

Dvarim

Shabbat Shalom.

(The Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, which is today, is always called Shabbat Chazon which means the Shabbat of Vision". This Shabbat gets its name from the first word of today's Haftorah which recalls a vision of the prophet Isaiah. According to Chassidic tradition, on this Shabbat, the soul of every Jew is treated to a vision of the holy temple which will be rebuilt when the Messiah comes. In this D'var torah, I will be talking a bit about vision...Moses, Caleb's and ours.)

The setting for today's parsha, Devarim, is the eastern bank of the Jordan River, where the Israelites, after 40 years of wondering in the Sinai Desert, are poised to enter the promised land. This parsha is pretty much a one man show, starring Moses in the only speaking role, and a cast of thousands comprised of the assembled Children of Israel to whom Moses is essentially saying good-bye. He does this by reviewing the events that occurred and the laws that were given in the course of the forty-year journey from Egypt to Sinai to the Promised Land. In a long discourse, Moses rebukes the Israelites for their failings and iniquities, and he enjoins them to keep the Torah and observe its commandments in the land that G-d is giving them as an eternal heritage, the land they will cross into after his death. Moses gives specific warnings, rules, and policies for moving into the nation's future. He recalls appointing captains and officers to lead the various tribes of Israel when their numbers grew too great for him to manage by himself, and judges and magistrates to help govern.

Moses is speaking to the nation he has loyally and lovingly tended for decades, since the departure from Egypt. He is speaking to the people whose poor choices have prevented them, and also him, from entering the promised land, stating to them, "Also against me, was G-d angry for your sake" and G-d's decree," You too, shall not go in there." It is the first day of the eleventh month, the month of Shevat. It is exactly thirty seven days before Moses' death. The parsha ends with Moses recounting more recent events: the refusal of the nations of Moab and Ammon to allow the Israelites to pass through their countries; the fact that lands

that have been set aside for the children of Esau and of Lot, the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the divinely delivered victories and consequent settlement of these lands by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh. Lastly, Moses delivers a message to his successor, Joshua, who will lead the people into the Promised Land and into the battles for its conquest: He tells Joshua not to be afraid, saying “ the L-rd your G-d, He shall fight for you.”

Moses’ speaking to the Israelites made me think about the fact that, at some point, each of us all will probably have thoughts and advice we would like to impart, especially to our spouses and children. We will all die one day and ultimately we will have made certain decisions about what we wish to share, or not share, before we do. And since we don’t ever know for sure when that day will be, it seems prudent to remain pretty up to date in our communication on a daily basis regarding those things we really want others to learn from us or remember about us....a story from our childhood, a new way of solving a problem, an empowering idea that might help our loved ones be more satisfied with their lives, a pep talk about taking care of oneself.

If charged with Moses task, how would you summarize your family’s process to date? How do you visualize your futures and what would be your best advice for getting there? If these were to be your last days, are you confident you have pointed out the most righteous paths, outlined the best ways to meet upcoming goals and challenges, articulated what you love most about each other in a meaningful way, and shared the things you hope would be remembered about you? If you had only another 37 days...what would you try to accomplish? How would you help your loved ones to learn from their pasts and with courage, insight, and reverence, create a brilliant future? This was Moses’ job, not an easy one, but it seems to me he did it with the same humility and conviction he displayed throughout the previous 40 years. He may have been extremely disappointed, but he sucked it up and continued to get the job done.

So today we read the first weekly parsha in the book of Devarim, the fifth and final book of the Torah. I want to tell you about the name of today's torah reading because it's really interesting. Devarim means "words". Commentary points out that although the *entire* Torah—at least as it was communicated to we earthly beings—consists of words, in Devarim, the nature of these words is especially meaningful. The book of Devarim is essentially a 37-day-long speech by Moses, beginning on the first of Shevat and ending on the seventh of Adar—which was the day of Moses' passing. To put it into historical context, the year is 2488, dating from creation, or, 1273 BCE. In Devarim, Moses recaps the major events and laws that are recorded in the Torah's other four books. Technically, it is believed that Moses wrote all five books. But, our sages explain that in the first four books Moses transcribed everything as he received it from G-d, while in Devarim he speaks "*in his own words.*" As evidence of this, the first four books are written in the third person ("And G-d spoke to Moses, saying"), but in Devarim we hear Moses' voice in the first person ("At that time, G-d said to me," ...). Even so, it is clearly understood that Moses is still delivering the word of G-d.

I'm now returning to the theme of "vision" in today's parsha, beginning with the vision of Moses, then of Caleb, one of the two loyal spies, and ending with the ways in which our own vision impacts how we each respond to our own life challenges. When Moses learns he too will be barred from entering the promised land, he implores G-d to allow him to cross into it and to see it. But G-d refuses. That task and that joy will be reserved for the new leader, Joshua. However, as Chabad Rabbi Yanki Tauber points out, Moses' prayer *was* at least partially answered. G-d refused the first part, entering, but granted the second, seeing. G-d directs Moses to ascend to the top of the mountain and to see Canaan with his own eyes from the far side of the Jordan. Rabbi Tauber suggests that we too, under all conditions and no matter how distant or difficult our own end-goal might be, have the power to ascend the summits within ourselves and to see what is our own promised lands, which means to visualize the reality and to commit to the promise of our own potential.

I am currently reading this outstanding book called Broken Open by an educator named

Elisabeth Lesser. It's about how very difficult times can actually help us to grow. I'm reading the stories of some amazing people who have been heart-broken by profound tragedy, loss, and disappointment, but have, after time, been able to use their experiences to view life differently and to surpass their previous abilities to learn, love, and contribute in life. In her book, Lesser quotes the well-known Holocaust survivor and writer Victor Frankl who demonstrated great vision under abhorrent circumstances. as he transformed the despair of the death camps into a search for meaning. In his darkest moments he realized this: "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life- daily and hourly. What matters, Frankl continues, is not the meaning of life in general, but the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment." Such a given moment may have occurred when Moses was choosing his words, or gazing out into the new land, when Caleb and Joshua decided to trust in G-d's promise to protect the Israelites in battling the Emorites, or when Victor Frankl put his soul in charge of his life, not his smaller and more fearful *self*, but his *soul* which he believed to be, under all circumstances, hopeful, expansive, and eternal.

This week, I was very excited to find a wonderful D'var Torah written by a *reform* rabbi, Zoe Klein. Rabbi Klein focuses on Caleb, the much lesser known of the two loyal spies within the 12, who scouted the promised land. Only Joshua and Caleb came back with enthusiasm and loyalty for following G-d's orders, and so these two would be the only men of their generation permitted to enter the land of Canaan. Joshua's leadership and heroic acts are well-known, but Caleb, Rabbi Klein says was important for a different reason. Caleb was a simple man. His name means "dog" (Kelev) and Rabbi Klein says he was as loyal as one, not just to the word of G-d but to his own heart as well. He was also a man of vision, and of humility, an honest man, and a good commander. But, Rabbi Klein notes, that these attributes are not what made Caleb so special. He was special because, in Rabbi Klein's words, "*Caleb is each and every one of us...you in the business suit, you in the summer dress. He is you when you were in the*

desert hundreds of thousands of years ago and you now. He is you when you look at yourself and see not the long shadows of the past but the blossoming future. He is you when you look at your neighbor and see no ugliness there, only God's radiant image. He is you when you feel not like a grasshopper beside the people you admire, but a worthy colleague and equal. He is you when you hush your doubts about yourself, quiet your fears, and rise to your glorious potential. He is you when you pass your hand over the heaps of the world and find there the jeweled spirit just underneath the husks. He is you when you replace "I wish I could" with "Yes, I can." He is you when you walk into a roomful of strangers with your head held high, instead of skirting the wall, afraid someone will see. He is you when you are a breath of love in the world. He is you when you stop worrying how people will consider your ideas.

In other words, Caleb reached the Promised Land simply because he was true to himself and loyal to his God. He followed both G-d's instructions and his own heart. He did his best, which, for most of us, is probably far greater than we might think it is. Ordinary, brave, modern day people have managed to reproduce themselves from the shattered pieces of very difficult times, and to manage even difficult change with a vibrant type of rebirth. I am striving to be one of these people. Sometimes the change is within ourselves, as in my own search for an *individual* identity after having been part of a happy *pair* for so many years. Sometimes the change must come not in ourselves but in our world. Who has not asked themselves lately, "Can a world where people continuously harm each other through war, where many families don't have enough food to eat, and where innocents are gunned down in a movie theater, recreate itself to be a place that is peaceful, fair, and safe?" The answer is yes, because it *has* to be yes. We will only reach our individual and collective potentials when we have an experience of our mutual humanity and can remain true to our highest selves. (If you watched the opening Olympic ceremony last night, you saw a wonderful example of this.) As Lawrence Kushner writes in *Honey from the Rock*, when we are our best selves we are all messengers from the Most High. This is what Moses implores the Children of Israel to do. He has seen these children at their best and he has seen them at their worst. It is with an understanding of their past and also great vision for their future, that Moses shares his final words before he is to leave his people. It is with a simple but steadfast faith that Caleb has a

vision of what needs to be done and does it.

We were all created for a reason and we all have unlimited potential. With the vision to see what is possible, and the humility and courage to do what it takes to get there, we can each reach our own promised lands.

Shabbat Shalom.

