

PARSHAT DEVARIM 5778

These are the words that Moshe told all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the Arava, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel, and Lavan and Chatzerot and Di Zahav. 11 days from Chorev, by way of Mt Seir, up to Kadesh Barnea.

This is how the book of Devarim begins, and Rashi tells us that the whole section here is full of rebuke. Moshe here recounted all the places where the nation had angered Hashem, but in order to protect the dignity of the nation, he encoded their sinful actions as if they were simply place names along the way. So for example “in the desert” really refers to the time just after they have crossed the Yam Suf when they said “would that we had died in Egypt where we had plenty to eat – but He has taken us out to kill us all by starvation in the desert”; “in the Arava” refers to the sin of worshipping Baal Peor in Arvot Moav etc.

Rashi goes on to say that “11 days” refers to the normal journey time from Chorev, ie Har Sinai, to Kadesh Barnea on the border of Eretz Yisrael – although they ended up taking nearly 40 years to get there, it is actually only a very short journey.

In passing, Rashi notes that they left Chorev on 20 Iyar in the second year of their exit from Egypt, as we read in parashat Behaalotcha. This is the stage when they were about to make their jubilant entry to the Promised Land, with the 12 tribes organised around the 4 sides of the Mishkan, and the silver trumpets to let them know when to start and stop. 11 days would take them to Rosh Chodesh Sivan, which would mark exactly a year from their entry to the Sinai Desert which was on Rosh Chodesh Sivan in the first year, and they would therefore have a neat symmetry between the two main goals of the Exodus – receiving the Torah in the first year, and entering Eretz Yisrael on the anniversary in the second year.

However, all this was not to be. Despite the jubilant atmosphere of parashat Behaalotcha, we embarked on a perpetual downturn of fortunes with the continual complaints in the desert, the spies and Korach’s rebellion; and what should have been an 11 day journey turned into 40 years of wandering.

With all this, Rashi doesn’t tell us what “these words” were that Moshe actually said. I found Sforno’s approach insightful. The words of rebuke were simply exactly what the passuk says “11 days from Chorev, by way of Mt Seir, up to Kadesh Barnea”. In each of the places that the Bnei Yisrael stopped on their tortuous route, Moshe would say to them “It is just 11 days from Chorev to Kadesh Barnea, but because of your sins you have been made to wander all these years”. Sforno adds that Moshe admonished them in this way in order that they would remember their behaviour and do teshuva.

Now that we have reached Sefer Devarim and they are entering the 40th year and about to enter the Promised Land without him, Moshe recognised two things. Firstly, because this was a new generation, he could be more open and explicit about the behaviour of the previous generation, and so he first launches into the story of the spies and its consequences. Secondly, because he won’t be in Eretz Yisrael with them to admonish them as and when they inevitably fall into further sin, he has further reason to be explicit about their past actions so that they consider these and be less likely to fall into the same problems again. And all this is to improve the behaviour of the nation, encourage them to do teshuva, and so they will be able to remain in the Land.

We always read the parasha of Devarim directly before Tisha B’Av, and this gives us an opportunity to reflect on the sin of the spies which is one of the tragedies that we mourn on this day. It also gives us an insight into how best to evoke feelings of teshuva, which is one of the main reasons for the fast days. Sometimes, it can be enough just to recall the slightest hint as an allusion, like Rashi says regarding the place names in the first passuk. Sometimes it can be useful to gently remind us of the effects of our actions “11 days from Chorev...”. Sometimes, especially when embarking on a new venture, without the leadership that we have been used to in the past, it is important to outline exactly what we did in order to avoid falling into similar traps in the future – this is what Moshe did as the Bnei Yisrael entered their 40th year in the desert and were about to enter Eretz Yisrael without him.