

We have arrived at the final book of the Torah – *Devarim*, which means Words. The common name, Deuteronomy, is the title used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. *Deuteronomion* means second, or repeated law, or *Mishneh Torah*, one of the Hebrew names for this book. Indeed, it is a book of words and repetitions. Moses recounts the story of the people since leaving Egypt, with all its ups and downs. He also reiterates the laws of our eternal covenant with HaShem, however with a few changes and many dire warnings. Midrash Devarim Rabbah 1:6 makes an eloquent play on words, juxtaposing *devarim* (words) and *devorim* (bees), comparing Moses's critique of the Israelites to the sting of a bee. His words do sting, but considering all that has happened, they are well deserved. Moses informs them that it is time to move on; they have been long enough in the wilderness. The first verse introduces a new appellation for the people: *kol Yisrael* – all Israel, a term that appears 11 times in this book, but nowhere else in the Torah. Suddenly the people are no longer *bonei Yisrael* – sons (children) of Israel, but simply Israel. This tiny change signifies a new phase in their development. After their 40-year ordeal in the desert they are no longer children. They are on the threshold of adulthood and must accept the responsibilities that accompany that milestone. First and foremost, they must build a viable future without Moses, who has not only led them, but has also continually intervened for them, pleading and reasoning with HaShem on their behalf. Now, they must move from dependency to autonomy, developing a national identity in addition to, and more important than, their old familial and tribal identities. They must build and maintain legal, social, and defense systems, and they must learn to take responsibility for their own actions. Up until now, HaShem had essentially been serving them, just as parents serve their children by providing for them, guiding them, and often to their mutual detriment, rescuing them. And like many children, they took it all for granted, unaware of how grateful they should have been. But in order to thrive, they must leave childhood behind and move confidently into the new paradigm of adulthood. Ready or not, *bonei Yisrael* is about to become full-fledged Israel, obliged serve HaShem by fulfilling the human part of our eternal covenant, a covenant that has hitherto been quite lopsided. The Torah contains all the instruction we need, but history teaches us that tragically, we continue to fall short of the lofty goals outlined therein – a theme with countless, senseless variations. Parashah Devarim is always read on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av, the day when we mourn the great tragedies that have befallen our people throughout the ages. This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Hazon* – the Shabbat of Vision, referring to Isaiah's vision in the Haftarah portion. After a litany of the people's horrendous transgressions, Isaiah offers the possibility of reconciliation if they will "cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the cause of the widow." (1:16-17) The overarching theme of our parashah is *tochecha* – accusation/ warning. Moses asks, *eicha* – how? "How can I bear your trouble, your burden, and your strife all by myself?" (1:12) The impassioned cry of a nearly 120-year-old who for 40 years has been parent, arbitrator, leader, and provider for this recalcitrant group of ex-slaves struggling with the new notion of freedom. The Book of Lamentations, which we chant on Tisha b'Av, begins with this word and its Hebrew name is *Eicha*. The word *eicha* appears in various forms 18 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is a rhetorical question with a tinge of reproach and lament. It first appears in chapter 3 verse 9 of Genesis, after Eva and Adam have eaten from that fateful tree and gained knowledge of good and evil. HaShem asks Adam, *ayeicha* – where are you? And our history with all its twists and turns begins, generating a steady stream of whys as we mourn our many tragedies and ponder what might have been if only we only could have acted more like adults. But living in what I like to call the negative subjunctive is counterproductive. We must learn from the past instead of wallowing in it, so that we are able live in the present and create a vision for the future. We are at the end of the 3 weeks of mourning leading from 17. Tammuz to Tisha b'Av, still in the narrow places, but about to emerge into the 7 weeks of consolation and hope before the new year. We need this time to mourn, to reflect, and to develop new resolve. At the end of mourning there is hope, as illustrated by a beautiful story in the Babylonian Talmud Makkot 24b: After the destruction of the second temple the sages and Rabbi Akiva went up to Jerusalem in mourning. They saw a fox emerging from the place where the Holy of Holies had stood, and the sages wept. But to their amazement, Akiva laughed, and explained two prophecies. Uriah the priest saw Jerusalem and the first temple utterly destroyed, but Zechariah saw Jerusalem rebuilt and repopulated. "Until the prophecy of Uriah with regard to the destruction of the city was fulfilled, I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled, as the two prophecies are linked. Now, that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid." Hopeful words for a people rooted in hope. Learning from the past, we progress, albeit in fits and starts, but always forward, guided by our Torah, whose teachings are valid from age to age.

Shabbat shalom!