

D'var Torah on Parshat D'varim

By

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One of the highlights of my recent trip to Israel was my visit to Yad v'Shem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. Now, I have to confess to you that I am one of those people who is reluctant to go to a Holocaust Museum, but I had heard that Yad v'Shem was well worth the visit, particularly in light of its recent renovation, which was completed in 2005. The two aspects of my visit that made it special were 1) the emphasis on the "Righteous Among Nations," the non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. 2) the architecture, part of the multimedia presentation of the history of the Holocaust. The building is triangular, built into a mountain. You start at the lowest point and work your way up an incline through the rooms, which are dark and cavernous until the last room, the highest point, which is flooded with sunlight from an open window overlooking a stunning panorama of Jerusalem. I left Yad v'Shem feeling elated and not depressed. It was special because of the mingling of the most tragic of events in our history with the hope and miracle of the modern state of Israel.

Tonight, we begin Tisha B'Av when we remember the destruction of the temples. History is important to the survival of the Jewish people. On Tisha B'Av, we remember other tragedies that occurred in our history starting from the worshipping of the Golden Calf, the loss of faith in God by the Israelites when the spies returned from the promised land with a bad report, the Bar Kochba revolt, the expulsion from England in 1290, the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the formation of the ghetto in Rome in 1555. Like Yad V'Shem, Tisha B'Av is a holiday where we remember and mourn the saddest times in our history, but those sad memories are mixed with hope for the continued survival of our people. The fact that we mourn the destruction of the first temple 2500 years later is a celebration in a sense that we have survived as a people and as a people that remembers its history.

History is important to the Jewish people because remembering our history is what keeps us together as a people. History also embodies the Jewish faith; our religion is inextricably bound to our history as that history tells of the relationship between us and God, beginning with the exodus from Egypt. And our history

carries moral lessons that we can live by. In parshat D'varim, Moses recounts to the Israelite people the events during the 40 years of wandering in the desert.

The Israelites camped in 42 different places, a fact that Rashi interpreted as proof that God protected them in the wilderness, that is they didn't perish but lived to settle in 42 different places. The years in the desert had many stable, peaceful times punctuated, however, with discontent, loss of faith, and revolts.

To me, the wandering in the desert is a metaphor for all of our history. Like the years in the desert, in our history we faced many challenging times interspersed with periods where we flourished as a people.

Moses in a sense was the first Jewish historian and like all historians, he interprets history to deliver a moral lesson. This is seen in this week's parshah in his retelling of the spy story. I was lead to examine the spy story by Eliezer Diamond. I talked to him at the Meah picnic and when I mentioned that I was giving a d'var Torah on D'varim, he said (I felt like I was in The Graduate, when the man says "plastics") "Check out the spy story, it s not the same spy story..." I saw that the spy story Moses tells in D'varim is not the same story as we learn it in Ba'midbar (Numbers). In the first spy story, God tells Moses to send spies to

scout out the promised land. Moses sends leaders from the tribes. When they come back, only Joshua and Caleb tell of a bountiful land. The other spies tell of terrifying giants inhabiting the land. The people lose faith in God and do not enter the land out of fear. They are then left to wander in the desert for 38 more years. In D'varim, the people ask Moses to send spies to scout out the land. It is not the tribal leaders that go, but people from every tribe. When they come back, they present a positive report of a fruitful land of great bounty. The people hear this report, but do not believe it and start murmuring about giants inhabiting the land. In their fear, they show that they have no faith in God. It is easier for them to believe evil things about the land. Nehama Leibowitz says that Moses retells the spy story like this in order to teach a lesson. He wants to teach that it is not the leaders who are responsible for the evil reports. Every Israelite man and woman was accountable for not believing in God and the goodness of the promised land. It is the responsibility of every individual to hear the report and decide for himself whether or not to enter the land. It occurred to me today in *Bible ba Boker* that this is analogous to the time when the Temple was destroyed. The destruction of the temples meant that the priests would no longer be in charge of worshipping God, sacrificing animals on behalf of the people.

Instead of leaders communicating with God on behalf of the people, every person in post-temple Judaism is responsible for praying to God as an individual. To bring this idea full circle, during the Holocaust it was every individual's obligation to act morally and do whatever was possible to save lives.

Nechama Leibowitz writes, "To sum up: what Moses did in our sidra was to interpret the historical events recounted in Numbers. He showed the descendants of those who had left Egypt, the sons of those who had forfeited the right to enter the promised land through their own misdoing, that, in the last resort, every individual is responsible for the misdeeds of the group. Each one is obliged to resist evil and do good, and not excuse himself on the ground that he was influenced by his colleague or superior or even leader. Each individual has ultimately to be his own leader, responsible for his every action and not just a cog in the vast machine called society."

Here we see the lesson of history. Just as each Israelite was responsible to decide for himself whether or not to believe the bad report of the spies, each of us is responsible for our personal relationship to God and for doing the right thing when challenged. As we mark Tisha B'Av starting tonight, let us remember the

importance of history to the survival of the Jewish people, as the story of our relationship to God, and for its lessons on how to live more moral lives.