

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

When Parashat Devarim nods to this text, we are meant to understand that **now** is the moment we have been waiting for:

(6) The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. (7) Resume your journey, and go into **the hill country of the Amorites**. . . the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. (8) See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them.” (Devarim 1)

Here the mysterious “iniquity of Amorites” has apparently been resolved, and it is now time for the offspring of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov to claim the land of the Canaanites.

One of the key features of our story, as told here, in Bereishit, and elsewhere in the Torah, is that we are on the move. On the one hand, we are told that this is our land, the land of our ancestors. On the other hand, we are told that our forefathers came from elsewhere and that our inhabitation of the land will happen after a long period of time; we will first be slaves, wander in the desert, and only later will we enter and settle. Thus at the core of the Jewish narrative, and therefore Jewish identity, we find a paradox. We are native and conqueror, from here and from there, all at the same time.

Enough of the wandering says Moshe here, you have sat here at Horev too long, it is time to enter and settle the land. And yet our formative experiences as a people, in Aram, in Egypt, and at Sinai, all happened when we were wandering strangers.

What does it mean to live with this paradox of native and conqueror? Our dual identity can allow us to be honest about our own power while keeping it in check. Yes, we Jews, in Israel and in the United States, have a lot of power and a strong sense of belonging, but our other role as former slaves reminds us that this power must be balanced with a strong commitment to justice and looking out for those less powerful. As wanderers, we remember what it was like to be weak and on the outside of society, but part of our survival as a people was an ability to stay true to a textual tradition and narrative that never let us let go of a sense that we were one people bound together.

It is critical that we look deeply at these core elements of what it means to be Jewish. It means leveraging our power and sense of security for the sake of those less secure and it means doubling down on our commitment to our language and textual tradition that has kept us together, creative and thriving throughout our generations.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Devarim

Shabbat Hazon

August 10, 2019 | 9 Av 5779

Annual (Numbers 1:1-3:22): Etz Hayim p. 981-998; Hertz p. 736-749
 Triennial (Numbers 2:31-3:22): Etz Hayim p. 981-990; Hertz p. 736-743
 Haftarah (Isaiah 1:1-27): Etz Hayim p. 999-1004; Hertz p. 750-754

D'var Torah: A Paradoxical Identity

Rabbi Shoshana Cohen, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Sefer Devarim (the Book of Deuteronomy) is filled with retellings of earlier stories, and Parashat Devarim begins by retelling one of the most famous and important episodes in Sefer Bereishit (the Book of Genesis): *Brit Bein HeBetarim*, the “Covenant Between the Parts,” when God made this famous promise:

(13) Then the Lord said to Avram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be *gerim* (strangers) in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; (14) but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. . . (16) And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; **for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete**.” . . . “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, (19) the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, (20) the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, (21) the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” (Bereishit 16)

In these few verses, we have an abridged version of the beginning of Jewish history, from Avraham through Egypt and into the Land of Israel.

Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: Isaiah's Vision

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Shabbat is the last of the three Shabbatot which precedes Tisha b'Av. It takes its name – Shabbat Hazon - from its special haftarah which opens with the words “Hazon Yishayahu – The Vision of Isaiah”. The “vision” of historical events as seen through the eyes of the prophets is different from how we might see historical events. Yishayahu, characteristically, views the tragic events which befall his city and its people through the prism of the behavior of its inhabitants. Outside threats are seen as a divine response to the internal wrongdoings of the city.

Yishayahu's prophecy is not a response to the Babylonians who destroyed the First Temple. He lived during an earlier threat from the Assyrians who also sought to conquer and destroy Jerusalem. Still, the threats to civil and moral society which afflicted his generation were common to the later generation as well. The city was rife with violence, corruption, and disloyalty to God, all serving as a rationale for the downfall of the city. The prophetic objective was to turn the city away from its evil ways and to restore its worthiness for redemption. Of course, the first step in the process is the realization that something is wrong. This is not always obvious to a society overcome by vice. Prophets had the unenviable task of confronting the society that they lived in and Yishayahu did not spare his tongue in this role: “How has the faithful town become a whore? Filled with justice, where righteousness did lodge, and now – murderers.” (1:21) Yishayahu pins the responsibility for this condition clearly on the heads of the leaders of the people: “Your nobles are knaves and companions to thieves. All of them lust for bribes and chase illicit payments. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's case does not touch them.” (1:23)

The nation's problems trickle down; corrupt leadership inspires the populace to do the same. Also, the leadership's self-indulgence leads it to ignore what is going on around them and leaves the nation to fall prey to further depravity. If the leaders will not take responsibility for the nation's problems then the problems will fester until they bring about the nation's downfall.

The Jewish liturgical tradition has us read this haftarah in the days before we mourn the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem as a reminder that the fate of society is in our hands and especially in the hands of the leaders of the people. If the leaders of the nation are unresponsive to society's ills, the nation will fall. If wanton murder is endemic and the leaders fail to curb it for whatever reason there will be a price to pay and the Yishayahu warns us the consequences will be grave.

Parashat Devarim Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are starting the book of Devarim (Deuteronomy), the fifth book of the Torah. It contains mostly Moshe's final words to the People of Israel including historic narratives, legal material, and Moshe's take on what might happen in the future.

- 1) The book opens with the statement that “these are the words that Moshe spoke... across the Jordan, in the wilderness...between Paran and Tofel... It was in the 40th year, in the eleventh month, on the first of the month...” (1:1-3). Why do you think the exact location and time of this speech are given?
- 2) Moshe starts his words with ‘God told us to go and conquer the land that was promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...’ (1:6-8). At what other points in the story might he have started? Why does he start with this?
- 3) In recounting the travels on the east side of the Jordan, Moshe mentions the nations that lived there earlier and were conquered “just as Israel did to the land of their possession” (2:9-23). He does not mention events such as Balaam who tried cursing them and instigated the events at Baal Peor (Bemidbar 22-25). What might be his reason for telling the events with this focus?

On Saturday night and on Sunday we will be observing the fast of Tisha Be'Av, commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem and the First and Second Temples. **The Book of Eicha**, Lamentations, which is read on Tisha B'Av, grew out of the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 BCE.

- 1) In the opening verses of the first chapter Jerusalem is described as a woman who has been forsaken by those who had been her fans, her friends become her enemies (1:2). How does this image help us understand the trauma experienced by Jerusalem of the 6th century?
- 2) Chapter 3 is unlike the other 4 chapters. It is made up of short verses spoken in first person. It does not speak of the historic event but rather reads as a stream of consciousness full of (often theological) thoughts. Why do you think that this was placed in the middle of the book?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.