

DEVARIM – 2010

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Gut shabbos everyone.

Today I would like to talk with you about memories. Good memories. Bad memories. Memories that can help us learn, and memories we would just as soon sweep under the rug.

Is it possible to construct our experience so that our memories will be good ones?

Is it possible to reflect on a bad memory and learn from it?

If you look at Parashas Devarim it would seem the answer to both of these questions is yes.

We Jews are big on memories. A lot of our spiritual commitments are based on the memory of yitzias mitsrayim, the Exodus from Egypt. A lot of the commitments we make during the High Holy Days are based on the notion of Zichronot, memories. Modern Jewish giants such as Elie Weisel bid us never to forget when it comes to the Holocaust.

Well, it seems as though we have been using memories – building them and burnishing them, molding them and manipulating them – since the days of Moshe Rabbenu.

I also want to talk about those infamous 40 years of wandering in the wilderness between the Exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land. These two themes, the memories and the wanderings, come together in the first two sentences of Devarim:

“These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan -- Through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazereth, and Di-zahab, it is eleven days from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea by the Mount Seir route.”

The Israelites are at the gateway to the Promised Land. Moses is giving them instructions and guidance on living in the Promised Land, for a time when he will not be there to help them. These are not the same people who were freed from Egyptian slavery, however. That event had happened forty years earlier by the time Moses spoke the words we read in Devarim, and almost all of that generation was gone.

Thirty eight years earlier, the people had been encamped in Kadesh-barnea on the western border of Israel. It was the gateway to the Promised Land and Moses points out to them that a normal traveler could reach Kadesh-barnea from Mount Sinai in 11 days. They left the wilderness of Sinai in the second year. They spent the next 38 years circling around to the eastern side of Israel, battling various enemies, and were now near the Jordan by Mt. Nevo. So that is 40 years for a journey that could have taken about 11 days. In fact, when the time came, it is said that G-d speeded the Israelites to Kadesh in only three days.

So it must have been painfully obvious that when Moses told the people that the Israelites had taken 40 years to make an 11 day trip, Moses was not paying them a compliment.

Now if you look closely at the lines I quoted, what Moses said was that it was an 11 days journey “by the Mount Seir route.” According to the Hertz chumash this is about 160 to 170 miles along a certain track. But this comment can be seen not just geographically but metaphorically. If the Children of Israel had taken the most direct

route, they could have accomplished the journey in 11 days, but doing it the way they did it required 38 years.

Well, how did they do it? This is where the memory part starts to come in.

Rashi points out that the geographical names that I read before can all be associated with places where the Children of Israel provoked G-d. For example, Arabah refers to the place where the Israelites engaged in idolatry and adultery with the Midianite women. Suph refers to Yam Suph, the Red Sea, where the Israelites did some of their infamous grumbling about how bad they had it. Some of these names do not even correspond to known physical locations, for example, Di-Zachav; however, the word refers to gold and is taken to refer to the incident of the Golden Calf. Some other names refer to Korach's rebellion and the failure of will of the scouts sent into Canaan.

Rashi believed that Moses used these allusions to avoid offending the Children of Israel, by being too much "in-your-face" about their failings. He is, though, bringing up these memories to drive home the connection between disappointing G-d and an unfulfilling journey through life.

Having completed his introduction, Moses again calls on memory. He enters into a discussion, much lengthier and more explicit, of these and other significant events that happened since the Children of Israel received the Ten Commandments. I will just name these in a nutshell:

- 1- More instances of grumbling and bickering. Moses could not alone bear the burden of refereeing their quarrels. He was obliged to set up a whole system of subordinate judges.

2- He refers again to the spies who went into Canaan and came back with a defeatist report. He recounts the people's initial refusal to fight, and their about-face when it was too late.

3- Moses then recalls passing through the lands of various other nations, and either leaving them alone or conquering them, according to G-d's dictate.

4- And then, if we peek ahead to next Shabbat's parasha, we will find Moses completing this discourse with a reminder to observe G-d's ethical and ritual laws.

This is quite a speech, using memory to influence the future conduct of the Children of Israel for a time when they will be in Eretz Yisrael without Moses. In fact, either implicitly or explicitly Moses has reviewed almost all of the important events that occurred during that 38 year period since they all left Sinai.

All of this raises a couple of important questions. The first is, why was it that the Children of Israel had to take those 38 years instead of the 11-day journey by the Mount Seir route.

Often times we hear an explanation of this that focuses on the failings of the Israelites which Moses has mentioned. Emerging from Egypt, they retained a slave mentality. They grumbled. They still wanted to worship idols. They shrank from entering into the Promised Land. They didn't want to face the responsibilities and hardships that are as much a part of freedom as are its possibilities and fulfillments.

Perhaps so, but there may be more to it than that.

Let's face it. There's no way that the supreme high points – the peak experiences of the liberation from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah – were going to last, no matter what the circumstances. Life eventually takes on a more even keel, sometimes mundane

and humdrum. At some point in the process of building the nation of Israel, it's likely that the events reviewed by Moses – the low morale, disillusionment, backtracking and infighting – would set in. Similar trials might occur in the growth of any nation. But what if the Children of Israel had crossed the wilderness in 11 days, and all of these national growing pains had unfolded in Eretz Yisrael itself?

We've had enough tragic scenes in Jewish history, without having to add to them by starting off with, let us say, the Golden Calf or Korach's rebellion taking place in the Promised Land instead of the desert. The many negative associations of the 40 years of wandering would then have polluted our experience in Eretz Yisrael itself. In fact, many things might have gone even worse. As it was, these unfortunate events at least played themselves out in the rough equality and transient surroundings of the desert. Had they occurred after the Promised Land was settled, they would have been exacerbated by personal greed and selfishness because, we can be sure, at that point people were also jockeying for position and dividing up tribal lands in the new society.

Not only would that have been tougher for the Children of Israel then, but such an experience would also have affected future generations. There are references in the haftarah to Zion as the faithful city of old.

Passuk 21:

Alas, she has become a harlot,
The faithful city
That was filled with justice,
Where righteousness dwelt —
But now murderers.

Passuk 26:

I will restore your magistrates as of old,
And your counselors as of yore.

After that you shall be called
City of Righteousness, Faithful City.

We read this on occasion in the Prophets, a yearning for an earlier time before the Jews went astray in the land. If Israel had arrived in Canaan prematurely and only then worked out its problems, our history in the land would have been troubled from the word go. There would have been no Golden Age to look back upon for inspiration. It might have seemed that the lofty thoughts and aspirations expressed by Moshe Rabbenu were just an impossible ideal; had never in history succeeded in practice; and were not worth striving for.

As an example consider how different our own history would have been had we Americans surmounted and overcome the issue of slavery before we embarked on our own national experiment, instead of dragging slavery with us into our formation as an independent nation.

So I think one reason for those extra 40 years was not just that the generation of the Exodus was unfit for leadership, but that negative energy is inherent in national consolidation. Better that the negative energy be discharged before conditions start to harden in the new land.

The other important question that I see here is this. I said before that Moses had reviewed almost all of the important events that occurred during that 38 year period since they all left Sinai.

But there were two major exceptions.

He does not mention the time when he struck the rock to obtain water in the desert, disregarding G-d's command that he speak to the rock instead. And he does not

mention the violent deaths of the sons of Aaron (Nadav and Abihu), who died at the instance of G-d because they approached the altar with “alien fire.”

Sometimes things that are omitted are just as telling as the things that are said. Is there anything we can learn from these omissions?

By this point in his career, Moses is such an icon, so singular and outstanding, that it is hard to see him also as a human being, with the full range of aspirations, interests, emotions, weaknesses and anxieties that being human entails. But it seems likely that he omitted these events for very understandable human reasons.

It seems to me that he omitted these events because he is in conflict about them. They don't square with the religion he is preaching. He has consistently reminded the people that if they obey G-d and His laws, good things will happen, but if they do not it will be the opposite. However, when he thinks about how he struck the rock, he must focus on his own disobedience. He knows that it makes him look the hypocrite. How can he implore people to determine and serve G-d's will, and then react with impatience and selfishness when asked to do so himself?

Also, he is speaking to the Israelites when they are on the cusp of entering into Canaan. He has to confront his own feelings of anger, exasperation, and helplessness because, due to his disobedience, G-d is not allowing him to go with them despite his many years of peerless leadership.

Then there is the incident of Nadav and Abihu. You will also recall this one. G-d had given very precise instructions on how worship was to take place at the altar of the Tent of Meeting. In an ambiguous circumstance that I would interpret as a display of an excessive amount of piety, Nadav and Abihu approached the altar with what the Torah

refers to as “alien fire.” These members of the priestly tribe of Levi were struck dead by action of G-d, rendering Aaron, their father, speechless. The sons of Aaron, Moses’ own nephews, made a mistake while learning to be priests, and were struck dead? It is hard for us not to see this as disproportionate punishment. For Moses, this tragedy struck his own family. He must have asked himself why a G-d that he would worship, and commend to a nation, would behave in such fashion.

So I think we can understand why Moses would want to sweep these particular memories under the rug.

What can we learn from the memories of the 40 years in the wilderness, and from the memories we would just as soon forget? That is, what can we learn from the memories that Moshe Rabbenu mentioned, and the ones he didn’t mention, growing out of those 40 years that could have been 11 days?

Well, as far as arranging events so we will only have good things to look back on, I don’t think most of us can usually stage world-shaking, far-reaching changes. Manipulating events on the grand scale to create positive memories is pretty much reserved to an omniscient and omnipotent G-d.

However, we can use these memories to try to construct personal experiences that we will be happy to look back on.

Right now Joan and I are about to become empty nesters, so I am especially conscious of doing things in such a way that our kids will have positive memories and continue to see our home as a happy and supportive place as they enter their adult lives. I don’t always succeed, any more than Moses did, but I try to be conscious of the need to make the effort.

That's just one small example.

Also, I think the wandering shows that almost any endeavor will be more successful if you build in an opportunity to work through problems and pitfalls before having to commit.

I don't think we can fault Moses for not publicly reviewing the details of the things he would rather forget about. But not being Moses, we can and should talk about these Torah teachings, not to emulate them, but for the equally valid purpose of learning to do things differently.

If we are disappointed in Moses for striking the rock, instead of speaking to the rock, then maybe we can use that memory to avoid similarly hasty or impulsive actions.

If we are shocked by G-d's reaction to the alien fire of Nadav and Abihu, we can use that memory to refrain from overreacting to provocations in our own lives.

This I think is part of what we mean when we say that the Torah is true and that we engage with the Torah. In these sentences Moses isn't laying out any laws, but he is teaching us through experience. It is our opportunity to consider and apply the experience.

So that we don't lose our way and turn an 11-day journey into a 40-year ordeal.

Once again, gut shabbos.