

פרשת דברים

OVERVIEW

In a wide-ranging review, Moshe sketches the most salient episodes of Israel's extraordinary history from the Sinai to the banks of the Jordan. His inspired words re-create before the eyes of his people the significant events of the forty years of wandering in the desert. Names serve as milestones: Horeb, Kadesh, Moab, Bashan. They highlight the miraculous survival of three million Jewish men and women in the desolate desert, surrounded by dangers and pitfalls. Secure in the knowledge of G-d's protective hand, Moshe guides his people until the border of the land where he must pass on the leadership to his young successor.

COMMENTARY

The Deuteronomy

The fifth book of the Torah begins "these are the word that Moshe spoke to all of Israel..."; According to most commentators "these words" introduce a series of solemn admonitions by Moshe to the people before he passed his succession to his disciple. Why does not the final book of the Torah begin with the account of Moshe's last prophecy and his passing? The Midrash explains that Moshe envisioned the nations impending settlements in its land, when a peaceful existence and growing prosperity might reveal fatal weaknesses in the nation's psychological structure. Would an Israel, matured by the experience of its forty-year wandering, be able to maintain its character as the people of G-d among the nations of the world? This anxiety

prompts Moshe to paint a gloomy picture of Israel's future by citing the dangers to its moral survival. At the same time he outlines the various ways that will enable the nation to overcome the threat to its spiritual existence.

The book of Devarim contains a number of laws that are repetitions from the previous books (thus the Greek name "Deuteronomy" and the talmudic title "Mishne Torah"). The majority of the more than one hundred articles of law in this book are entirely new. One must attempt to explain why these new laws were not set down in the preceding books and why the laws previously recorded should have been singled out for reiteration in our present text.

As an example let us turn to Ch. 16. In verses 1-17 we find a strikingly repetitious account of the Jewish festivals. Yet we note that in contrast to Ch. 23 in the book of Vayikra, here neither the Sabbath nor Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Shemini Atzeret are mentioned. These exalted days in the Jewish calendar are in reality not national holidays that correspond to the changing seasons, but are special days and festivals that define our relationship to the divine. As the fifth book of the Torah is dedicated to preparing the people for its entry in the promised land, it is the "pilgrim festivals" with their national and agricultural aspects that are repeated here. (This interpretation is borne out by the descriptive titles given to the three festivals in Ch. 16: "month of the standing grain" for Pessach; "from the time that the sickle begins (to be put) to the grain shall you begin to count seven weeks" for Shavuot, festival of

weeks; "when you gather up (the produce) from your threshing floor and your wine press" for Succot.

Numerous parts of the Torah's judicial legislation are repeated, as are laws relating to prohibited food, idol worship, social justice, with a view to the imminent encounter with strange cultures whose inevitable influence on the people's moral stance requires constant strengthening of its moral and ethical principles. The social laws needed to be reiterated because of the lack of opportunity to put them into practice during the forty-year wandering through the desert. For there, the concepts of rich and poor had lost their meaning. Everyone was equally dependent on the Manna and water from the rock. Many of the social laws that are presented in Shemot, Vayikra and Bamidbar did not take practical effect in the desert. Now, as the arrival in the promised land draws closer, these laws assume an urgent importance that warrants the re-emphasis in Devarim.

Similarly, the physical aspect of the marriage laws which were outlined in the third book are being enlarged upon in the 5th book in regard to their social and legal framework. For the Jewish marriage assumes its full function as an essentially social institution only after Israel will have settled in its own land with its families firmly rooted in their homestead.

Before turning to the detailed aspects of this law, Moshe impresses upon the people fundamental principles of timeless importance emphasizing the role of the moral duties that inspire the "reiteration of the law".

Moshe begins by outlining the precise borders marking the land that will be theirs. However, we note that these borders include the whole of Transjordan up to the banks of the Euphrates, while in actuality only a part of Transjordan was added to the land of Israel. According to tradition, this territorial change took place after the episode of the spies to which Moshe refers only at the end of the second chapter.

There follows a review of the outstanding events of the forty-year period which ends with the exhortation "do not fear them, for G-d, your G-d, it is He Who fights for you". It does not say "you need not act for G-d will fight for you". On the contrary, the awareness of its bond with G-d will encourage the people's initiative and strengthen its moral steadfastness. Israel will not withdraw into a state of passive gullible inertia waiting for divine intervention. Taught by Moshe and drawing on its long experience of the past, Israel knows that G-d awaits man's first step as a sign that he is ready to act on the strength of his blind trust in divine providence. "Do not fear them:" Know that "neither with weapons of war nor with brutal strength..." but only "through My spirit".

#### The stars in the sky (1:10)

Repeatedly Israel is compared to the numberless multitude of stars. This image is enhanced by the giant gathering of hundreds of thousands of man and women which at first glance seemed a picture of utter confusion but which in reality was inspired by the same lofty spirit of worshipful allegiance to the dictates of the divine Word.

This comparison also refutes the erroneous notion that this multitude should be regarded as an uncounted mass in which the individual had no significance. לכולם בשם יקרא, as He calls each of the heavenly bodies by name so, too, each individual member of this nation retains his significance as an independent identity; he is a "world unto himself". All these "worlds" form one great unit that obeys and is governed by the Will of G-d.

#### Moshe's Helpers

In a brief retrospective, Moshe refers to his father-in-law's assistance in lightening his heavy burden by appointing upright and righteous men to share with him the administration of the people's affairs. He recalls how the leaders of the tribes were among the chosen, "your leaders", men who enjoyed the confidence of their people. Their authority was solely based on the supreme authority of G-d's words. Their required qualifications also applies to the selection of the judges:

- 1- They must be equipped with the qualities of high intelligence, education, experience and wisdom;
- 2- They must enjoy the people's trust;
- 3- They must have the approval of the highest national authorities.

#### Joshua and Caleb

As in 1:36 Moshe refers only to Caleb as the one spy who was to be privileged to enter the land, it was necessary to mention Joshua as well (1:38), although as the chosen disciple of Moshe, there was no doubt that he would enter the land. That Caleb was able to withstand the fury of the people warrants special mention.

#### The Wanderings

The Torah stresses the disparity of power and resources between the Jewish people and its hostile neighbors. The reference to "giants in the enemy camps" indicates that there may have been remnants of an ancient race of human giants who caused terror by their very appearance. There is no doubt that the warlike prowess of the neighboring nations surpassed by far Israel's military capabilities. Moreover, the people failed to follow the example of a Joshua and a Caleb and thus prolonged the "harsh school of the desert" for forty years. But it is no less true that now six hundred thousand young men of twenty year's and up were poised, inexperienced and without sufficient weapons, to capture the fortresses which guarded an unknown land and to do battle with an overpowering enemy force - because G-d was with them. The nation deserved the praise that came from Moshe's lips.

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