

*Parashat Devarim - Shabbat Hazon*  
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*Gil Brodsky*  
*Temple Aliyah, Needham*

Shabbat Shalom.

With today's parashah, we started a new book in the Torah, the book of *Devarim*, or Deuteronomy. It starts, "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan." And after a very long description of the place where this address took place and the time it took place, we get the entire text of what Moses said. And what a text it is! He goes through an extensive accounting of the travels of the Israelites beginning from the time they left Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, and the peoples they encountered, along with a detailed accounting of the numerous misdeeds of the Israelites during that time. He then goes on to present a detailed discourse on reward and punishment, reminding the people repeatedly of their covenant with God, and that adherence to that covenant will bring reward and failure to do so will bring severe punishment. But wait, there's more! Then Moses lists many commandments that the people must follow once they enter the Promised Land without him. All in all, Moses speaks nearly nonstop, with a break for third person narrative text of only about 9 verses in next week's parashah *Va-etchanan*, for 30 full chapters, through a total of eight parshiyot. Only then does the text revert briefly back to the narrative, telling in two passages of Moses's final days, between which are sandwiched the poetic passages of *Ha-azinu* and *V'zot Ha-bracha*.

Now I want you to think back to the book of Exodus, in chapter 4, when Moses encountered God at the burning bush, when God told him that he had been designated to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. After several excuses to get out of the job which God, summarily rejects, Moses says, "*Bi Adonai, lo ish devraim anochi* — Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Yeah! Well, after nearly 40 years hanging out with his people in the desert, he certainly has developed a whole new set of oratory skills!



Now because the book of *Devarim* is almost all oratory and not narrative, it stands in contrast with the four books of the Torah which come before it, as well as the initial books of the Prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings— which come after it. In fact, if you take the brief sets of verses surrounding Moses’s death at the end of Devarim and move them to the end of the Book of Numbers, which we finished reading last week, and delete the rest, then you likely wouldn’t even notice. Since so much of what Moses says in the first two parshiyot of the book are a recounting of the historical events in the books before it, a second telling if you will, which gives it its Latin name Deuteronomy, we wouldn’t be missing much.

Except that we would of course be missing a lot: Most importantly, the Shema! And the second paragraph of the Shema, the V’haya im shamo’a, as well. And the memorable lines “Justice, justice you shall pursue” and “Man cannot live by bread alone,” as well as others.

But let’s get back to Moses’s words. Who is he speaking to? What history does he relate? And what’s his vantagepoint? The text says he spoke to *all* Israel. Well, who are all these people? It’s important to note that with the exception of the very oldest of them, these are not the people who had been slaves in Egypt, who had witnessed the great miracles of the Exodus, or stood at Mt. Sinai. All of those people had died during the wanderings in the wilderness. And it was none of the people who had cried during the episode of the spies, or those who had joined in the revolt of Korah and his coconspirators, or who had whored themselves at Ba’al-pe’or. All of them had died. What was left was a strong, unified people, burnished by the desert, whose army had conquered those of mighty kings. And for some reason the text is obsessed with the names and residences of those kings, because they are mentioned so many times: Sihon, King of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth and Edrei.(I’m guessing Edrei was his summer getaway home.)

So if you were giving a speech to this group of people and starting with a historical recap, where in history would you start? Should you start with what these people all know, that is that because of the sins of their parents they hung around in the desert for 38 plus years and then moved as an unstoppable military force, to reach this current time and place? Or maybe you should start with the Egyptian enslavement, reminding the people that their parents and grandparents were slaves, and God brought them out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, and with signs and wonders that they had not seen but their parents had. Or perhaps you should start with the patriarchs, with Abraham who made the original covenant with God, followed by Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, resulting in the people moving to Egypt.

No, Moses uses none of these as a starting point. Instead, he starts out right after the people received the Ten Commandments at Sinai. His first words: “The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb (Sinai), saying, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain.’” That seems to me like an odd time to start.

Moses also takes some liberties with the facts of his recounting. Specifically, regarding the spies, he says, “Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land...’” Multiple commentators mention that Hebrew implies that the Israelites ganged up on Moses. But what does the actual text of parashat Sh’lach-L’cha say? God spoke to Moses, saying, “Send men to scout the land...”. Why does Moses change the narrative from one of a command to him from God to one of a mob demanding he take action?

I think we can synthesize from these questions a picture of the man Moses at this point. He is old, but he is still passionate about his mission, and he is angry about the fact that he will not personally be able to complete that mission, and he is angrier still that there have been so many stumbling blocks in his way, with an almost obsessive, lingering anger at those who laid those stumbling blocks.

Moses blames the people for God’s decision not to let him enter the Holy Land. That is why he begins his historical recount as the people are about to leave Mt. Sinai. It’s then that all of the problems with getting to Canaan arise. First, the episode with the spies. Even though it was God who told Moses to send them, he blames the people: “In chapter 1 verse 34 Moses says “When the Lord hear your loud complaint, he was angry, and he swore, ‘Not one person in this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your forefathers’” and he continues in verse 37, Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said, ‘You shall not enter it either.’” It’s as if Moses was saying, “*You* came and harangued me to do this, and it turned out badly, and God became angry with *you*, and He also became angry with *me* because of you!”

But who is Moses talking to? None of the people who are standing there listening to him had anything to do with that incident. Why is he blaming *them*?

And in the very beginning verses of the next parashah, Va-etchanannan, Moses makes one last appeal to God to be able to enter The Land, in a blatantly sycophantic effort, alas to no avail. He continues his speech to the Israelites: “But the Lord was wrathful with *me* on *your* account.”

What’s going on with Moses? Frankly, I think this once greatest of leaders is washed up. Having spent most of his life fighting with Pharaoh, being the medium in performing God’s miracles, and fighting seemingly endlessly with the people, he is worn out, and he has lost perspective. He is a victim, perhaps, of world

literature's first generation gap. He is so obsessed with the wrongs he feels the people before did, he can't realize that those people aren't even there. He has become a whiner, screaming at ghosts! He cannot identify with the new generation—nor can they identify with him. It's no wonder God has told him he can't lead the nation across the Jordan. If you were a casting director for the film, think no more Charlton Heston, think instead Gilbert Gottfried.

And yet, in this final hour, after his rant, Moses regains his composure, girds himself for the task at hand and continues to deliver eloquent speeches for 30 more chapters, plus two more final poems, before finally quietly accepting his lot and ascending Mount Nebo to quietly be gathered unto his people. In the end, the great leader once again humbly shows his greatness.

Switching gears here, we must make note of the fact that today marks a special day in the Jewish calendar: it is the last day before Tisha B'Av, the day of fasting and mourning the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, as well as so many other tragedies that befell the Jewish people over the centuries. And that is reflected in both the Torah reading and the haftarah reading today. Tonight we will read Aicha, Jeremiah's book of Lamentations. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 of that 5-chapter book all begin with the Hebrew word aicha, meaning "how could it be?" In this week's Torah reading, in Chapter 1 verse 12, Moses laments, "How can I possibly bear by myself the trouble of you, your burden, and your bickering?"—again, there's Moses kvetching—and that verse is chanted not with the usual Torah trope but with the trope used for chanting Aicha.

Finally, I want to switch gears once again, and relate something in a recent Daf Yomi. As you know, Daf Yomi is the tradition of studying one page of Talmud every single day, over a span of seven and a half years, so that by the end of that time one has studied the entire Talmud. Of course Rabbi Perkins has been leading a Daf Yomi class on a weekly basis all year. I personally have been listening to one of the several available podcasts covering Daf Yomi. And I wanted to bring up something that came up in one of the pages just a little over a week ago. It was in Tractate Yoma, about the laws of Yom Kippur, near the very end of the tractate. It discusses the exceptions regarding what sort of work might be permitted on Yom Kippur or Shabbat.

Yoma 83: Similarly, with regard to one upon whom a rockslide fell, and there is uncertainty whether he is there under the debris or whether he is not there; and there is uncertainty whether he is still alive or whether he is dead; and there is uncertainty whether the person under the debris is a gentile or whether he is a Jew, one clears the pile from atop him. One may perform any action necessary to rescue him from beneath the debris. If they found him alive after beginning to clear the

debris, they continue to clear the pile until they can extricate him. And if they found him dead, they should leave him, since one may not desecrate Shabbat to preserve the dignity of the dead.

This passage of gemara rings so eerily to us in light of current events. Because, of course, such a rockslide, or more accurately a building collapse, had just occurred a week before in Surfside Florida. We now know, after the rubble has been cleared, that about 90 people lost their lives in that unspeakable and incomprehensible event. Now, two of those people were husband and wife David and Bonnie Epstein. Many of you have heard by now that David is one of my half-brothers, one of dozens of half-siblings I discovered only a little over 3 years ago. I spoke about that discovery at a prior dvar Torah I gave back in November of 2019. I had only met David once, at the first family reunion I attended, for a few hours. I specifically remember he had a nice smile. Other sibs who got the chance to spend more time with him said that he was a great guy. He and Bonnie had recently retired and were spending more time in Florida, on the beach, because they both loved the water, and they were looking forward to island hopping in the Caribbean to waterski, jet-ski, parasail, and the like.

If you can sympathize with Moses about not reaching his goal, what can you say about David and Bonnie? Their lives and their dreams cut off in an instant. No time to climb the mountain to at least view all of the Promised Land, no time for goodbyes or reflections on times past with their only son Jonathan, or with any other family and friends.

When the sibs learned of this tragedy, what were we to do? Well, those who had met Jonathan and knew him best asked how we could help. He said two things. First, could we help him with food at the shiva he would be having in his New York apartment, and second could we donate to a charity focusing on marine conservation that was one of his parents' favorites? We all chipped in and had lots and lots of food sent for the shiva, and what was left over went to that charity. And we individually reached out, each in our own way, to send him condolences.

One of the things that I love about Jewish practice is that it tells you what to do when you don't know what to do. When a loved one or member of the community dies, you support the family, often with food, so they don't have to worry about food prep or feeding shiva visitors. You give condolences to the mourners. And if you just don't know how to do that, what to say, well then our tradition gives you an answer to that as well: *Ha-makom yinachem etchem b'toch sh'ar avaylay Tsiyyon vee-rushalayim*. May the divine Presence comfort you, among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. And finally, when faced with all the overwhelming existential questions about painful loss, life and death, and how can

something like this happen, what can you possibly do to wrap your head around any of it? Well, our tradition has an answer for this too. You say kaddish. You stand up in shul announce publicly that you don't understand, that God or whatever power it is that guides the universe has no obligation to provide you with answers, yet here you are, affirming life and seeking peace—*Oseh shalom*—for those of us fortunate to still be residing on this side of that eternal divide.

And so, since the day of David and Bonnie's funeral this past Monday, I have been saying kaddish. And I will continue to do so for a week. Regardless of how little we knew about each other, he was—he is—my brother.

So Moses, Jeremiah, David Epstein. None of them reached his respective promised land. Each befell a tragedy. Yet every life well lived deserves to be respected and celebrated for the good it did, in spite of any internal failings or external tragedies. I promise that I will never forget David's sweet smile. And that applies to all of those who died by kiddush hashem in persecutions over the millennia that we recall tomorrow on Tisha B'Av. *Y'hi zichronam baruch*—may all their memories be for a blessing.

Amen