entire forty days studying the law and conversing with God "face to face;" the man who tirelessly led the nation through highs and lows for forty long years was about to leave the world of the living. He delivers a "living will." There are certain messages that he feels he must impart in order to reinforce the people's commitment to particular areas of law, of morality, of religious life. His speeches are filled with encouragement to the nation that they retain the national lifestyle proscribed by the Torah. It is, then, highly appropriate that for the modest man whose burial place is a mystery - "and no-one knows his place of burial to this very day" (Deut 34:6) - that his words are his ultimate epitaph; his passion and loving-care for the nation are his memorial monument. This is the reason why these speeches of Devarim are so cherished.

ENTERING THE LAND

But we have to mention a further dimension to this story. The timing of Moses' speech is auspicious not only in the context of Moses' personal life. For his audience too, these are moments pregnant with expectancy. Let us remember that the nation is encamped at the border of the Land of Caanan. They wait there, poised, ready for the conquest of the land, an event which they have waited a full forty years to see. The changes which the nation will undergo in the transition from a desert tribe to a nation state are enormous. The potential for success is enormous, the potential for failure is equally frightening. Moses' speech would be relevant even were he not to be on the verge of death. His speech is about the society that will need to be created in the Promised Land - the tensions and pressures, the compromises and challenges. Moses excels in this speech in his foresight and guidance. For this second reason, his lengthy teachings to the nation are critical.

The content of the speeches are crucial to Moses' agenda. Devarim is made up [2] of three addresses or speeches. The three sections of the book are:

Speech	Chapter	Content
1.	1:6-4:40	History lessons
2.	5:1-26:19	The main speech - The mitzvot in the land
3 & 4:	27:11-28:69 /Ch.29&30	The covenantal ceremonies

There is a straightforward structure to the book. First, a historical background; the first speech would seem to be something of an introduction. Then, Moses reviews the laws (mitzvot) of Judaism. By its length, this is clearly the main purpose of the speech; to teach Jews how to live as Jews. The final speeches describe what happen if we observe or neglect the laws of God, the terms of covenant whereby the promise of the land of Israel is conditioned upon the keeping of the commandments .

This then is the logical structure of Moses' address: an encouraging introduction, followed by a central core which delineates the code of law, and a conclusion stressing the terms of commitment or failure.

This class will focus upon the message of the first speech, the introductory address whose first three chapters form our parsha. For optimum understanding of the rest of this shiur, it would be good to have a text at hand. The really keen amongst you might want to take a break at this point and read chapters 1-3 of Devarim.

SELECTIVE HISTORY

At first glance, our parsha reads as an historical review. We mention our departure from Mt. Sinai, the disastrous spy episode, the journey to Israel/Canaan, the nations that we encountered en route and the war against Sichon and Og. But take a closer look! This "historical review" is far from complete! It does have some surprising omissions if it aims to be anything approaching comprehensive. For example, the Exodus from Egypt does not warrant a mention. The revelation at Mt. Sinai and the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) are also missing.

So what does this mean? We see a speech here which recounts many historical incidents from the wilderness years but misses some of the central ones. What can we conclude? - That this is not a simple historical review, with the aim of informing a younger generation of their auspicious past. Rather, the historical incidents here are hand-picked. The review is a and it is delivering a clear message. What is left for us is to review this selective reading of history and to "decode" the clues to find the "message" - to formulate an intelligible spiritual statement.

Here is the listing of the "stories" or events mentioned.

- The command to leave Sinai to the promised land (1:6-8)
 - Leadership crisis and appointment of Judges (1:9-18)
 - The journey to Canaan (1:19)
 - The sin of the spies and their punishment (1:20-40)
 - The sin of those who tried to enter the Land (1:41-45)
 - The forty years in the wilderness (1:46-2:1)
 - The command to leave the wilderness to Canaan (2:2)
- Confrontations with:
- Edom (peaceful) (2:3-7)
 - Moab (peaceful) (2:8-18)
 - Ammon (peaceful) (2:19-25)
 - Sichon of Cheshbon (war) (2:26-37)
 - Og of Bashan (war) (3:1-20)

What is the meaning behind such a list? Why are these events in particular singled out for Moses' attention? And what conceptual thread of thought weaves these particular happenings together?

TWO JOURNEYS

The key to understanding the thrust of this history lesson is to begin to be attentive to the words used by the Torah, in particular, a

phrase which is repeated twice, in different context, almost word for word:

"And the Lord our God spoke to us at Choreb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Start out and make your way to the hill country..." (1:6-7)

"Then the Lord said to me: You have been circling this mountain long enough, start out to the north..." (2:2-3)

The text, by using almost identical phraseology (long enough - this mountain - start out), is drawing a connection between two events. What are these two events? They both contain God's order in relation to a journey to Eretz Yisrael - the promised land. The first verse is the order to Moses to embark upon the first journey to the Canaan. Israel set out from Sinai on a direct path to conquer the land. This expedition was curtailed tragically by the spies' episode. The second verse (2:2) is the identical order, issued 38 years later (see 2:14), where the people left a mountain at which they had been rooted, and they were told to set out for the promised land. This was the second national attempt to reach the holy land.

So, Moses is drawing a simple parallel or possibly a contrast, between the failed mission in the second year of the desert - the mission that so curiously collapsed - and the current mission to reach the holy land. This second mission, from the perspective of the nation, is on the very brink of its fulfillment. The people have massed on the border of the land and in a very short time they expect to enter the land. But, then again, was this not the self-same situation that Israel faced 38 years earlier when, encamped at Kadesh, they requested spies? And the rest is history! The two situations do have their parallels.

So we have established that the historical analysis aims to draw a parallel between the first and second journeys to the land of Canaan. But what is the focus here?

TO ENTER OR NOT TO ENTER?

A different textual similarity is evident within the text of chapter 1. With the spies:

"... You did not wish to enter the land and you rebelled against the word of the Lord your God." (1:26)

But, in the aftermath of the story of the spies, after the Israelites have received the decree that they stay in the wilderness and die there, we read of a group who try nonetheless to enter the land. Moses warns them not to try:

"And the Lord said to me: tell them not to go... for I am not with them." I spoke to them but they did not listen and they rebelled against the word of God and deliberately entered (the land)..."(1:42)

This comparison is in truth a deep and striking contrast. In both cases the people rebel against God defying his words, however, the direction is different. With the spies, the nation is meant to enter the land but they refuse, thereby rebelling against God's plan. In the next story, God has decreed that the people refrain from entering the land, and some people feel that they themselves should go in. This too is a defiance of God's word, His decree.

This contrast clearly raises certain central questions: Is it good to go into Canaan or not? Some people get punished for their refusal to enter the land; others are struck down because they wished to enter the land. So where is the truth? How does a person know what to do? A simple answer is appropriate. A person knows what God tells him.

The second journey to Canaan tells a similar story. Some nations - Edom, Moav, Ammon - confront Israel only to prompt a warning from God:

"... be very careful not to provoke them, for I will not give you of their land... do not harass them or engage them in war..." (2:4, 9,19)

With other nations (Sichon and Og) God encourages Israel to engage in warfare. So we can pose an elementary question: How does one know which way to act? Sometimes it seems that God says "yes" to the war option, and at others He will say "no!" How does one know what to do? The answer is that in truth, the only reliable option is to resort to the word of God.

So, both sections establish the same pattern. They bring stories which happened on the way to Canaan. The stories are grouped in such a way that in each grouping, the stories go either way: to enter or not to enter, to fight or not to fight? It is not clear-cut as to how to act. In these situations, the text is telling us that God's word is decisive.

Or, to put it a different way, the first mission failed because the people refused to enter the land when God wanted them to enter, and they wanted to enter when God explicitly told them not to. A mission to the promised land in defiance of God will always be doomed to failure. In contrast, in the second journey, God's instructions are heeded, despite their somewhat confusing direction, and the journey runs smoothly.

THE LESSON

Where is all this leading? I think the answer is reasonably simple. Moses is telling the people a simple teaching: You cannot always trust your intuitions, your logical reasoning isn't always correct. The word of God is the surest way to follow. Surely this has additional significance at this particular historical-national juncture. The nation is about to enter Canaan. It is their immediate task. However, Moses, the great leader who has taken them so far, will not be continuing the journey with them. Moses is leaving them at a crucial moment in Jewish History. Moses then, feels an intense need to say: 'You messed it up once. Don't do it again!' You stood in exactly this position thirty-eight years ago and it all came to a tragic end. How about this time? Moses wants the people to learn these lessons clearly so that they will not fall into the trap of their ancestors. They must know that the control over Canaan is dependent on obedience to God. Moses is not going to be there to remind them of potential pitfalls and mistakes. He will be dead by the time they enter. Instead, he tries to review their journey through the wilderness with a simple agenda. Why did the first mission fail, and how will the second succeed. This is really Moses' entire objective in the book of Devarim as a whole. In Moses' words at the conclusion of his "history lesson":

"And now, O Israel, listen to the laws and rules that I am instructing you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers is giving you..." (4:1-2)

The "history lesson" is focussed upon this message. The topic of the lesson relates to the fundamental orientation as regards the word of God in the context of nation and land. The first speech of Devarim attempts to establish a relationship to these values. We can then move upwards to a deeper understanding of the system of mitzvot themselves.

Shabbat shalom

Footnotes:

[1] Tradition has it that Moses died on Adar the 7th. Although it is not mentioned in the Bible explicitly, it is derived from the books of Devarim and Joshua which records thirty days of public mourning for Moses, a three-day preparation for the journey to Canaan, Circumcision of the nation (assumption that there is a three-day recovery period), and the celebration of Pesach on the 14th of Nissan. Working backwards one reaches 7 Adar.

[2] The end of the book I have ignored for our purposes: Ch. 31-32 The historical "song" or "poem" of Ha'azinu. Ch.33 Moses' blessings to the tribes Ch.34 Moses' death