

Parashat D'varim 5780

Shabbat Shalom! Last Shabbat we finished the fourth book of the Torah, *B'midbar* (Numbers) and this Shabbat we begin the fifth and last book, *D'varim* (Deuteronomy). As usual, the Hebrew name of the book derives from the first important word in the book itself. The opening verse begins as follows: *ayleh had'varim* (these are “the words”) (a note for our students of Hebrew - it's pronounce *had'varim* because there's a dot, called a *dagesh* in the *dalet* above the *shva* which makes the *shva* pronounced like “uh” instead of being silent as it usually is). The portion begins by announcing that these are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan. As we all know, Moses does not cross the river. In next week's *Parashah* Moses recounts how he persisted in asking G'd to let him cross over the Jordan and enter the land, and G'd responds: “enough already, don't speak of it again.”

But let's stick with this week's portion. Our ancestors are about to enter the land of Israel. *D'varim* is also known by another name *Mishneh Torah* which here means a repetition of (much of) the Torah. In Deuteronomy Moshe recaps much of what took place in the three preceding books: Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Moses at the end of the book essentially delivers a farewell address to the people before he is “gathered to his kin.” Another relevant point is that this Shabbat's portion also takes place every year on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av which is a day of mourning the destructions of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem and which is observed as a fast day. It occurs this year beginning this Wednesday evening until three stars come out on Thursday night. The yearly juxtaposition of this *Parashah* with Tisha B'Av is significant. In the portion we are on the verge of fulfilling the dream of finally entering the Promised Land, of the promise to our ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, is about to be fulfilled. However the message includes a warning that the land will be ours if we live lives of holiness in the land. Otherwise the land will expel us as it did previous peoples who inhabited the land. That is essentially what happened historically during the events marked by Tisha B'Av. The destruction of both the First Temple, the first *Beit HaMikdash*, or *Bayit Rishon*, as it's sometimes called, and the Second Temple, *Bayit Sheni*, were both followed by periods of exile from the land of Israel. The exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the First *Beit HaMikdash* only lasted about fifty years (although some Jews stayed there after the return), whereas the exile after the destruction of the

Second *Beit HaMikdash* lasted close to 2,000 years. From the Biblical point of view, anyone living in the diaspora is in exile (*galut*, in Hebrew). Probably half the Jews in the world live outside of Israel these days. One of the striking things of our current period of Jewish history is that very very few Jews in the United States today would characterize themselves as living in *galut*, in exile. Our prayer book may speak of gathering us from the four corners of the earth and bringing us back to Israel, but few people in the U.S. would see that as anything but a far distant messianic dream. However in the early days of the Zionist movement and continuing into the early years of the state of Israel the concept of the “negation of the diaspora” or more literally, the “negation of the exile” (*shlilat haglut*) was an important tenet of the Zionist movement. But even that has changed. They stopped using the term *galut* in Israel and switched to *t’futzot* (the diaspora, the dispersion).

What’s striking to me is that when we take a long-term view of our history i.e. over hundreds or even thousands of years, our residence in the land of Israel is not guaranteed. From the end of the Torah when we’re about to enter the land through the destruction of the First Temple is a span of about seven hundred years. Then when the exiles returned until the destruction of the Second Temple is a span of another six hundred years. Right now the State of Israel is only 72 years old. That may seem like a long time for those of us who remember it when it was much younger. But on the scale of our people’s history that’s an extremely short period of time. I think people in Israel are acutely sensitive to that fact and those Israelis who believe that Israel needs to separate itself from the West Bank and Gaza and those who think those lands should be annexed by the State of Israel both feel that the spiritual and physical existence of the State are at stake. Both sides believe that the other side’s position would lead to the destruction of the State of Israel. Part of that is because of their awareness that our residence in Israel is not guaranteed. Today’s Torah portion pretty much says that very thing. If we don’t live a holy life in the land of Israel we won’t last there.

Things that have been around for the length of our lives and longer can easily feel permanent. In the United States probably all of us have always taken for granted that democracy and democratic institutions are a given. We don’t think that they could be threatened. But those institutions have only been around less than 250 years. That’s one of the messages of Tisha B’Av – that what seems permanent may not be nearly as permanent as we thought. We have to be cautious and vigilant and protect our freedoms and values of justice. The book of *D’varim* is

very concerned with justice and the welfare of the poor and underprivileged. It's very concerned with the spiritual quality of our lives. In many ways it was one of the most influential Biblical books in terms of our sense of what Judaism is. It contains the *Sh'ma* and it repeats the Ten Commandments. It's the book that most strongly expresses our ideal of monotheism. So here at the cusp of entering a dramatically new era in our people's history, the promise comes with a warning that we have to live up to the promise, we have to live lives of holiness and integrity, not be seduced by various forms of idolatry whether of other gods or the worship of materialism. This Shabbat begins the journey into the last book of the Torah. Shabbat Shalom.