

Devarim

Parashat Devarim, the beginning of the final book of the Torah, opens at a momentous occasion in Jewish history. After 400 years of slavery; after witnessing G-d's intervention in human history to redeem the Jews bringing 10 plagues to the Egyptians and participating in the exodus from Egypt walking on dry land through the Red Sea; after perceiving the word of God at Sinai; after disappointing God and Moses with their lack of faith with the incidents of the Golden Calf, the spies, and the advocacy for the return to the fleshpots of Egypt; after wandering in the desert for nearly 40 years; after all of the exodus generation had died off, save Joshua and Caleb; the offspring of the slaves were now ready to enter the land of Israel. The land promised to our forefathers.

Moses is not going with them into the land; so he has one last chance to address this group of special people, this wandering generation. What does with this opportunity? It is all in the book of Devarim. Moses does three things in this series of speeches. First, he rebukes this wandering generation of Jews for the lack of faith shown by their parents'. Second, he recapitulates all of the laws that they will need to govern their lives when once they enter the Land of Israel. Finally, he blesses them and presents them with a song to celebrate their impending entrance into the land before he departs from the scene.

In this week's parasha, Moses tells this first generation of future Israelites to do two things. First, take the land, by force if necessary; and second, as soon as you settle, establish a system of justice. While the land of Israel is "owned" by God, we know from parashat Pinchas that the land is to be divided between the Jewish People in such a way that each family receives an equal portion. Tribes that have larger numbers get more land, smaller tribes less, so that the amount of land can be divided equally between all families. While we know that while the family unit is typically defined as having a male head of household, the story of the daughters of Zelophechad teaches, that in fact, the family unit can exist, even without a male head, as long as its daughters marry within their tribe so that the land remains part tribal land. This concept of equality applies not just to land, but to income and wealth as well. In other parts of the Torah, we are given laws designed to redistribute income, such as the laws of peah, leket and shichecha entitling the poor to glean the corners of the fields, and to take dropped or forgotten sheaves; of ma'aser sheni, where the community is taxed to provide for the poor in years three and six of the shmittah cycle; of shmittah, where debts are remitted every seven years, to rebalance income

between families; and yovel, where ancestral land is returned to families, as a mechanism to rebalance the equality of land ownership and wealth between families.

The Jews are told in Devarim to establish a tiered system of justice, with judges over 1,000s, 100s, 50s and 10s, similar to our system of federal, state, county and city courts. This system of justice must be incorruptible, so Moses cautions that neither the rich nor the poor can be favored. The powerful should not oppress the poor or weak, nor should the majority, even if poor, band together to confiscate the rightful earnings of the successful.

A Jewish system of justice has been proscribed to establish equality of outcome from the outset, with built-in mechanisms to rebalance the system, if and when some become rich, and others become poor, through rightful means. The logic of this system is that equality is essential to promote brotherhood between Jews and between tribes, and provide individual freedom essential to allow families to remain autonomous and to thrive.

The book of Exodus tells us a good deal about the generation of those who left Egyptian slavery and their backsliding from freedom, but we are not told much about the generation born in the wilderness. These wanderers never lived under slavery; they never experienced the threat of having all of their male children murdered; they have eaten manna for every meal of their lives; they have witnessed miracles, and the presence of God in the form of a pillar of cloud, even if they were born after Sinai and didn't witness revelation directly. But we are not told much about their psychological make up. Were they scarred like the children of Holocaust survivors, carrying around the guilt of survival, and neuroses that served as survival mechanisms passed down from parent to child? Did they reject the worldview of their parents, and as a result of living in freedom become self-assured, and zealous followers of God? It is very hard to know for sure, but it very likely that there were a variety of types among the wandering generation. We get a small glimpse of this at the end of the last parasha, where we learn that the tribes of Gad and Reuven were not interested in crossing the Jordan to live in the Promised Land. They preferred Chutz L'Aretz, and to support their Israeli brethren militarily, but not with their presence in the land.

While it may be impossible to know exactly what the wandering generation was like, it may be possible to study another period of Jewish history, and learn about the psychological make up of more recent Jewish pioneers who entered the Land of Palestine to establish a state of Israel.

It struck me that the situation the wandering generation found themselves in is in many ways similar to the Jews of Eastern Europe after the turn of the 20th Century. Both were driven from their countries as a result of oppression and faced the opportunity to settle the land promised to our forefathers; a land that was forbidding, inhospitable, barren and dangerous, while being marketed as flowing with milk and honey. Neither were particularly prepared to make the transition from slavery to freedom, or from proletariat or intellectual to farmer and warrior.

What do we know about the young generation of chalutzim that went to Palestine in the Second Aliyah, during first two decades of the twentieth century to found the state of Israel? What allowed them to have the courage to break with their families, face terrible conditions and certain danger to move to Palestine. One thing we know was that there was a wide generation gap that existed between the parents and the children, as described in books such as Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Many of the Jewish youth rejected the bourgeois lifestyle of their parents, and their craven unwillingness to stand up to the anti-Semitism they witnessed in the pogroms and Jewish massacres in Eastern Europe. Many saw the answer to the Jewish question in a combination of Socialism and Zionism. They were willing to leave the comfort of their middle class homes, and move to a backward country that their "spies" told them was filled with swamps, malaria and an unaccepting local population. They lacked Moses, but instead crafted a blueprint that was one part Theodore Herzl and another part Karl Marx. They were inspired by the words in 1907 of Yosef Vitkin, a school teacher who moved from Eastern Europe to the Galil and chided them:

What was required now was simple courage, a mighty joint effort of "chalutziut," of pioneering. The major cause of our blundering is our search for a shortcut, and our belief that the attainment of our goal is close at hand. Of this belief we have built castles in the air and have turned aside with contempt from the longer and harder road, which is perhaps the surest, and, in the end, the shortest. Awake, O youth of Israel! Come to the aid of your people. Your people lies in agony. Rush to its side. Band together; discipline yourselves for life and death; forget all

the precious bonds of your childhood; leave them behind without a shadow of regret, and answer the call of your people.

This is the kind of Shakespearean St. Crispin's Day speech we would have expected to hear from Moses on the other side of the Jordan. Motivated, and with a plan, the proletarian and intellectual chalutzim boldly crossed the Jordan to re-establish a Jewish State in Palestine for the first time in 2000 years. Melford Spiro in his book *Children of the Kibbutz* describes the chalutzim of the first kibbutzim as follows:

Eastern European Jews motivated by the desire to escape from the anti-Semitism to which European Jewry was heir, by the dream of reconstituting the Jewish people as a Nation in its ancient homeland, by the conviction that physical-and particularly, agricultural-labor was the noblest means to self-expression, and by the zeal to establish a society based on freedom and equality.

The kibbutzim they came to establish were characterized by group living, communal ownership, and cooperative enterprise. All land is owned by the Jewish National Fund, an arm of the Jewish Agency, which rents it to the kibbutz on a long-term lease for a nominal fee; and all capital goods are owned by the kibbutz, although individuals possess a few personal effects. Kibbutz collectivism is predicated on moral rather than on pragmatic grounds. Zealously devoted to the ideals of brotherhood, equality and freedom, the kibbutz believes that these can best be implemented in a collectivist community. Communal ownership, it is believed, prevents the development of economic classes and the inevitable social inequality that seems to characterize societies stratified by class. Similarly, cooperative enterprise is believed to promote brotherhood and freedom by muting the more vicious aspects of a competitive economy by precluding the rise of entrenched power and the of the exploitation which, it is believed accompanies the conjunction of power and privilege.

Decision making and justice was devolved to the lowest level, where the direct democracy of the kibbutz meeting was used to decide everything. While dissent was encouraged in the presentation of issues to the collective, but once a decision was reached by majority rule, all members of the kibbutz were expected to accept the majority's decision.

The result was remarkable. While today we often look back at the kibbutz movement as hopelessly naïve, or worse, dangerous in its attachment to the Soviet Union long after it was clear that Stalin was a monster, and not the friend of the international proletariat, and that the ideals of the kibbutz have not survived to today, even on the very kibbutzim where they were established, we must recognize that this wandering generation accomplished impossible and miraculous things. They drained the swamps, settled the land outside of the few cities that existed, learned to become farmers; promoted the rebirth of the Hebrew language; and provided the leadership in fighting for the establishment of the state in the war of Independence, and afterward, for decades in both the government and the IDF. The sacrifice of these superhuman everymen and courageous women laid the groundwork for the modern state of Israel, without which we would not have a state today.

So, can we learn anything from these 20th Century Sabras that provide an insight into Jews standing on the other bank of the Jordan listening to Moses' orations in Devarim? Maybe. Perhaps, settling Canaan required a rejection of the parents' experience and values to become ready for the struggles necessary to establish a Jewish state in the Land of Israel? Cruel as it may be, no one except Joshua and Caleb were deemed fit to make that transition between the two worlds. Also, despite some obvious differences between the system of rules and land ownership set forth by Moses, and those set forth by Marx and the JNF, there are also some striking similarities. Both systems placed a high premium on avoiding the creation of a permanent class of wealthy and powerful families. Both value work, independence, justice and freedom. Both promote a concept of brotherhood to a greater family. An overarching ideology that is both egalitarian, and promotes freedom and brotherhood is critical motivating the Jews to make the sacrifice necessary to conquer a land and sustain a country. Maybe the common thread is the combination of a generation ready to reject their parents' world, and adopting guiding principles of equality, freedom and brotherhood is the key to establishing and maintaining Jewish sovereignty?

The problem both then, and today, is once we go beyond this brave pioneering generation, can we get our people to accept and live by principals that will allow us to continue to value equality, freedom and brotherhood necessary to thrive and grow into the distant future.

Shabbat Shalom.