

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

unreasonable and inexplicable love that leads God from jealousy to rage and back to forgiveness without very much logic or explanation at all.

Generations of Jews have struggled to understand our role as the chosen objects of this wild and powerful passion. As “The Chosen People,” what we are chosen to do? What does that mean for our relationship with God, ourselves, and others? Sarah Hurwitz suggests that “A better name for us would be ‘the choosing people’ - the people who choose to accept a particular covenant with the Divine, and who must continue choosing, in each new generation, to honor it” (Sarah Hurwitz, *Here All Along*, 25). Her point is well taken. Being chosen is only meaningful if we choose to respond to it. We learn a similar lesson from the extra-biblical text of the Harry Potter series. Those of you who have read “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince” will remember that Harry is particularly troubled by Sybill Trelawney’s prophecy identifying him as “The Chosen One.” However, Dumbledore later explains this prophecy is not binding on any of the people it mentions. Rather, “what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so....Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him – and, in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dangerous to him. It only has power if people choose to listen to it” (Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, chapter 23).

Similarly, our role as God’s Chosen People only has significance if we choose to respond to it in a meaningful way. Our chosenness is not elitist: Moshe made it clear that God didn’t choose us because we’re the biggest or the best. And our chosenness is not conditional: God’s choice does not depend on us completing a specific task or being an exceptionally good example for everyone else. God chose to love us because God loves us. But like the prophecy about Harry Potter, that choice only has power if we do something back. This is why Moshe is so emphatic about the mitzvot. Living life in accordance with the commandments is the best way Moshe believes we can respond to God’s choice. God will love us either way, but without the mitzvot God is just some poor sap running around pining after us. To borrow a metaphor from Rabbi Heschel, if we don’t do the mitzvot, God will be searching for man indefinitely! Unrequited love really isn’t that fun for anyone. Fulfilling the mitzvot is our way of reciprocating this great, inexplicable love from God.



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TORAH SPARKS

Devarim

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Annual I (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22) Etz Hayyim, p. 981

Triennial I (Deuteronomy 1:1-2:1) Etz Hayyim, p. 981

Haftarah I (Isaiah 1:1-27) Etz Hayyim, p. 1000

The Choosing People

Rabbi Allison Poirer, *Temple Beth Sholom in Framingham MA, CY 2016*

After forty years of wandering, this final book of the Torah opens with the Israelites assembled on the Plains of Moav, poised to enter the Promised Land. Moshe delivers a farewell speech in which he strives to both mourn and celebrate, encourage and warn them. He delivers a humbling description of their origins, saying, “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you. Indeed, you are the smallest of peoples! But it was because the Lord loved you passionately, and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the Lord freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh, King of Egypt” (Devarim 7:7-8).

According to this description, God freed the Israelites and brought them to the Promised Land because of the strange, powerful, passionate, and dangerous love God has for them. In describing God’s love of the Israelites, Moshe uses the word “שֶׁחֶם” meaning that God “set God’s heart” on them, using the same word that describes the unbridled passion that Shechem felt for Dinah. This is an

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D'var Haftarah: The Sins that Lead to Destruction

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives

The Shabbat preceding Tisha b'Av is marked with the reading of the first chapter of Isaiah for its haftarah. This chapter offers little to no solace. It is filled almost entirely with rebuke and chastisement, a cascade of painful reflections on the illnesses which ate away at the soul and flesh of the nation's body politic. No comparison could have been more biting than comparing the nation to the biblical paradigm of depravity – the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Hear the word of the Lord, you chieftains of Sodom; Give ear to our God's instruction, you folk of Gomorrah!" (verse 10)

In the popular mindset, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are associated with sexual depravity and licentiousness. In contrast, Rabbi David Kimche (13th century Provence) captures the rabbinic mindset in his explanation of the verse from Isaiah: "For the chieftains of the people were similar to the chieftains of Sodom and Gomorrah, in cheating the poor and in perverting justice. And the people were similar to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in their evil deeds." The crimes that caused God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah were economic and legal. The nation had failed to create a just and fair society. No one was concerned that people were hungry or forced to live in the street or had no work while others lived in opulence. Those who were not wanting insured that the system guaranteed the perpetuation of this norm. Kimche sensed that these were the same sins which afflicted the nation at the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

The rabbis used didactic stories about the events in Sodom to try to change the attitude of those who found this norm acceptable. For example: "Rabbi Judah said: They issued a proclamation in Sodom, saying, "Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor and the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire!" Pelotit the daughter of Lot was wedded to one of the wealthy men of Sodom. She saw a certain very poor man in the street of the city and her soul was grieved on the account. What did she do? Every day when she went out to draw water, she put in her pitcher all kinds of provisions from her house and she sustained that poor man. The men of Sodom said: "How does this poor man live?" When they ascertained the facts they brought her forth to be burnt by fire. She said: God of the world! Maintain my right and my cause at the hands of the men of Sodom! And her cry ascended before the throne of glory. In that hour the Holy One Blessed be He said: "I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to her cry which is come unto me" and if the men of Sodom have done according to the cry of the young woman, I will turn her foundation upwards and the surface downward. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 25) Through this sort of prism the sages weighed the tragedies which befell the Jewish people on Tisha b'Av. They, like Isaiah, intuited that the only cure for the ills that befell the Jewish people on this tragic day were in the building of a just and fair society where a parody like this little rabbinic anecdote would no longer contain an element of truth.

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Telling It All Over Again?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

Text: Devarim 1:1-5

(1) These are the words that Moshe spoke to all the Israelites across the Jordan; in the wilderness, in the Arava opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel... (2) Eleven days from Horeb by way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh-Barnea. (30) And it was in the 40th year, in the 11th month on the 1st of the month, Moshe spoke to the Israelites according to all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them. (5) Across the Jordan in the land of Moab did Moses undertake to expound this teaching...

- This is the opening of the book of Devarim, the last of the 5 books of the Torah. Based on its opening, how does it seem to differ from the previous ones?
- Where is this book spoken? Why do you think that Moshe goes through the history of the traveling until arriving there, as well as the exact date when he began speaking?
- What do you expect Moshe to say to the Israelites on the eve of them entering the land, which he knows that he will not enter, but rather die seeing it from afar?

Commentary: Ibn Ezra Devarim 1:3

*Scripture says **eleven days** to tell us that Moshe spoke these words during those eleven days wherein they traveled from Horev to Qadesh Barnea. ...the spies started out from Qadesh Barnea [see Numbers 32:8]. After God swore that they would not enter the land, no new commandments were given until the fortieth year.*

- What picture do we get of the 40 year period in the desert and the delivery of the Mitzvot?

Commentary: Ramban's introduction to the book of Devarim

This book... in which Moshe our Master will clarify for the generation entering the land most of the Mitzvot of the Torah needed by Israel...And he will also add in this book a few Mitzvot that have not been mentioned at all,... for all of them were already told to him at Sinai or in the Tent of Meeting in the first year, prior to the spies,... but the Mitzvot were not written in the earlier books that he spoke to those who exited Egypt, for perhaps they were only applicable in the land...

- Ramban suggests that some Mitzvot were not taught previously. Why? How would you define the pedagogy Moshe implements when teaching Mitzvot and Torah? What do you think of it?
- Do you see any modern cases that should consider a similar approach?