

Parashat Devarim: Three Buckets of Wisdom

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

This week we begin the book of Devarim.

Moshe is parting from Am Yisrael. Before him stands a generation that did not know bondage. His final task is to transform this unruly group of wanderers into responsible landowners and farmers, in anticipation of their entrance to the Promised Land.

“On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching.” (1: 5) In Hebrew, the root of “expound” or “explain” is ר.א.ב, the exact same word as “well” (of water). Hence, Torah study is the art of drawing forth pure, life-giving water from the depth.

The first “bucket” of wisdom which Moshe draws from the well is one of parting and banishment: **“The LORD our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Start out and make your way...”** (1:6-7) Just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, so too, Bnei Yisrael are banished from Mount Horev, the mountain of God, where they received the Torah and where they believed God dwelled. They are to learn that God is everywhere - He is not limited to a mountain or a wall. He is the vitality life, sustaining every cell, every molecule, and every atom.

The second “bucket” of wisdom is also a message of parting: **“Thereupon I said to you, “I can no longer bear the burden of you by myself.”** (1:9) Our life journey begins in total dependency, we are nurtured and cared for in order to survive. As we mature, we have to carry forth the burden of life, with the heritage and teachings we received as guides. Moshe is preparing Bnei Yisrael for his impending death.

The third “bucket” of wisdom is the most vitalizing. While banishment and parting are integral to life’s journey, their real goal is to help us discover that we are never really alone. **“... in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled, until you came to this place.”** (1:31)

There are days when life’s journey feels like a lonely trek in the wilderness, bearing the burdens of your life on your own. But you are not alone. Somewhere along the way you discover that in fact you yourself have been carried all along...

“The Lord your God” is not an external being with a long beard and white robe. God is not owned by the “religious” and is not on the Rabbinat’s payroll. God is vitality itself; the water of life, the source of all creation. God is present, flowing, and sustaining everything. God’s vitality is concealed from our human sight, because the brain can see only God’s footprints on the sand of creation. God is both totally zealous to God’s self, and completely compassionate, all at the same time. God is both universal and personal.

Divine vitality does not require conversion (גיור), but does require expounding (ביאור).

Expounding (באר) the Torah is the Hebrew journey to the well (באר) of life - the source of all existence.

May it be a meaningful Tisha B’av, replenishing the wells of love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha