

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Charlie Schwartz

Midrash Tanhuma Devarim 1:1

מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת דברים סימן א

דבר אחר ישושם מדבר וציה מפני מה כתיב כך ללמדך שבשעה שהקב"ה מגלה שכינתו על ישראל אינו נגלה עליהם כאחת מפני שאינו יכולין לעמוד באותה טובה בפעם אחת שאם יגלה להם טובתו כאחת ימותו כלם...הקב"ה עאכ"ו אלא מה הקב"ה עושה מתגלה להם קמעא קמעא

“The wilderness and the parched land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35:1). Why was this verse written in such a descriptive manner? In order to teach that when The Holy One Blessed Be He revealed His presence to Israel, He did not reveal it to them all at once, because they would not have been able to stand the totality of God's goodness. For if God's goodness had been revealed all at once, all of Israel would have died . . . so what did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He revealed himself to them bit by bit.

This week's midrash seeks to answer the question of why Moses needed to retell the entire Torah in the book of Devarim. Shouldn't one iteration of God's covenantal relationship with Israel have been enough? Using a particularly descriptive verse from Isaiah, our midrash's clear answer is that the repeated revelation of the Torah was necessary for Israel's sake. Had the full magnitude of the Torah, of God's presence been shown all at once, the Israelites would have been overwhelmed by the sheer awesomeness of the event, and would have died on the spot. So God disclosed the Torah and His presence bit by bit, over a period of time. Hence the need for the Devarim—to continue the process of revelation.

A valuable lesson lies at the heart of this midrash. When we are looking to create change in ourselves, our spiritual life, our community, and the world, the natural tendency is to want to do everything all at once—to achieve the instant gratification of rapid transformation. But like God imparting the entire Torah at once, this approach is not sustainable, and in fact can be harmful. Rather, gradual growth, learning, and slow transformation are the way to achieve true change, and to see God's full glory revealed in this world.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Devarim
Shabbat Hazon

Deuteronomy 1:1–3:22

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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Jonathan Milgram, Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.

When the end of the week arrives and we settle into our Friday night routine of rituals, I often try to encapsulate in a few short sentences what I think is the main thought or idea in the parashah so that my children leave the table with a “takeaway” lesson. I engage in this activity not only because the iPod generation prefers short explanatory messages as opposed to full-blown homiletic discourses on the weekly reading, but also because I honestly believe that the overarching theme of a weekly Torah portion—when clearly, concisely, and meaningfully explained—can have a potentially transformative impact on an individual, as the message of this week's parashah has had on me over the years. While I admit that my discussion below is not just a few short sentences and the audience is not made up of children, the takeaway of my piece is (just in case the impatient contemporary reader wishes to stop now) that when opportunity knocks—and it seems that everything is in your favor and God is on your side—grab it and go with it. Don't make the mistake made by the generation of the Exodus. For more details, keep reading . . .

First, a summary of some specifics: Parashat Devarim begins the fifth and final book of the Torah of the same name, in English known as Deuteronomy. It begins a series of discourses by Moses. The setting is the land of Moav at the end of the Israelites' decades-long journey through the desert. The first part of Moses's initial discourse, verses 1:6 to 3:29—comprising almost our entire parashah and the first verses of next week's reading—is adequately described by Jeffrey Tigay in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia, 1996) as a “Retrospective on the Forty-Year Sojourn in the Wilderness and the Lessons of that Period.” Moses's address tackles the themes of submission to divine will versus rebellion against it, and the implications of each. He accuses the people of not having taken advantage of the opportunity set before them to conquer and settle the land of Canaan. They did not obey God's word, a fact that led to the ultimate demise of the Exodus generation.

The address begins by Moses retelling how God commanded the Israelites to enter and conquer the “Promised Land,” stating, “See, I place the land at your disposal (*natati lifneichem*). Go, take possession of the land . . .” (1:8). As pointed out by Tigay, the Hebrew “*natati lifneichem*” means to “place at your disposal,” “deliver into

your control' . . . [t]he past tense of the verb implies that the giving is already complete, thus expressing certainty" (9). That is to say, the Israelites' victory over the native peoples was already divinely promised. God was on their side. Despite this basic assurance, however, the Israelites refused to enter. Instead of capitalizing on the opportunity set before them to finally end their desert wandering and enter the land, they decided not to trust the word of God. They trusted the word of mere mortals, the scouts who spied out the land and gave a damaging report about the state of affairs there.

Significantly, the details of the negative report are not mentioned here. A comment here would incriminate the scouts, and Moses's goal at this point in the narrative was to remind the people that *they*, of their own volition, did not follow God's word; *they* rejected the Almighty's benevolent gift of entry into the land. Accordingly, Moses only refers to the *peoples' response* to the scouts' report: "What kind of place are we going to? Our kinsmen have taken the heart out of us saying, 'We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even Anakites [giants]" (Deut. 1:28), thereby emphasizing that he faults them (Tigay, 16). Ultimately, this generation of Israelites missed their great chance to enter the land and rebuild the Jewish nation after centuries of Egyptian servitude.

God's response—to have that rebellious generation of Israelites die in the wilderness instead of ever enter the land—engendered the peoples' counterresponse: they attempted to enter the land without God's support. They failed to conquer it on their own, however, and were defeated by the Amorites. They marched back into the wilderness with the realization that they had lost their opportunity. Despite the fact that God was on their side initially—and even though at the right time the generation of the Exodus would have conquered the land with relative ease—they did not, in the end, merit entering the land. The shortsightedness—they did not recognize when everything was perfectly in place—plagued the People of Israel and disabled them from seizing the opportunity placed before them.

All too often, we also do not recognize when we are offered opportunities for advancement, positive change in our lives, and redemption from our contemporary enslavements. Moving ahead requires not only having faith in oneself and in the path that God sets before him or her, but acting on it. Shakespeare's character Brutus puts it aptly in his succinct statement when speaking figuratively of a "tide" in the life of humans in act 4 of *Julius Caesar*:

And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

For Brutus, capitalizing on the "current," or the "high tide," ensures that one will move on, advance, remain afloat, and travel on to great things; by not grabbing the tide when it comes, though, one misses opportunities and may even sink.

The major shortcoming of the Exodus generation was that it did not embrace what was set out before it to take. Although ultimately this generation's descendants inherited and built up the Land, there remains something very tragic about the story of a generation that, although given opportunity, failed to fulfill its potential destiny. The generation of the Exodus died in the wilderness before accomplishing the goal that the People set when they initially escaped from Egypt. When I go over this week's parashah with my children, it is this point that I will emphasize: take hold of opportunity when it comes around for not always will it ever present itself again.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

The fifth and final book of Torah that we begin this week, Devarim, is well known for its repetition. Once again, we review the details of the Israelite journey through the wilderness, as well as the nuances of a number of laws legislated earlier. Far from being superfluous, the effect of repetition in this book of Torah is meant to help both the biblical Israelites as well as their modern-day descendants (us) internalize the journey and the most essential teachings of Moses. One case in point is when Moses reminds the people about the appointment of a judiciary. He declares, "I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, 'Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger. You will not be partial in judgment; hear out low and high alike . . .'" (Deut. 1:16–17). Why does Deuteronomy insist on echoing this law now? What is its import, both in terms of content and context?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

It is to be quite the same to you whether the case on which you have to give your decisions is between two of your native born countrymen or between one of them and a stranger who has come from outside to live among you. With his entry into your country the stranger is made the equal of every native . . . No matter may be considered too petty for the judge to give serious consideration. He must acquaint himself with all the necessary details to bring justice and equity in all cases of dispute and quarrel . . . All personal considerations of the contending parties in the case is forbidden to the judge, and it is demanded that he should "not know them at all" in forming judgment, as, according to Jewish conception of justice the most correct pronouncement of judgment results when the parties are really personally unknown to the judge . . . (Hirsch, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 14)

As the Israelites are about to enter Israel, the land where they will be blessed to build their particular and unique home, Torah goes to great lengths to remind the "natives" of the rights of the stranger. This vital reminder comes at a critical point of the narrative in which we repeatedly hear of the need to obliterate the devotional sites of the Canaanite nations from whom the Israelites are inheriting the land. Wiping out idolatry does not and should not involve mistreatment of strangers. As Hirsch points out, when it comes to judicial cases in the Land of Israel, "with his entry into your country the stranger is made the equal of the native." Hirsch reinforces the revelation that Torah brought about in its day—for the majority to treat the minority with fairness and justice. It is an important lesson to be heeded in the modern State of Israel as this beloved country wrestles with the challenges of foreign workers and their children.

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