

## Inspiration from Parshat Devarim / Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

This week we plunge into the final book. It is final, not only because it is the fifth and the last of the five. It represents a whole new phase, a new understanding. Perhaps even a great Tikkun (healing) of all that we thought was broken in our lives.

The book is called Devarim, the book of "things", or "words" (otherwise known in Greek as Deuteronomy).

Not much actually happens in this book. Just a lot of talking. In Chapter 1, verse 3, we read: "And it came to pass in the fortieth year, in the eleventh month [Adar], on the first day of the month [one week before Moses dies], that Moses spoke unto the children of Israel...].

Moses is about to die, and he is parting from the People of Israel. Those standing before him were born in the desert. They did not know Egypt. Did not walk in dismay through the Sea of Reeds. Did not stand bewildered at Sinai

Moses, therefore, gives a brief course in "Jewish History 101". He moves on to summarize the basic tenets of the Torah and the essence of their heritage, in order to prepare them to enter the Land.

In Bamidbar (Numbers) Moses tried to transform slaves into a nation of free people. Here, in Devarim, he hopes to transform this free, wild, nomadic, tent-dwelling rabble into respectable home owners, responsible farmers, and moral leaders of civilized settlements.

It is interesting to notice what Moses chose to relate to the People. Each generation chooses to teach its story based on the ideology it believes in. the story we tell is not really historical truth. It is, rather, **a very accurate description of that generation's current consciousness**. The connection between the stories we tell and "what really happened" is flimsy at best, and so it should be.

What details does Moses give? What does he emphasize? What does he neglect to mention?

Here is the first hint: "On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses took upon himself to expound (*Ba'er*) this law..." (Chapter 1,5).

Moses, who was slow of speech, and of a slow tongue, begins the speech of his life. Finally! Moses has learned to speak!

But what does he say?

Moses is expounding (*ba'er*) the Torah!!!

I know, I am a man of exclamation marks. But these are the three most important exclamation marks I have ever typed.

Do you remember that Moses' sister, Miriam, died recently?

Do you remember that there was no water to drink immediately following her death?

Do you remember that the Sages concluded that Miriam was the well (*be'er*) that escorted the People on their journey in the desert, and that it dried up when she died?

Do you remember that Moses then received a strange divine order shortly afterwards - to **speak** to the rock and extract water from it?

But, alas, Moses did not yet know how to speak. Remember? Forty years earlier, upon receiving his life mission, at the age of 79, he only knew how to say: "Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, never have been, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue".

God then draws Moses' attention to his staff.

Indeed, God tells Moses, you're not. Aaron will speak, you be the man of the **staff!**

For forty years Moses did what he did best and he did it over and over again, many many times: he raised his staff and performed miracles. God delivered the people with an "strong hand and an outstretched arm", and He did it through the might of Moses' staff. The staff turned into a snake, it plagued Egypt time after time, it parted the Sea of Reeds, and then it struck the rock until water poured forth. But this final miracle, amazing as it was, was the one strike that God did not command, the final strike that prevented Moses from crossing the threshold into the Promised Land.

Miriam was a prophetess of words ("ba'er Miriam"). "Ba'er" in Hebrew is both to expound and interpret but also a well). Miriam died, and Moses was asked to learn her secret lesson.

And now we read how, miraculously, Moses doesn't just speak, he expounds – ba'er.

**Moses turns the Torah into a well! Moses turns this difficult Torah, hewn in stone, into a well of life-giving water!**

He who knows how to interpret the Torah has found the source of the life-giving well. The deeper the interpretation, the more rejuvenating the water. And the closer the water is to the core of existence, the deeper the vitality of spirit.

Devarim ("words" or "speech") is, therefore, Moses' great Tikkun. He begins to interpret his life's journey; to finally comprehend the deep understanding that is to be found in the depths of the well, and to pass it on.

It is not possible to heal that which has been broken. It is possible only to understand the deep wisdom that lies in our broken past. And when we understand, we realize that perhaps nothing was actually broken. It simply was. And God was there all along, even when we didn't see Him; even when we thought all was lost, all was broken. As we will see – indeed, God was there all along.

And so Moses begins to draw water from the well of living water and to quench the great thirst of the People. The staff is not mentioned again – only words. Only the deep understanding that comes from the depths of the well.

And the first message that Moses brings forth from the depths is the meaning of the whole story: the journey. But of course!

**6** "The LORD our God spoke unto us in Horeb, saying: 'You have dwelt long enough in this mountain; **7** turn, and take your journey... **8** Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them."

Moses did not begin the story with the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, or the building of the Tabernacle; but rather with the forced separation from the Mountain of God. The Children of Israel spent an entire year at the foot of that mountain, connected by an umbilical cord to the Source of Life. And they were very comfortable there.

And then, as in the story of Creation, as in the stories of our Forefathers, as in all stories of journeys, there is banishment and the beginning of a journey. This is what Moses draws forth from the well. God says "Enough. You have been here too long. It is time to go and be on your way."

This is the first commandment of Devarim! It parallels the first commandment given to Abraham: Lech Lecha – go forth, leave your land, your birthplace and from your father's house (similar to "You have dwelt long enough in this mountain. Turn, and take your journey..."), to the Land which I will show you (similar to: "go and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers").

Every great story of human journeying is same.

This is how the journey begins. But how does it end?

Moses – man, prophet, prototype, wise – teaches us that too, right at the get go: (chapter 1): "**31** and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the LORD thy God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went, until you arrived unto this place."

There are days when the journey of life seems more like a journey in an endless desert. But the truth be told, says Moses, that while you thought you were bearing the burdens of your long life's journey on your own, God was actually there bearing you. God has been there with you the whole time, bringing you unto this place.

Yes, Moses' journey is ending.

He put down his staff and spoke.

He spoke and interpreted, spoke and expounded.

And from that interpretation (Be'er, well), water poured forth,

Water which quenches the thirst of all who are on a journey.

And the deeper the interpretation

The sweeter the water.

Until that final kiss.

Shabbat shalom,

Elisha