

## A Few Thoughts on Parashah Devarim – Shabbat Chazon (Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22; Isaiah 1:1-27) July 21, 2023

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This week we begin to read Deuteronomy, or *Devarim*, as it is called in Hebrew. In the other four books of Torah, HaShem speaks directly to people. But now, HaShem is silent, and it is Moses who speaks, quoting HaShem and reviewing the checkered story of the Israelites' 40-year trek through the wilderness. Midrash Devarim Rabbah 1:6 juxtaposes *devarim* and *devorim* (bees), comparing Moses' words to a bee sting. Indeed, he does not mince words when he reviews their many missteps, but along with well-deserved rebukes and dire warnings he also presents a vision of hope for the future. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, Moses is not speaking to the people he led out of Egypt. It is imperative for this new generation to understand their history in order to avoid making the same mistakes as their elders. The opening verse introduces a new designation for the people: *kol Yisrael* (all Israel), a term that appears 11 times in Deuteronomy, but nowhere else in the Torah. They are transitioning from *bonei* (sons/children), *Yisrael* to *Israel*, a significant milestone. Now, on the cusp of adulthood, they must learn to live without Moses, who has not only led them, but has also more than once intervened with HaShem on their behalf. Until now, HaShem has provided for them, protected them, and often to their mutual detriment, rescued them. Like children, they took it all for granted, and rather than showing gratitude, they reacted to every challenge with defiance and a barrage of complaints. But in order to thrive, they must leave childhood behind. Ready or not, *bonei Yisrael* is about to become full-fledged, adult Israel, obliged serve HaShem by fulfilling the human part of our eternal covenant, which has thus far been quite lopsided. Twice in our parashah Moses reiterates the words of HaShem: "You have dwelt long enough at this mountain" (1:6), and "You have circled this mountain long enough" (2:3). It is time to move forward, with courage and discipline. To make it perfectly clear, he reiterates the tragic story of the scouts, beginning with a curious discrepancy: "And all of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us ...' And the matter pleased me ..." (1:22-23) In Parashah Shelach (Numbers 13:2), HaShem is the initiator and Moses simply implements divine command. Much has been written about this, but the message in both versions is the same: On the threshold of the Promised Land, the people succumb to a fatal lack of trust. Moses explains the sin of the scouts in graphic detail. In both versions they report that the land is good, but instead of emphasizing HaShem's promise to help them conquer and settle it, they spread panic and dissent with their defeatist stories of the inhabitants' size and power. "You murmured in your tents and said, because the Lord hates us, He took us out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to exterminate us." (1:27) The fact that the name Amorites (Hebrew אַמֹּרִי – Emori) likely stems from the root אמר (to say/tell), points out that the scouts' negative report is *lashon ha-ra* – slanderous speech. For slandering HaShem, Moses, and the land itself, those who panicked and then disobeyed went up the mountain to fight the Amorites are roundly defeated, and except for Joshua and Caleb, everyone who left Egypt with Moses will not live to enter the new land. It is noteworthy that 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, beginning with the sin of the scouts. Discussing the sin of the scouts in the light of *lashon ha-ra*, Talmud Tractate Sotah 35a teaches "'And all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried.' [Numbers 14:1] Rabba says that Rabbi Yochanan says that that day was the eve of the Ninth of Av, and the Holy One of Blessing said, 'On that day they wept a gratuitous weeping, so I will establish that day for them as a day of weeping for the future generations.'" But living in what I like to call the negative subjunctive is counterproductive. We must learn from the past so that we are able live in the present and create a vision for the future. This is also *Shabbat Chazon* – 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) We are at the end of the 3 weeks of mourning, 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. Mourning does give way to hope, as illustrated by a beautiful story in Talmud Traktate Makkot 24b: After the destruction of the second temple the sages and Rabbi Akiva went up to Jerusalem mourning its destruction. 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." 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!