

Thank you Marci.

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking....Actually teaching chemistry to Brandeis freshmen is an excellent way to develop public speaking skills. It is a privilege to be up here on the Bima speaking for the first time and I thank Terri Swartz-Russell for pestering me for several years to do this. Before we jump into some fairly heavy stuff, let me lay out how this talk has come together so you have some signposts to help figure out where I am going. I will start with a brief review of the Holy Day cycle from an emotional standpoint but spend more time on the connection between Devarim, specifically the opening part of the parsha, and Tisha B'Av. This in turn led me into analyses of Moses' emotional situation at the opening of the book of Devarim. At the end, I will say a few words about the section of the parsha we read today as well.

Welcome to Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat before Tisha B'av. We are now at the *lowest emotional point* in the Jewish cycle of holy days. There are several ways the cycle of Holy Days can be viewed. Does the cycle start with Purim or Pesach? Are the days between Pesach and Shavuot days of increasing spiritual elevation or are they days of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students? After Tisha B'Av do we almost immediately stop the mourning at Tu B'Av or do we slowly work our way back to a happy state at the end of Yom Kippur? I suggest viewing the cycle as beginning with the joy of deliverance of Purim, progressing through the liberation of Pesach and reaching a spiritual peak at Shavuot. Then we sink down emotionally from catastrophe – the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem marked by the fast of the 17th of Tammuz – to even greater catastrophe: all the terrible events in Jewish history that occurred on or about Tisha B'av. Before you get too depressed, let me remind you that Tisha B'av is shortly followed by our greatest period of spiritual growth, renewal, and redemption, the period of the month of Elul through Rosh Hashana and climaxing at Yom Kippur, followed almost immediately by HeHag – **THE** holiday the Talmud calls it – Sukkot, our physical and spiritual harvest festival and our most joyous one. The holidays between Sukkot and Purim are another story for another time.

It is no coincidence that every year on Shabbat Chazon we read Parshat Devarim, our Parsha today. The cycle of parshiot is carefully arranged to make sure that Parshat Devarim always falls

on the Shabbat before the black fast of Tisha B'av. Why is this? Why is the Jewish holiday cycle so cyclically emotional? What are we to learn from the coupling of today's Parsha to Tisha B'av?

First let's look at the Parsha as a whole. It opens with Moshe speaking to all Israel in Moav, across the Jordan from the Land. The Israelites have already defeated and destroyed the Midianites, the Amorites, and the Bashanites. Presumably the generation that left Egypt, except for Caleb and Joshua, is mostly if not entirely dead; Moshe is speaking to the new generation, the people who will enter and conquer the Holy Land. Moshe announces that the time has come to cross the Jordan, but first he has several things he wants to remind the Israelites of.

Moshe starts his speech, which will consume almost the entire book, by recounting how he could not bear the burden of judging all of Israel alone. It is *not* at all obvious that Moshe would pick this topic to start his speech, especially right after an introduction that reminds the people that G-d told them at Horeb (i.e. Sinai) that it is time for them to enter the Promised Land.

So what is on Moshe's mind that makes him want to start with the appointment of judges, as suggested by Moshe's father in law Yitro, whom Moshe completely omits in this retelling of the story first told in Sh'mot. Rashi points out that the introductory sentence of Devarim is what appears to be a list of places that describes the route the Israelites took from Horeb to where they are at this moment. Rashi explains that this list of place names is actually in *code*: each of these is a place where the Israelites *sinned*.

This alone is sufficient to tie Devarim to Tisha B'av, for the basic premise of Tisha B'av appears to be that the Temples' destructions and all the other horrors that occurred on or around Tisha B'av were the result of the sins of Israel; Jewish guilt is a topic for another day. Rashi sees Moshe's speech initially as well as many times later in Devarim as a speech of reproof. In that list of ostensible place names – some of which not occurring anywhere else in the Torah – is encoded the sins of the People. I won't go through the list in detail, but Rashi shows that the list refers to the times the Children of Israel spoke against Moshe's leadership, for example at the Reed Sea as the Egyptian army is approaching and the People say to Moshe "is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you, Moshe, have brought us here to die in the wilderness?"

Rashi's decoding of the list goes on to include the idolatry and harlotry with the Moabite women, the complaint the Israelites make about being sick of manna in Bamidbar 21: 5, Korach's

rebellion, the Spies, and finally the Golden Calf. No wonder judging and judgment are on Moshe's mind at this point.

And yet, Moshe actually opens his speech by remembering G-d telling the Children of Israel while still at Horeb (i.e. Mt. Sinai) that it is time to get moving to go to the Promised Land. Moshe then starts talking about his burden of judgment and how he came to appoint judges over Israel. As noted earlier, the details he presents here are rather different from the version in Exodus. Here Moshe says that he went to the People and asked them to select men who are wise, discerning, and experienced. Rashi notes that the words used to describe the values needed to be chosen to be a judge are different from the ones Yitro gave Moshe in the Exodus version; Rashi sees this discrepancy as an indication that Moshe could not find men of understanding as opposed to being merely wise and discerning. We will return soon to the question of what we can learn from the Devarim version of this story.

Moshe then begins to tell the story of the abortive quick trip up to the promised land. The Israelites in just a few days journeyed from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea, right on the southeastern border of the land. Then we get Moshe retelling the story of the spies. At the opening of Parshat Shelach L'cha in Bamidbar, G-d tells Moshe to send out the spies and Moshe gives them a list of questions to answer. In Moshe's retelling, it is the People who ask Moshe to send out the spies and Moshe approves the plan. No mention of G-d. Moshe gives a one sentence summary of the spies' report: it is a good land that G-d is giving us. Moshe then puts the blame not directly on the spies but on the entire People, saying "*You* refused to go up and have flouted G-d's command." It is the People who blame the spies, saying "our kinsmen have taken the heart out of us."

What is going on here with Moshe's different remembrances of events? In his book "Redeeming Relevance: Deuteronomy", Rabbi Francis Nataf, a contemporary Orthodox thinker in Israel, posits that Moshe sees himself as responsible for the debacle of the spies and that event, not just hitting the rock, is why he is prohibited by G-d from entering the Promised Land. The prohibition is very much on his mind – his unsuccessful final appeal to G-d opens next week's Parsha. So then why does he delete Yitro from the story? Rabbi Nataf proposes that what Moshe saw as possible given the success of Yitro's plan was the devolving of his leadership in preparation for the Israelites' settling in the Land. Moshe, remember however, had in Bamidbar

11:29 wished that all the People of Israel could be prophets who have a close relationship with and full trust in G-d.

With the judicial appointment system working as planned, Moshe, whether under G-d's direction or because of the People's request, had no problem supporting the plan to send the spies. Let me selectively quote some of Rabbi Nataf's statements. Rabbi Nataf writes "Our approach can also explain why in Moshe's versions of the Yitro story and the Spy incident in the book of Devarim, he almost surgically removes the other key players.... The attentive reader will wonder why Moshe attributes the actions of others to himself. In line with what we have discovered, however, the decentralization process would be Moshe's legacy to the Jewish people.... Unfortunately, however, Moshe's optimism was premature to say the very least.... Given that Moshe could *not* but admit ownership of the plan [i.e. the spies], he had to shudder at how it unfolded before his very eyes.... On some level it was now evident that Moshe had literally made the mistake of his life." Moshe choosing to focus on himself in both the setting up of judges and the incident of the Spies is his way of accepting responsibility for the disaster.

Rabbi Nataf cites Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, the second half of the 19th Century final leader of the famed Volozhin Yeshiva, for the idea that Moshe wanted to maintain a strong Divine Presence in the encampment. However, it was G-d's intent that the Israelites, unable to cope with the demands of G-d's immediate presence, would need to accustom themselves to, in Rabbi Nataf's words, "a more hidden level of Divine favor in conquering the Land." Netziv writes that, starting with the spies' mission, the desert experience was to be the training ground for adjusting to this new modality. He goes on to say that, while Moshe accepted G-d's decision to lower the intensity of G-d's presence, dealing with this change would be a struggle for Moshe for the rest of his life. Moshe's failure in *hitting* the rock instead of speaking to it then is the final chapter of this struggle. Netziv writes that Moshe's task at the rock was to teach the Children of Israel how to earn G-d's favor in more conventional ways. At the rock G-d meant for Moshe to teach the Israelites how to *pray* (!), *not* to make the dramatic kind of petitioning G-d that Moshe was uniquely good at.

Thus the speech Moshe has started in Devarim is his last chance to accomplish his mission to motivate the Israelites to both trust in G-d and to be independent enough to enter the Land under Joshua. Moshe knows his previous failures are keeping him from entering the Land so it is all the

more important that he get his message across THIS time. He does that by reminding them of their previous victories, as the Parsha goes on to recount, by citing his own failures as failures that the Israelites also own, and via the curses and blessings in much of the rest of Devarim.

Let me close by moving the focus to later in the Parsha to the section we read in the triennial cycle today. It consists entirely of Moshe recounting the march the Israelites had made from Mount Seir, where G-d told Moshe the 40 years of wandering were over, to where they are now on the banks of the Jordan. This is Moshe the *motivational* speaker, reminding the new generation of what they had already accomplished and how they obeyed the restrictions G-d placed on them as to whom they should attack and whom they *must not* disturb but must *compensate* for food and water.

We can learn several things from G-d's instructions. Two things stand out to me. The first is a strong message that it is G-d, not people, not even the Chosen People, who determines the fates of nations. It is *only* under G-d's direct orders that the Israelites may conquer and destroy another people. Secondly, we Jews have *no* special standing as G-d's people in terms of having received promises from G-d. G-d makes promises to other nations and G-d remembers and keeps those promises, even to the descendants of Esau and Lot who became idolatrous. I suggest that we should see this narration as a warning against Jewish triumphalism such as that occasionally expressed in current Israeli and American politics. When G-d gives *direct orders* we can march to fulfill them but just because for the first time in over two millennia Jews in the land of Israel have military and political power does not give license to use Moshe's and Joshua's victories as permission to use that power aggressively.

So Moshe has taken his own failings and emotional state and turned them into tools to finally accomplish what he now understands to be the needs of the Children of Israel, needs that G-d of course had already recognized. May we too be able to turn our failings, our misunderstandings, and our emotions to good, like Moses.

Thank you, Shabbat Shalom, and an easy fast for those who are fasting tomorrow.