

PARSHAT D'VARIM

July 25, 2020 – 4 Av 5780

Annual (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22): Hertz p. 740

Haftarah (Isaiah 1:1-27): Hertz p. 750

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Torah Portion Summary

Sefer Devarim is Moshe's farewell speech to the people he has led for forty years. It contains an overview of the history of the wilderness years, a review and elaboration of the statutes and ordinances of the Torah, Moshe's final blessing, and his death. The core of the first parsha in Deuteronomy is history. Moshe begins by describing how he appointed judges and officers to help him lead the people. He reminds the Israelites about what happened the first time they were about to enter the land, when, after the spies' report caused the people to panic and refuse to proceed, God became angry and decreed that the generation of the Exodus would die in the wilderness. God also decreed that Moshe would not enter the land. Moshe reviews recent events – the conquest of Sichon, king of Cheshbon, and Og, king of Bashan. He describes how their territory was given to the tribes of Reuvein and Gad and the half-tribe of Menashe.

I. Sichon with all his men took the field against us at *Yahatz*, and the Lord our God delivered him to us and we defeated him and his sons and all his men. At that time we captured all his towns and we doomed every town – men, women, and children – leaving no survivor. (Deuteronomy 2:32-34)

1. In the towns of the latter [Canaanite] peoples, however, which the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must proscribe them – the *Chittites* and the *Amorites*, the Canaanites and the *Perizites*, the *Chivites* and the *Jebusites* – as the Lord your God has commanded you, lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-28)
2. Ramban remarks that the inhabitants were Amorites and, as such, came under the Divine ordinance, “in the towns of the latter peoples... you shall not let a soul remain alive.” (Deuteronomy 20:16) But that fate was only conditional on their refusal to come to terms of peace by giving up polytheism and undertaking to dutifully keep the general laws of humanity, the seven Noachide laws. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)
3. When adulterers increased in number, the application of the waters of jealousy ceased; and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai abolished them, as it is said, “I will not punish their daughters for fornicating nor their daughters-in-law for committing adultery; for they themselves turn aside with whores and sacrifice with prostitutes...” (Hosea 4:14) (Mishnah Sotah 9:9)
4. To place the Bible's aggressive and cruel mode of warfare into context, one must remember that three thousand years ago, this is how wars were fought. “Ancient documents from Mesopotamia to Egypt,” a recent book notes, “abound in joyous references to annihilating neighbors...” (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “Jewish Literacy,” p. 69)
5. When the Holy Blessed One said to Sha'ul, “Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him,” he said: If on account of one person [found dead] the Torah said perform the ceremony of the heifer whose neck is to be broken, [see Deuteronomy 21:1-9] how much more [ought consideration to be given] to all these people! And if human beings sinned, what have the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the little ones done? A divine voice came forth and said, “Do not be overly righteous.” (Kohelet 7:15) (Talmud Yoma 22b)

Sparks for Discussion

The Torah appears to endorse the wholesale slaughter of enemy populations. This is only one of several Torah texts many modern readers find difficult, among them sections permitting slavery, prescribing the death penalty for adultery and homosexuality, and allowing a jealous husband to subject his wife to a trial by ordeal. How do we deal with such texts? Our commentators offer different approaches – by justifying the Torah’s position, by rabbinic legislation that makes troubling laws effectively inoperative, and by understanding that each text reflects a particular historical reality that no longer exists. Are there Biblical texts you find troubling? How do you come to terms with them? What do you make of the passage from Yoma in which God tells Sha’ul, “Do not be overly righteous?”

II. At that time I charged you, saying, “The Lord your God has given you this country to possess. You must go as shock-troops, warriors all, at the head of your Israelite kinsmen. Only your wives, children, and livestock – I know that you have much livestock – shall be left in the towns I have assigned to you, until the Lord has granted your kinsmen a haven such as you have, and they too have taken possession of the land the Lord your God is assigning them, beyond the Jordan. Then you may return each to the homestead that I have assigned to him.” (Deuteronomy 3:18-20)

1. All Israel are responsible for one another. With what may this responsibility be compared? With a ship in which one compartment has split apart. Of something like this, it is not said, “A compartment in the ship has split apart.” What people say is, “The entire ship – the whole thing – split apart.” (Tanna d’Bei Eliyahu)
2. We may assume that Moshe was not so much concerned that the war would not be won if the tribesmen of R’uvein and Gad did not take part in it; he believed that the Land would be conquered in accordance with God’s promise, no matter how many tribes participated in it. Moshe’s concern was with the ethical implications of the two tribes abstaining from a war that should be fought by all Israel. The conquest of Eretz Yisrael was not incumbent only on those people who planned to live in the Land. It was, in the eyes of Moshe, the culmination of the drama of redemption that should be acted out in full by all the tribes that came out of Egypt. (Rabbi Pinchas Peli, “Torah Today,” p. 191)
3. Among American Jews today, there are a great many Zionists, especially in the Orthodox world, people deeply devoted to the State of Israel. And there are great many liberals, especially in the secular Jewish world, people deeply devoted to human rights for all people, Palestinians included. But the two groups are increasingly distinct. Particularly in the younger generations, fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal. One reason is that the leading institutions of American Jewry have refused to foster — indeed, have actively opposed — a Zionism that challenges Israel’s behavior in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and toward its own Arab citizens. For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead. (Peter Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010)

Sparks for Discussion

Although the tribes of R’uvein and Gad asked for and received permission to settle east of the Jordan, they still were required to join the other Israelites in the fight to conquer Canaan. Rabbi Pinchas Peli explains that this was a matter of Jewish unity, that the conquest of the Promised Land was the job of all Israelites. There has been much discussion about Peter Beinart’s article, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” in which he argues that young American Jews are turning away from Zionism because their understanding of Israel’s politics and policies conflicts with their liberal values. Do you agree? What do Jews in the Diaspora owe to Israel? Must we always support Israel, right or wrong? Is it appropriate to criticize Israel publicly, or should our criticism be voiced only within the Jewish community? What does it mean to be a Zionist today?