

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

at this mountain': It is **very bad** for you, your dwelling on this mountain." Dwelling - *staying* - at the mountain is "very bad." With all that they gained there, and the closeness to God they felt, it would be tempting to stay forever. But staying in place, no matter how good that place is, leads to stagnation and to complacency.

The *p'shat* (plain) reading of the verse, as found in most translations, is "You have dwelt at this mountain long enough" (an odd way to begin one of the longer speeches in history!) Yes, in the place where God was revealed there is a feeling of unparalleled closeness. And yes, in the place where laws, beliefs, rituals, and prohibitions were given, they were transformed. But the mountain is in the midst of an uninhabitable wilderness, a place owned by no nation, and ultimately this is not what God wants from Israel. As Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, known at the Netziv, writes, "God was troubled by their delay, even though it was at this chosen and elevated mountain, for God wanted to bring them quickly into the land of Israel." According to this reading, which could also be called the Zionist reading, Israel was destined to bring God's message to the world not as a wandering people, but as one settled in its own land - bringing the Torah to bear on the real challenges of building and living an individual and collective life. The mountain was good, great even, but it was time to move on.

Being in a good place is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, there is the sacred sense of appreciation, of **הכרת הטוב**. On the other, there is the loss of the new experience, the thrill that comes from facing the unknown, and the growth that results from facing new challenges.

I write these words on my 48th birthday, having spent almost half of my years studying, teaching and administrating at the same institution, the Conservative Yeshiva. No heavenly voice or human boss has come to me and said, "Enough Josh, you've been sitting at your desk in the corner of that room for too long." But it is a challenge for me, and I think for many at my stage in life, to answer the question: Is this the mountain where I have "dwelled long enough" or is this the "promised land" where I am supposed to enjoy the security and build my legacy?

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Devarim

Shabbat Hazon

July 21, 2018 | 9 Av 5778

Annual | Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22 (Etz Hayim p. 981-998; Hertz p. 736-749)

Triennial | Deuteronomy 2:2-2:3 (Etz Hayim p. 990-994; Hertz p. 743-746)

Haftarah | Isaiah 1:1-27 (Etz Hayim p. 999-1004; Hertz p. 750-754)

D'var Torah: Settling

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Rosh Yeshiva & Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Most of the book of Devarim consists of Moses's speeches to Israel full of history, law, promises and warnings. But ask someone what the first thing Moses tells the people of Israel, and my guess is that they will be stumped. The first five verses of D'varim situate the book, and the first thing Moses says is found in verse 6. He says "רַב לָכֵן שָׁבַת בְּהָר הַזֶּה," which translates literally as "Much to you dwelling at this mountain." But the ambiguity of the phrase "Much to you" there are several ways we can read the verse.

Sifre Deuteronomy, a midrashic composition on the book of Deuteronomy reads, "'Much to you dwelling at this mountain': Much **reward has accrued** to you by dwelling at this mountain [Mt. Horev - seen here as another name for Mt. Sinai]. Upon it you accepted the Torah upon yourselves, I appointed for you seventy elders, officers of thousands, officers of hundreds, officers of fifties, and officers of tens, I made for you the *mishkan* and its vessels — You benefited greatly by your dwelling in this mountain!" For the Sifre, "much" refers to their transformation into a nation, with the Laws and moral system found in the Torah; a political and judicial system devoid of the tyranny of a single leader; and the establishment and construction of the *mishkan*, a centralized place and mode of worship.

But Midrash Tannaim, another composition on Deuteronomy, goes a different way. After quoting a teaching similar to the Sifre, it reads, "Much to you dwelling

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D'var Haftarah: Neither Ox Nor Ass

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The prophets are often hard reading, not only because their messages are difficult to decipher, but also because their messages are frequently grating to our sensibilities. The special haftarah for the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av comes from the first chapter of Isaiah and its message is painfully harsh. The prophet focuses on the nation's infidelity to God and its gross inability to discern its own faults. This shocking lack of awareness and seeming inability to remain loyal to God led the prophet to make this comparison: "An ox knows its owner, an ass its master's crib: Israel does not know, My (God's) people take no thought." (1:2)

This critique takes aim at the self-superiority of human beings in relation to other animals. Isaiah's logic goes like this: Animals, even though they have a lower level of discernment than human beings, are capable of being loyal to their masters; how, then, is it possible, that Israel cannot do the same?

Rashi offers two interpretations. In the first, he asserts that these animals, though not sentient, nevertheless have an innate fear of their masters and so do their masters' will without concern for either reward or punishment. But human beings, even when cognizant of the implications of their actions, lack this fear, so act with willful disregard and disobey God. In the second, Rashi focuses on the difference between oxen and asses. Oxen, he asserts, can be trained through reward and punishment to perform a task, but once they learn it, they do not veer from it. Asses are different. They respond to food as an incentive, but they must continue to receive the reward in order to behave properly. Sadly, humans, according to Rashi, do not consistently respond to either approach.

Rabbi David Kimche contrasts the differences in behavior between animals and human beings this way: Animals, even though they lack higher-level discernment, are still cognizant that they should distance themselves from harm and draw close to benefit. Associating benefit with the master instills in them loyalty. Israel, which should be discerning, seems unable to make the connection between God and all that God has done for them. So they act contrary to their own interests by disregarding God and the Torah.

For these sages, human beings are distinguished from animals because they have volition, the ability to make choices. Animals, act mechanically. Their programming may be innate or may be learned (conditioned), but their loyalty is inviolate since they cannot choose. It is choice which is both the greatest human virtue and the source of the greatest human vice. Isaiah, and our tradition in general, challenges us to be wise - to *choose* loyalty and recognize and appreciate blessing. Only then are we better than the animals.

Parashat Devarim Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

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

1) The book of Devarim is mostly Moshe's words to the people on the verge of entering the land. Nonetheless, it is stated that he spoke all that God commanded him to say (1:3). So how should we understand the book of Devarim?

2) Moshe tells of the leadership that works with him (1:12-17). He defines their qualifications as 'wise, understanding, and well known to your tribes.' Why do you think that the leaders have to be well known to their tribes?

3) As a prelude to retelling the event of the spies (in which the people asked not to enter the land), Moshe reminds the people that they traveled through 'that whole great awe-full desert' (1:19). Why do you think that he chooses to tell the story in this manner?

4) When the people passed by the border of Edom, God warned that the Edomites will fear the people of Israel greatly, so we need to be careful (2:3). What is the possible danger from a nation that fears you?

5) Moshe says that he gave the land in Trans-Jordan to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of Manasseh (3:12-19). However, when the event took place (Bamidbar 32) we learnt that it was Reuben and Gad that requested the land, and Moshe was quite angry about their request, comparing them to the spies and blaming them for taking what everyone fought for while leaving the rest to battle alone in the land. Why do you think that he does not mention his disapproval here?

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.