



Parashat D'varim, Shabbat Hazon: The Darkest Hour

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Dear Friends,

We have reached the book of D'varim (Deuteronomy), the last and final book of the Torah. The entire book is Moshe's parting speech. In exactly one month he will take leave of his People, climb to the top of Mount Nevo, see the Promised Land, and end his life's journey with a Divine kiss.

Moshe speaks to a nation that did not know Pharaoh or Mount Sinai; a generation of free nomads. Moshe tells this generation about the period that preceded them, stories of their heritage. The order in which he chooses to relate the stories is odd. **Moshe's historic narrative begins with leaving Mount Sinai.** It then continues with the story of the 12 scouts and the calamity that followed.

(Deuteronomy, Chapter 1) 'These are the words [D'varim] which Moses spoke unto all Israel...The LORD our God spoke to us in Horeb [Mount Sinai], saying: 'You have dwelt long enough at this Mountain; turn and take your journey... [and they did].

[Shortly thereafter...] And you came near to me, every one of you, and you said: 'Let us send men before us, that they may search the Land for us, and bring us back word of the path which we must take, and the cities to which we shall come.'...And indeed they brought us back word, and they said: 'Good is the land which the LORD our God gives to us.' Yet, you would not go up. You rebelled against the commandment of the LORD your God, and you murmured in your tents...

Then I said to you: 'Dread not, neither be afraid of them [the Canaanites]. The LORD your God who goes before you, He shall fight for you, as He did for you in Egypt before your very own eyes; and in the wilderness too, you have seen how that the LORD your God carried you... **Yet, it is in**

this that you do not believe the LORD your God, who went before you...'

Moshe's version of history does not begin with the creation of the world, nor does it begin with Avraham, the first Hebrew. It does not even begin with the story of the Exodus.

Why? Why begin at the moment of departure from Mt. Sinai?

In the Creation story, as well as with Avraham, and certainly in the Exodus, **God was very much present**. Moshe's account begins at the moment in which Bnei Yisrael are told to take leave, to abandon God's Presence! The story - every story - begins when they - we - leave the safe and secure haven.

The inevitable fall happened immediately thereafter: they quickly lost faith, trust, and any sense of guidance and hope.

Indeed, every meaningful journey begins at the point in which we lose "sight" of God! We've all been there. The times in which we feel God is not present are difficult! We feel lost. We are restless. We are anxious.

Our Sages tell us that God is all encompassing. Maimonides reminds us that all is God, and there is nothing but God. Yet, how many of us really feel that? How many truly experience the all-encompassing God?

I would like to suggest that losing sight of God is a prerequisite to human growth and evolution.

But why leave God's safe and comforting presence if the fall that follows is inevitable (and it is)?

God's presence is... well... boring! It is too safe, too stagnant! In God's presence there is no growth. Human curiosity cannot stand it. It was Eve's (healthy) curiosity that set the scene for the great drama which caused her and Adam to be expelled from the comfort of God's presence in the first place. Indeed, the "Original Fall" (a new term...) was driven by human curiosity.

Every toddler who starts crawling, then walking, then running is re-enacting that same primal move - leaving the safe and loving parental hug, to go out and explore the exciting and challenging world that lays beyond the safe pale.

However, shortly thereafter, as the excitement and novelty wear off (because they always do), the toddler - whether one years old, or fifty - will seek a safe haven again. We always need a place to call home. We Jews call this process T'shuva (returning). While toddlers quickly return to their parents' outstretched arms - thus learning that it is safe to go out and seek new horizons, because there will always be loving arms to return to - teenagers and adults don't always return. In fact, at some point they just don't! But they, too, like the toddler, will, after a while, seek that safe haven again to nestle in. Only this time, instead of returning to the starting point - Mom and Dad's loving arms - they will seek out a higher plane to call home! Perhaps a nest they will build themselves, a home to share with their loved ones and raise their toddlers...

The cycle of leaving the safe haven and then nesting again in a more elevated safe haven, only to leave it again for some more growth and excitement, is the psychological engine which powers all human journeys. The goal of this journey, however, is NOT the safe haven, nor is it curiosity. They are just the operating forces. The goal is the ever-evolving Self, that seeks to grow and Become, and discover what it's made of.

The spiritual language of this psychological process talks about losing and rediscovering God. Over and over again.

We have to lose sight of God in order to grow and evolve, and then seek God again, only this time, as we evolve, we discover a greater and far more evolved God.

When the young Ya'akov flees from his mother's tent, he loses God. The God that he loses is a warm and maternal God - in the image of his own mother. Alone for the first time in his life, he has a dream. In his dream he encounters a "new" God, the God of his father and grandfather. The God of journeying and guidance. When he awakens he says: God has been in the place all the along, but I did not know. But now he knows. He marks that spot, for he knows he will want to return to it (we always cherish and remember the places where we encounter God) and leaves again. As he leaves he loses that God too. He again sinks into faithlessness and despair. Twenty years later he will encounter an even more "evolved" God, one of strength and courage. That God will give him his new name, Israel, and history will never be the same again.

The Shabbat before Tisha B'av is called "Shabbat Hazon", meaning a Shabbat of Vision, named after the first verse of the Haftorah.

These are difficult times in Israel! We are looking around us in dismay and disgust. Eisav is after us and Lavan's deceit is at it again! Difficult times are a sign that we have lost sight of God. God maybe ever-present and all-encompassing, but we are not. Yet now we know, difficult times are but a wake-up call for a new vision of God. Difficult times are a sign that we are evolving, and that we will find God again.

We are all Ya'akov - smart, mostly righteous, but also fragile, confused and guilt-ridden, and a little bit scared. We have to climb God's ladder, one rung at a time. Draw from the wisdom of our ancestors, from the visions of our prophets, and from the faith of our elders. They will all tell us: if God is nowhere in sight, chances are that you are out there growing! You are evolving! You are still Becoming - Becoming Israel! And... you will prevail! And just before you do, you will find a new vision of God.

It's worth it.

And you may be sure - the whole world will be blessed when you do.

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of deep vision.

Elisha

P.S. This year our Kehillah will be marking Tisha B'Av evening together in Jerusalem, so we will not have our traditional community reading of Eicha here in Zichron Yaakov. If you want to join, please call the office or send us an email.