

**Running Out of Time**  
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**Shabbat Devarim – July 23, 2020**

This week we begin the reading of the final book of the Torah, which we also fondly call “the Five Books of Moses.” But in truth, I’ve always felt a bit odd calling the Torah that. I think only the Book of Deuteronomy, the book we begin on this Shabbat, deserves that title. The first book, Genesis, is really an introduction to the entire Bible. It sets the stage, and gives us the back story on the main players who will appear later. For instance, the first thing we learn is that everyone is one big unhappy family, filled with clans descended from different people who have fought since the beginning of time, up until today. In books 2 through 4, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, Moses does play a central roll, but not THE central role, that is still God. But these three books do take us from Moses’s birth to his final days, with an overview of his personal and professional life.

But this Shabbat, as we begin book number 5, the Book of Deuteronomy, or Devarim, we see a profound shift in the Torah and in the way the narrative is told. In Deuteronomy we finally see the person who tried to avoid his job as God’s spokesperson due to his speech impediment, give what might be the longest and most eloquent sermon in Jewish history. Because that is what the book of Deuteronomy essentially is, it is Moses final sermon. Except in this book, unlike in the others, it’s not God speaking through Moses, it is Moses speaking for himself.

Over the July 4th weekend, I like much of America, watched the filmed version of Hamilton. And there’s a line that kept going through my mind as I was studying this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Devarim. It was the words from the song “Non-stop,” in it the cast sings to Alexander Hamilton:

Why do you write like you're running out of time?

Write day and night like you're running out of time?

Everyday day you fight, like you're running out of time...

That urgency in that verse is what we hear in Moses’s words throughout Deuteronomy. He is coming quickly to the end of his life,

and he knows it, and with this knowledge, he finds his voice, and is desperately wanting not only to be heard by the Israelites, but to be remembered by them as well.

He wants to make sure that they have learned from their past, that all of their suffering wasn't for nothing, that the struggles they went through will help guide them as they go on without him. He wants to know that what he has worked for, fought for, and sacrificed for, will endure long after him. And he knows that he is running out of time. I wonder, what would we do if we lived every day as though we knew that we were running out of time, as though we were Moses, knowing that our days were quickly coming to an end? What would we say, what would we want to be remembered for? What wisdom would be essential for us to pass on to others? What would we want to be remembered for?

It's easy to feel right now like our life is on hold, that we're waiting for it to start up again, and we're just wasting time until it does.

But at that times like that, it's important for us to remember that for most of the 40 years of the Israelites dwelling in the desert, they weren't wandering, rather they were camped out at Kadesh Barnea, they were on their own sort of lock-down. But the Torah does not look at those 40 years as being wasted.

They had to stay put not because of a physical pandemic, but because of an emotional and intellectual toxicity that had spread throughout their camp. After giving them many chances, God realized that the generation that had left Egypt was beyond being able to learn how to behave like free people, and the Holy One decreed that only their children would be able to enter the Promised Land. They needed 40 years so that a new generation could be raised to see themselves as capable of, and worthy of, owning their own destiny.

They needed the forty years in lockdown so that they could learn how to take responsibility for themselves, rather than constantly complaining that their leader was the one responsible for messing things up.

It's tempting to waste time right now, to think of life as being on hold. But it's not. While what we can do is more limited than just a few months ago, that doesn't mean that we have ceased to live. We, like

the Israelites, can spend this time working on who we are, and who we want to be. This is an opportunity for us a society, not in spite of the restraints on our daily lives, but because of them, to be able to recalibrate and decide what our values and priorities need to be. This is the time for us to do as the Israelites did and learn a new, healthier way of operating as a society.

Just because we are experiencing constrictions on what we can do physically, there is no reason for us to constrict what we are capable of doing spiritually, psychologically, or intellectually.

In the 1980s and 1990s, South Africa was suffering under an AIDS pandemic. Many children were being diagnosed HIV-positive from birth, with the deadly disease having been transmitted to them while still in the womb. One of these children was a little boy name Nkosi Johnson.

Nkosi was credited with being hugely influential in shaping people's perception of the pandemic, and inspiring an entire country. Aware since birth of what he was up against, Nkosi said "Do all you can with what you have, in the time you have, in the place you are."

Let me say that again: "Do all you can with what you have, in the time you have, in the place you are."

Nkosi was 12 when he died. What amazing courage and wisdom at such a young age. Nelson Mandela referred to Nkosi as an "icon of the struggle for life."

What a striking phrase "an icon of the struggle FOR life." When we are healthy, when times seem normal, most of us take life for granted. We forget, or perhaps have not learned, what it means to have to "struggle FOR life."

In the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses is beginning to wrap up his sermon, he speaks to the Israelites and says:

"See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil; In that I command you this day to love the Eternal your God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments and statutes and judgments, that you may live and multiply ... But if your heart turns away, so that you will not hear ... I announce to you this day, that you shall surely perish ... I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and

curse; therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live.  
(adapted from Deut. 30:15-19)

“Choose life” informs nearly every aspect of Jewish law and ethics. That is the foundation of the Jewish imperative of “pikuach nefesh” – the belief that saving a life overrides nearly every other Jewish law. It’s more important than Shabbat. More important than keeping kosher. It’s more important than praying in a minyan. It’s more important than any other ritual or holiday that you can think of. In the Talmud we learn that the imperative is so strong that even if a known anti-Semitic doctor tells you that the only way you will survive is to eat pork, then eat pork.

A modern corollary would be that even if you are suspicious of the public health and safety institutions, if they tell us that we need to wear masks, physically distance ourselves and stop praying inside, or we risk giving ourselves or someone else a potentially deadly illness, then we must do it. We must choose life.

Over the last 25 years I have sat with many people as death hovered at their door. In all those years, I never heard someone say “I wish I had worked more. If only I had gone to another meeting or took less of my vacation days!” No, at the end of people’s lives, they look back at their relationships, they reflect on the lives of those who they have touched or who have touched them, they examine their choices, and wonder, did they choose a life filled with blessings or curses?

One of the lessons I learned at a very early age is that no one knows how much time they will be given. Nkosi Johnson was right, we must do all that we can with what we have, in the time that we have, in the place that we are.

We cannot control the choices that others make. We cannot control this pandemic by ourselves. But we can still choose life. We can still find ways to spend this time in a way that is meaningful and safe. Every day that we wake up, we are given the choice again and again to “choose life or death, blessing or curse.” And every day we are given the opportunity to choose how we will fill our days and spend our time.

With the current pandemic Moses’ ancient warning feels so timely, we have been reminded that we have set before us the choice between

life and death, blessing and curse. But as Moses knew too well after 40 years of leading the Israelites, that he could warn, he could threaten, he could preach, but ultimately, that choice is for each of us to make. So I beg you, please, choose life, so that you, and I, and others may live.