

## Parashat D'varim/Shabbat Hazon 5775:

### Memory, Mission and Motivation

Shabbat Shalom!

It's been more than a few years since my last talk from the *bimah*. The occasion was my *Bar Mitzvah* and the *Parashah* was Emor, in Leviticus. I was thirteen then and knew so much more than I know now. I knew I would be chanting from the Torah, "*Vayidabayr Adonai el Moshe laymor,*" "and G-d spoke to Moses, saying" – mostly laws regarding priestly conduct, holidays, observances, and human relationships. And I would be chanting the *Haftarah*, from Ezekiel, about the *Kohanim* and their responsibilities to "declare to my People what is sacred and what is profane...[and to] preserve My teachings and My laws regarding all My fixed occasions; and [to] maintain the sanctity of My Sabbaths." So on my *Bar Mitzvah*, I knew I would be chanting words that were written down by others with extraordinary concern for their message, their inspiration, their rhythm, their calligraphy, their grammar, their import, their

permanence. And these words had been, and would be, read and chanted and studied and analyzed and deconstructed and reconstructed, and would occupy the minds and hearts of my people *l'dor va'dor*, from generation to generation.

See how much I knew back then? I also knew enough to let my father, Meir Ben-Horin, z"l, professor, linguist and scholar, help prepare my *Bar Mitzvah* speech. He would bring the same rigor to its words as he did to his own books and articles. I'd watched him visit rare book rooms in libraries, correspond with other scholars to verify a word or quote, and footnote so extensively, that the footnote section was often longer than the chapter or article he was writing. Did I mention poring over galley proofs? Long before there were word processors, my father made corrections by hand on galley proofs, long strips of paper printed before the type was separated into pages for printing. The work was exacting, whether he was researching, writing, editing or correcting proofs. And it was excellent preparation for helping craft a speech that your son would deliver before chanting the words from Leviticus and Ezekiel.

So what I remember from my *Bar Mitzvah* is the trope, which my father taught me, and two things. The first was the verse from *Parashat Emor*, “*Mishpat ehad yihiyeh lahem ka'gayr ka'ezrah yihiyeh, ki ani Adonai elokayhem.*” “You shall have one standard, for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your G-d.” My father chose this verse to be embossed in Hebrew and English on the invitations, and to be a theme of the speech. It is quoted often, for its high ethical implications, even though its context in Leviticus is questioned. The second thing was a phrase in the speech, where I acknowledged my relatives, who died for the “sanctification of the Name.” At 13, I knew that my maternal grandparents, and my aunt, had been murdered at Auschwitz, so I grasped the significance, if not the meaning, of the phrase “sanctification of the Name.” I didn't yet know the Hebrew phrase “*kiddush Hashem.*” But thinking back now, when I know the expression all too well, I wondered if there were a connection between “sanctification of the Name” and the verse from Leviticus. And it finally struck me. “You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike” is

not applied to Jews in much of the world and throughout our history. In a twist of the commandment's intent, the Jew is the stranger, and there's always a different standard applied. And owing to that, millions of Jews have died for the sanctification of the Name, that is, martyred. We must demand that the world apply this standard from Leviticus, to stop the martyrdom. We will always choose ethical conduct as our preferred way of sanctifying the Name, acting in a way that brings honor, respect and glory to G-d. As we approach *Tisha B'Av*, it is a most fitting issue to contemplate.

This brings me to *Parashat D'varim* and Shabbat Hazon. *Parashat D'varim*, which includes Moses' rebuke of the people, is read on the Shabbat before *Tisha B'Av*. This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Hazon, named for the *Haftarah* from Isaiah that begins "Hazon Yishayahu," the "Vision of Isaiah." Hazon is the last of the three special *Haftarot D'Puranuta*, or *Haftarot* of Admonition. It, too, is read before *Tisha B'Av*. *Yishayahu* – Isaiah, rebukes the people and warns them to repent lest their sins bring national ruin. So rebuke is a theme today in both the

Torah and the *Haftarah*, and our mood is one of sadness. We acknowledge the failings, missed opportunities, and misfortunes that reside in our memory, both as a people and as individuals.

*Parashat D'varim* is found in the first three chapters of D'varim – or Deuteronomy – the last book of the Torah. It is the beginning of Moses' farewell speech that will take the entirety of the Book of Deuteronomy.

Perhaps you need to picture Moses first. I'm ruling out Charlton Heston, Burt Lancaster, Michelangelo's Moses with Horns, and Mel Brooks. I'm OK with Rembrandt's Moses the Lawgiver, but my preference is the Moses I first met in the Billy Dalwin Pre-School when my daughter was a student there. I even think I knew him first as Moses, before I knew him to be Dick Wissoker. Does that image work for everyone? Good.

The *Parashah* begins, "*Eleh haDevarim asher dibayr Moshe el kol Yisrael bi'ayver haYarden.*" "These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan." For those of you who are more numerically inclined, don't let that beginning discourage you. For a *parashah* that

begins “These are the words...” there are numbers aplenty. There are numbers for distances, time periods, spies, tribal leaders and appointed chiefs, and perhaps of more dubious importance, the size of Og, King of Bashan's bed, which, in case you were curious, is nine cubits long, four cubits wide by the standard forearm cubit. The bed didn't save him.

Recently I read an interview in the Business Section of the Sunday New York Times (June 28, 2015, page 2). I'd like to read you a portion of it now. The first line is mine.

*Eleh haDevarim.* These are the words of Tae Hea Nahm, Managing Director of Storm Ventures, a venture capital firm:

“As C.E.O., I learned firsthand what an emotional rollercoaster it is to run a company. You can feel so high and so low in the space of a single day. Now, when I work with start-up C.E.O.s and they tell me life is so great, I figure it's never that great, and when they tell me it's so bad, it's never so bad.

“The other thing I learned as C.E.O. is that it's very lonely. If you share all the doubts and fears with people, then people sort of freak out.... You have to provide a path to success. So

what I found as C.E.O. is that you almost need a split personality.

“On the one hand, you have to appear like Moses, so that people believe that you’re going to take them to the Promised Land. And you have to present a very clear path to success. On the other hand, if you just believe all that, you can easily run the company off a cliff. Being a C.E.O. requires a lot of faith and passion, but for making decisions, sometimes truth and faith are different. So you also have to be a skeptic, almost like Galileo. You can have beliefs, but you have to really search for the truth, which is often tied to bad news.”

When I first saw this interview, it struck me as a very good take on Moses and offers a good perspective on the goings-on in D’varim.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is said to be speaking in his own words. This is in sharp contrast to the first four books of the Torah, in which G-d speaks to Moses and Moses speaks those words to the people. In the other four books, the reading often begins with “*Vayidabayr Adonai el Moshe laymor,*” “and

G-d spoke to Moses, saying.” But in Deuteronomy, *Parashat D'varim* begins “*Eleh HaDevarim asher debayr Moshe.*” “These are the words that Moses spoke.” Moses, once the inarticulate orator, is speaking his own words with presence and purpose. Of course, if Moses is speaking his own words, as C.E.O., he may certainly feel lonelier than when G-d had his ear. And if Moses is both speaker and author of his words, this raises a serious question regarding Divine authorship of Deuteronomy. To many, such questions pose a threat to the Divine authority of the Torah and the moral and legal underpinnings on which the faithful rely. This is a subject of much debate and scholarship, but beyond the scope of this *d'var*.

Right off the bat, Moses lists names of locations rather than specific incidents that occurred at those locations. According to Rashi, these words are a rebuke to the people, yet they are a coded rebuke, because the place names are really references to incidents when or where the people angered G-d. So why use a coded rebuke? Two years after the exodus, at Kadesh-Barnea, the generation of the exodus

was on the cusp of advancing to conquer the Promised Land, and was frightened off by the report of ten of the twelve spies. For this sin of not trusting in G-d, and rejecting the “can-do” reports of Caleb and Joshua, G-d kept this generation wandering in the wilderness until it died off. Now it is forty years after the exodus, and Moses is speaking to the next generation, in Moav, east of the Jordan. He needs to tell this new generation, born into freedom, how that freedom came about, and how the early exercise of that freedom was fraught with doubt and fear and egregious mistakes. These include the Golden Calf, Korah's rebellion, the manna, and the sin of the spies – all evidence of a lack of faith in G-d who'd redeemed the Israelites from bondage and sustained them. So, Moses just enumerates the locations to put the coded rebuke into their memories, but without shaming them, or might I say, without freaking them out. He needs them to stay free of the “what-have-you-done-for-me-lately” concept of G-d. G-d made them into a people, an army, and a nation of laws, with leaders and judges. Moses needs each one in this new generation to

accept the mission to fulfill the covenant with G-d in order to take possession of the Promised Land, and there serve G-d as a holy nation through righteousness and the pursuit of justice.

But what a mission this is for a generation with the memory, but not the experience, of slavery in Egypt, of surviving Pharaoh's army, or of receiving the commandments at Mount Sinai. The mission to take possession of the Promised Land is about territorial conquest. Moses understands the mission, but is not sure he can provide a clear path to success. But he's Moses, so he has to make people believe that he's going to take them to the Promised Land. Importantly, he yielded to the overwhelming burden on his own shoulders long before and appointed the military and judicial leaders to carry it. Now, he first needs to deal with the territories and people in Transjordan. There are current or past enemies and allies, concerns over who will provide safe passage or impediments, questions on what to do with combatants and non-combatants, and how to control his own tribes. There are also tactical issues for dealing with high-walled cities and giant-sized

enemies. Somehow, under Moses' lead, the Israelites are victorious in Transjordan, thus setting the stage for crossing over the Jordan River. But Moses is already on the "soon to be relieved of command" list so he will not be crossing over. His successor Joshua has already been chosen by G-d, so Moses gives Joshua the mission. Moses tells him, "Do not fear them, for it is the Lord your G-d who will battle for you." Joshua is clearly motivated by his faith in G-d.

In today's *Haftarah*, the kingdoms are long established. But the mission to be righteous, pursue justice and serve G-d as a holy nation has proved elusive at different periods in our history. Isaiah rebukes the people of Judah for their wickedness, corruption and the hypocrisy of their religious practices, and their failure to repent. We witness just how difficult the mission is. Isaiah says, "Cease to do evil; Learn to do good; Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged." But the return to ethical behavior proves too difficult, and the Assyrians invade the Kingdom of Judah. Although Jerusalem

survives, it falls a hundred years later to the Babylonians. The Temple is destroyed.

Tonight begins *Tisha B'Av* and we will mourn the destruction of that First Temple, and the Second Temple, and the many other calamities that have befallen the Jewish people on this saddest of days. And we will mourn those who have died *al Kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of the Name. May we see the day soon when the world's nations shall have the same standard for our people as for their own.

In the *Haftarah*, Isaiah concluded his lament on a hopeful note, "Zion shall be redeemed with justice, her repentant ones with righteousness."

May we continue to witness the redemption of Zion.

Shabbat Shalom.