

Decency and Kind Behavior Should Precede Torah

Parashat Devarim



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This Shabbat we start the book of Deuteronomy. In addition, this week also ends with Tisha B'Av. I'd like to discuss the weekly Torah portion, but I'd also like to talk about the destruction of the Temple and the sadness, remembrance, and repentance associated with this tragic event.

The Two Meanings of the Word “Devarim”

Deuteronomy differs from other books of the Torah in that it is made up almost entirely of a speech that Moses delivered to the children of Israel on the plains of Moab, before they entered into the Land of Israel. Moses was preparing the people for entering into the Land of Israel, and in doing so, he was preparing them for a time without him as their leader.

The first word of the Torah portion is “devarim,” in Hebrew. “Devarim” is the name of the book of Deuteronomy, but in addition to this it also means “words.”

It is interesting to compare the end of Moses' professional career to its beginning. This week's parasha is named after the entire book, “devarim.”

“These are the words Moses spoke...” - Deuteronomy 1:1a [NIV]

Moses’ Lifetime and Important Speech

If we take a moment and go back to the beginning of Moses' career, to the beginning of Exodus, it might bring a smile to our faces:

“Moses said to the Lord, ‘Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and tongue.’” - Exodus 4:10 [NIV]

God told him that He understood his concern, but that He still thought that Moses was the right man for the job.

*“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” -
Philippians 4:13 [NIV]*

After the end of the long, monotonous journey towards the entrance into Israel, Moses, that same guy who stuttered and told God he wasn't fit for the job, gave a speech before the entire nation of Israel.

Moses' speech throughout Deuteronomy included all the events of the past, from the beginning until that moment. These events that were mentioned were mainly warnings that were given to the people as well as to us, to prevent us from making the same mistakes.

The Quota of Sins for the Inhabitants of the Land of Israel

During the speech, Moses gave many geopolitical descriptions of conquests and reminded the people of Sihon, Og, Moab, and Ammon. We are even reminded of previous occupiers of the region, for example:

“That too was considered a land of the Rephaites, who used to live there; but the Ammonites called them Zamzummmites. They were a people strong and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites. The Lord destroyed them from before the Ammonites, who drove them out and settled in their place.” - Deuteronomy 2:20,21 [NIV]

Moses said that the Ammonites inherited the land of the Zamzummites, and Israel inherited the land of the Ammonites.

However, I want to remind you of the promise that God made to Abraham at midnight, the moment when all his offspring after him were said to be as numerous as all the stars of the heavens. Despite this, God delayed the application of the promise for 400 years:

“...for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”
- *Genesis 15:16b [NIV]*

In other words, the inhabitants of the land had a quota of sins, and as soon as they exceeded that quota, they lost the right to their existence, and God distributed the land anew. Moses tells us that this was how it was with the Zamzummites, the Ammonites, and the Amorites.

The Importance of Upholding a Certain Level of Morality

Let's make this clear, there is a direct connection between the moral behavior of a people and between its duration, particularly when it occupies the Land of Israel.

The message of Moses and God in these verses was also directed at us.

Moses explained to us that we are not the first owners of the house, and that its history is well-known and painful. According to His will, it was taken from us and given to all kinds of conquerors - Persians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Romans, Turks, and the British. It all depends on the will of the Creator as well as the amount of sins and iniquities committed by the inhabitants of the land. Everything is conditional, and it all depends on us; we have been warned.

The essence of this parasha is an exhortation and a warning. Moses was warning the people, and the Bible warns us. We as a society must be above a certain level of morality, and if not, our days in the Land of Promise are numbered.

We must understand, as believers, that we are in the same boat with the nation of Israel, and everyone's future, including our own, is tied up with the

future of the people of Israel. If one of us makes a hole in the bottom of the ship - we all will drown.

Tisha B'Av and the National Day of Mourning

As mentioned, this week ends with Tisha B'Av. In the Jewish-Israeli collective, this is the second most important fast after Yom Kippur. It is a sad day of national mourning.

Zechariah is still very relevant to our conversation today. Chapter 7 begins with a question about the fasting and mourning that have been kept for 70 years:

The Israelites sent a delegation from Bethel to the priests and prophets in Jerusalem.

The delegation came to ask for God's instruction: Should we continue to observe these days of fasting even though the exile is behind us and the Temple is being built before our eyes?

In Zechariah chapter 7, God gives a very sharp answer.

It's as if God was mocking the ones questioning Him. He asked them, "Where were you when my prophets warned you? Where were you when there was terrible evil around you, and you sat in peace and thought you were safe, and then came destruction and exile, as if by surprise?"

The question we need to ask ourselves is, what exactly has something changed? Are we any better? Zechariah was a prophet of comfort, and he was trying to encourage the people to become stronger, to overcome the exile and rebuild Jerusalem, especially the Temple.

We are in the Same Situation as in the Days of the Prophets

We are in a similar situation today, the Diaspora is behind us, we have come to Israel, and we have rebuilt the Land of Israel. 70 years ago there was nothing here, and according to the fulfillment of prophecy, we succeeded in building a state. The question is whether we learned the lesson. If now we'll listen to the prophets and to God's word.

Think about it, that temple that Zechariah was encouraging others to build, is the same temple that Yeshua said would be destroyed:

“Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. ‘Do you see all these things?’ he asked. ‘Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.’” – Matthew 24:1,2 [NIV]

In 70 AD, also on Tisha B'Av, indeed no stone was left on another.

We are All Guilty of Senseless Hatred

Two thousand years ago we did not learn the lesson. The reason for the destruction of the Second Temple was due to senseless hatred. What is senseless hatred? Is there such a thing? You can not say that this is hate for no reason, because there is no such hatred. Every hatred lies with whoever created it. Sometimes the reason is inappropriate, or the reason is just an excuse, but hatred comes from a certain place.

Usually hatred comes from a difference in opinions, whether it's faith, religion, and lifestyle. Furthermore, hatred that is disguised as religion, faith, commandment, ideal, is both harmful and dangerous.

As a matter of fact, we are all to blame for this - some more than others. We are all guilty of senseless hatred on a religious basis. We attack each other with our Bibles, throwing punches at others with our ideology. We insist on our rich tradition, but we forget to love one another.

We (and when I say “we” I mean Jews, Christians, and ourselves as a community) observe ritual, a certain form of prayer, our habits, the principles of our faith, but forget the person at our side.

We Must Remember to Treat Each Other with Respect

Like Zechariah, the prophet Isaiah, says the same things in this week's haftarah, which will be read in every synagogue in the world:

God is saying to us in the haftarah: “Are you coming to the house of God? Why? Who asked this of you? Do not come, I do not want to see you.” That's what God is saying. All you do is an abomination: Shabbats, holidays, and fasting.

Isaiah was speaking strongly, and God was saying to us through him - we will pray, and He will not listen. We will offer Him a sacrifice, and He will not accept a thing from us. Why is this? This is due to the fact that we do not treat each other properly as human beings. Treating one another with respect goes way beyond religion.

The adage that says, “Derech Eretz Kedma L'Torah” (decency and kind behavior should precede Torah) is a true statement.

The Formula for a Life of Blessing

Isaiah was saying, “You want God to listen to you, you want to return to a life of blessing?” Here is the formula:

“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” – Isaiah 1:16,17 [NIV]

What is really God's will? Zechariah answered this question similar to Isaiah in Chapter 7:

“This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’” – Zechariah 7:9,10 [NIV]

Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another. In other words, give of yourselves in order to help your brothers in trouble. Do not oppress the widow or the defenseless, like Hagar, for example. Do not even let the thought enter your mind to do evil against one another. In other words: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

There are very similar words in the epistle of James:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” – James 1:27 [NIV]

Our Role as Believers in Yeshua

The lesson I am learning from Tisha B'Av this year is that I must not feel safe. I mustn't feel secure in my home, in my community, or even in my faith when there is terrible evil around me.

I, as a Messianic Jew in Israel, am a part of this people. As such I ascend with them to heights and successes, but I also fall as one of them, in the collective punishment of the people of Israel.

Our role as believers in Yeshua is to strive towards a change. In Hebrew this change is called “Tikkun Olam” (repair of the world).

Our job is to support the weak and the poor because God hears their cries and their call for help. Woe to us if God hears their cry and we stand idly by confident in ourselves and in the righteousness of our ways. Although in actuality, we don't even lift a finger.

This week's parasha is an exhortation, a heavy portion that requires soul-searching. Next week we'll discuss the topic of comfort.

I wish you a Shabbat of peace and rest as well as a meaningful Tisha B'Av.

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