

Drash for Devarim

Written by Art Geiger

Read by Norma Cohen

Devarim is the first parashah in the Book of Deuteronomy. Devarim is the beginning of the first of three speeches Moses gives to the Israelites, prior to entering the Promised Land. In this section Moses recaps the wanderings of the Israelites over the past 40 years. Let me tell you, my first takeaway from this portion is: if you are going on a trip, don't leave without a GPS; minimally, Google directions so that you know how to go, to increase your odds of getting to your destination in a reasonable amount of time. Directions are important.

Experiences recounted in Devarim include:

Moses sent 12 men to reconnoiter the Promised Land. When they came back, they brought extraordinary tales of the people who lived there, causing the Israelites to be frightened of entering the Promised Land. God became angry and banished the current generation of Israelites from entering the Promised Land. OK, so maybe it wasn't for lack of a GPS that it took the Israelites so long to cross the desert; however, they didn't follow directions. Directions are important.

Another experience: King Og of Bashan stood in the way of the Israelites. God said, "Do not fear King Og." Israelites attacked King Og, as directed, and defeated them handily. All the territory of King Og came into the hands of the Israelites. Directions are important.

A final experience: God directed Moses to speak to the rock to get water to come forth. Moses instead struck the rock to get the water. God punished Moses by denying Moses access to the Promised Land. Directions are important.

In reading Devarim, one comes away with the conclusion that if one follows God's directions, good things happen and if one doesn't, the opposite happens. So do we take the directions (commandments) literally and just follow them? If we did, we would not be Reform Jews. As Reform Jews, we read the Torah and interpret what the Torah means for ourselves, as individuals and as a movement. We practice *tikkun olam* based upon these interpretations. Yes, we follow the directions of the Torah, but we also modify those directions based upon our own understanding. We need to be true to our own, individual understanding of Torah's directions while maintaining its moral prescriptive of the Torah. As the world changes over time, it is important to constantly reinterpret our understanding of the Torah's directions while keeping the underlying moral base. Directions are important – both the Torah's and our own.

Shabbat Shalom.