

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Devarim & Shabbat Chazon (Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22; Isaiah 1:1-27) August 5, 2022
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Each year at this juncture in our weekly Torah and Haftarah readings we, like the Israelites, have an opportunity to focus our vision both backward into the past and forward to the future. We begin reading *Devarim* (Deuteronomy), the final book of the Torah, in which Moses addresses the Israelites, retracing their steps and missteps, and entreating them to work together to build a viable society based on Torah principles. And our Haftarah reading, which provides the name for this Shabbat, ends the three weeks *bein hametzarim* (in the narrow places) that lead from the tragedy of 17. Tammuz, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Romans in 69CE, to the panoply of tragedies that have occurred on Tisha b'Av. This Haftarah begins with Isaiah's vision (*chazon*), no less full of rebuke than the two preceding it, but holding the promise of restoration and redemption, provided Israel mends its ways. For us, it is our yearly wake-up call, because of course, we still make mistakes. For the Israelites, it is the first day of the 11th month, in the 40th year of their journey from the constraints of slavery to the obligations of freedom – the culmination of nearly 4 decades of fits and starts, of forward motion and tragic, senseless backsliding. Moses does not mince words when enumerating the people's shortcomings; but he makes sure to include himself: "The Lord was also angry with me because of you, saying, 'Neither will you come there.'" (1:37) In that tiny note of accusation "because of you," there is a beautiful lesson: Even our greatest leaders are only human. While many surrounding cultures glorified, and often deified, their leaders, our scriptures portray real people in all their prodigious talent and heartbreaking fallibility. Moses is no exception. He can be impulsive and accusatory; he must learn how to delegate responsibility; and even he, the humblest of all people, can, and does, lose his temper. He is not superhuman; he is wonderfully, agonizingly human. Along with the rest of the generation born in Egypt, he will die without entering the Promised Land, leaving it to Joshua and Caleb to carry them forward. But first, Moses addresses the people with powerful, visionary words, laying out glowing positive and graphically negative scenarios to illustrate the choices that lie before them. Because he knows that there will be many more missteps along the way, he does his utmost to inoculate them against the perils and temptations they will face. But human nature being as it is, Isaiah and our other prophets faced the same uphill battle, railing against the human weaknesses that cause people to squander their rich blessings in futile pursuits. Shabbat Chazon always falls on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av, the day of deepest mourning, when we turn our gaze back to the many disasters that have befallen us over the millennia. But how do we reconcile the gravity of this day with the mitzvah to rejoice and be happy on Shabbat? The Chassidic Rabbi Abraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadigura (1820-1883) offered this insight: "Shabbat Chazon can be compared to a person who sits in a dark room. Suddenly, a friend of his enters, bringing a lit candle. The man sitting in the dark is delighted to see the wonderful light of the candle. Likewise, when the pure light of Shabbat appears during the days of semi-mourning before Tisha b'Av, our mood changes and we rejoice for a day." This pause in our mourning allows us to regroup, giving us strength to continue and may even show us new ways to understand the past. Both Moses and Isaiah presented black and white visions of reward and punishment, laying the onus firmly upon us. But today, with our knowledge of history, we realize that no amount of righteousness and painstaking observance can prevent us from being caught up in the turmoil of the world. Even if our actions do have consequences, universally applying that old adage "God punished you" rings hollow in light of catastrophes like the Inquisition and the Shoah. Generations of Jews have repeated the prayer that begins with the words, "because of our sins we were exiled from our homeland," which is part of our traditional festival liturgy. Today, we know better. We are one small group in the vastness of humanity, and many things are simply beyond our control. While we must mourn our losses, it behooves us to turn our gaze beyond them and acknowledge the fact that amid the chaos of each event, we have always managed to find the courage and strength to rebuild and continue, renewing our eternal covenant and affirming that life is still worth living. Gazing back into our tragic history, we should not overlook the enduring legacy of its glorious periods of achievement that have invariably followed each disaster. From the ashes of the last Temple arose a more flexible Judaism that continues to evolve, assimilating the lessons of the past and carrying them into the future with new resolve. Wherever the vicissitudes of life have taken us, we have managed to pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and rebuild, adapting to our new home and often contributing in countless ways to its greater good. Perhaps the most important lesson in this parashah is that wallowing in the past will paralyze us. Twice HaShem tells us that we must move on. (1:6, and 2:3) As we review our history in all its tragedies and all its triumphs, we would do well to apply its lessons in the present in order to help create a better future. The light of Shabbat illuminates our path forward, and basking in its peace, we gather the strength to go on.

Shabbat shalom!