

## **This Week in Torah: *Devarim***

The fifth book of the Torah begins with these words: “These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan—Through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab....”

Seems a throw-away line of sorts about places we don’t know and words spoke to the children of Israel. But we know that the sages never saw any words as superfluous.

Rather they saw them as an entry into a deeper meaning. This verse is no different—here we begin the second telling of law or in Greek: Deuteronomy. But the medieval sage RaSHI from the 11<sup>th</sup> century taught from a Midrash that when the Torah speaks of “these are the words...” it usually refers to a sense of anger, exasperation and disappointment on the behalf of God. Something happened in those locations that provoked God’s ire. But instead of dwelling on the flaws, God transcends to a place where the Holy One gives an allusion to what occurred in order for our ancestors to become better rather than be brow-beaten for not being perfect.

That is right—according to RaSHI—God doesn’t seek to punish or to blame us, rather God challenges us to do better. The Psalmist says it this way [112:4]—“A light shines for the righteous in the darkness; God is gracious, compassionate, and beneficent.” Just let that notion resonate with you for a moment—in God’s goodness, when the righteous stumble God sets a new beacon to light up the path on how we can act to match our fullest divine potential. Wow—Ezekiel understood that as well [18:23]: “Is it My desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.”

You and I are not perfect; we are a work in progress. I do believe that we all have the potential to be righteous—which in Hebrew comes from the Hebrew root *tsadik-dalet-koof* which leads to the words *tsdek* [a righteous person], *tsedek* [justice], and *tzedakah* [charity]. Just as the opening verse reminds us, we will stumble but we can pick ourselves up again and as we dust ourselves off, we can refocus on the right path for us to be on. Thru our actions and our being we can transcend the inclination to act poorly and arrive at a higher place of being, more worthy of being in the image of God which was bestowed upon us. Just like the prophet Micah said [6:8-9]: “And what the LORD

requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God-- Then will your name achieve wisdom.”

The painter Andy Warhol said: “You need to let the little things that would ordinarily pain you suddenly thrill you.” For us, that means strive to be better rather than stew on the hurts inflicted on us. It means that we should seek a better sense of self rather than obsess on the flaws. It means that we should aspire to transform ourselves into a more sacred vessel than be crippled by our self-ridicule and lingering guilt.

“These are the words...” Now, go ahead—listen and strive to be a better person who has been created in the image of God.