

Torah Table Talk – *Pirke Avot*

Sefer Devarim: A Preface to the High Holy Days

Parshat Devarim, Deuteronomy 1:1 – 3:22

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z'l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Each year, as we begin reading the book of Deuteronomy, I find myself thinking about the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Parshat *Devarim* is always read the week prior to the black fast of *Tisha B'Av*; this is even reflected in the way in which we chant this *parshah* and *haftorah*. Certain verses in both of these passages are chanted to the trope, the special melody, used for the chanting of Lamentation. Appropriately, *Devarim* is a book of moral and spiritual reproof in which Moses, who now approaches the end of his life, reviews Israel's sojourn in the wilderness and the essential teachings which make up its covenant with God. Moses faces his death as the nation comes to terms with its past and future. Some of the sages read the word *devarim*, 'words', as *devorim*, 'bees;' that is, Moses' words are meant to sting. He does not pull any punches. Moses is blunt in telling the people why they have failed and that most likely they will fail in the future. At the same time he encourages Israel to recognize the gifts that God has given them and the miracles and wonders they have experienced.

How appropriate, that we read this book of national reflection and review as we approach the season of judgment when we are asked to look at the past year and reflect on our successes and failures. Although the High Holidays are almost two months away, we begin reading a series of *Haftarot* on *Shabbat* morning next week which will carry us through to *Rosh Hashanah*. We must also begin to set our life in order as we prepare to stand the presence of *shofet kol ha-aretz*, the judge of the universe. Akavya ben Mehalalel's three questions can serve as an apt context in which to honestly reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives.

Pirke Avot 3:1 Akavya ben Mahalalel said: Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin. Know from where you came and where you are going and before whom you are destined to give account and reckoning. From where have you come? -- From a putrid drop. Where are you going? -- To the place of dust, worm, and maggots. Before whom are you destined to give account and reckoning? -- Before the supreme Sovereign of sovereigns, the Holy One.

Pirke Avot 2:2 Rabbi Judah the Prince used to say: Reflect on three things and you will never come to sin: Know what is above you --a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and all your deeds recorded in a book.

Sources

Rabbi Obadiah of Bartenora who Commentary on the Mishnah

One reflects on his origins will be saved from pride; the one who reflects on his destined place will be saved from lust and the desire for money; and the one who reflects on his ultimate future will be saved from sin.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153a

When Rabbi Eliezer said, "Repent, even if only one day before your death," his disciples asked him, "Does any man know what day he will die?" Rabbi Eliezer answered: "Then all the more reason that he repent today. For should he die tomorrow, his entire life will have been spent in repentance. In his wisdom, Solomon also intimated [the need to repent] when he said, "Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment" (Eccles. 9:8).

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

The fear of the Lord is His treasure" (Isa. 33:6). Rava said: When a man is led in for judgment [in the world-to-come], he is asked, "In your (business) dealings, did you give and take with integrity? Did you fix definite times for study of Torah? Did you fulfill the duty of being fruitful and multiplying? Did you wait for [God's] deliverance? Did you analyze the wisdom you acquired? Did you draw proper inferences from each utterance?" No matter what the answer to these questions, if "the fear of the Lord is his treasure," it will go well with him; if not, it will not go well.

Commentary

Recently someone told me that for many people summer is over after the July 4th weekend. For rabbis and those who are attuned to the flow of the Jewish calendar, summer ends with *Tisha B'Av*. We have not yet taken the shofar or the *Machzor* out of storage but the High Holy Days are already beginning to weigh heavily upon us. With this fast we begin a journey of inner-reflection and self-transformation that carries us into and through the Days of Awe.

And it all begins with the book of Deuteronomy. *Devarim* is a book of inner reflection in which Moses calls on Israel to look at itself honestly and forthrightly. Moses, the man of few words, finds his voice in the book of devarim, 'the book of words.' Now, more than ever, he is aware of his own mortality and is deeply sensitive to the legacy that he will leave the people of Israel. The entire book of Deuteronomy, made up of a series of addresses delivered in the days just before the people cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land is really an ethical will, a final statement of his hopes, fears and aspirations for his people. It consists of three parts: The first third of the book is a review of the core experiences of the people of Israel in the wilderness. Moses focuses on two events: the story of the spies and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. In each case Israel fails to live up to God's expectations of them. In the middle section of the book Moses goes on to review the covenant, giving this book its other name: the *Mishneh Torah*, or the second Torah. In truth, not all the laws are a repetition of the ones we find in the other books of the Torah and, in some cases, we are introduced to new *mitzvot*. In the final section of Deuteronomy, Moses focuses on the theme of consequences and personal (and national) responsibility. Israel is given a choice between a blessing and a curse, between life and death. Only the individual and the nation can choose what their destiny will be.

So what does all of this have to do with Akavya ben Mehalalel? It seems to me that while his answers are different, the three questions which Akavya asks are not so different from the basic premises of Moses' address to the nation. Where have you come from? Where are you going? Before whom must you stand in judgment? Israel's journey through the wilderness is about change and growth just as our personal journey through life is about constant growth and change. There is a beginning and an end point – we must ask ourselves what we will do with the limited number of moments in between. How we view our beginning and end can influence the way we see our life and what we choose to become.

There are two elements necessary for the type of honest self reflection in which we must engage during the High Holy Day season – and throughout the year. One is a keen sense of our mortality. And the second is a belief in our accountability. These are the foundations of our moral and spiritual compass as Jews. They should be present in our lives all year long; but at the very least we should become more aware of them as the summer gives way to the fall.

Questions to Ponder

1. How do you think Moses' mortality might have influenced what he has to say to the people of Israel? Do you think he sees himself as a success or a failure?
2. How is the Book of Deuteronomy a fitting context in which to understand the upcoming High Holy Day season?
3. In what way do you see your life as a journey? From where have you come and to where do you see yourself going?
4. If the Torah is the story of Israel's journey through the wilderness, why do we conclude the five books before the people of Israel actually enter the Promised Land?
5. Do you believe in the idea of accountability? How do you understand the idea that you must give an ultimate reckoning for your life?
6. Write your own obituary. If you were to pass away tomorrow how would you want to be remembered by your family, friends, coworkers, and by the Jewish people? What message would you like to leave others as a summation of the values and ideals that are most important to you?

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