

Parashat D'varim -- Hazzan Neil Schwartz

Agudas Israel -- July 27, 2012

This week we begin the Book of Deuteronomy, the last section of our *Torah*. It is a moment of transitions for the Israelite People in ancient history, both in the contents of Deuteronomy and in the history of how this section was added to the rest of the *Torah*. It is also a moment of transition for this Jewish community, as this will be my final *D'var Torah* as your Hazzan.

Taking the narrative of the *Torah* at face value, Deuteronomy is mostly the speeches of Moses to the new generation of Israelites on the eve of their entry into Canaan. In the past 40 years, the generation of their ancestors who knew servitude in Egypt has passed on, and this new generation must now learn their *communal history* and *rules of conduct* before they can cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

If we look closely at the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy, we discover that there are subtle differences in the text for this retelling of history and laws. While there is much unity in the style of writing in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, that is not the case in Deuteronomy. This is so clear to some scholars that they speak of not of a *Pentateuch*, or Five Books of the Torah, but rather a *Tetrateuch* or Four Books, and a *Deuteronomic History* that includes Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

An example of the differences in language can be found in the Ten Commandments. When they are delineated in Deuteronomy, there are several differences in the Hebrew text from the original version in Exodus. Most of these subtle text differences seem to reflect the concerns of a settled agricultural society, rather than a large group of nomads who have just left Egypt a few weeks prior to receiving these rules of conduct at Sinai.

The answer may be found in the history of how Deuteronomy came to be part of the Hebrew Bible. According to chapter 22 in the 2nd Book of Kings, a scroll containing the Book of Deuteronomy was found in the Temple in Jerusalem during a renovation that was part of the religious revival conducted by King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. Many scholars have accepted the proposition that Deuteronomy was actually newly written during this time-period, well after the rest of the Torah was written, though other scholars disagree.

This is further complicated by some modern scholars who feel that the archeological evidence does not support the concept of an Israelite Conquest of Canaan under the leadership of a Joshua. Rather, they propose that there was a gradual infiltration of the Tribes who mixed with the native population, and together they became the Israelites. Within this approach, the *Torah* is sometimes considered to be a "national history" that was written to provide a common narrative for these disparate groups of people.

This is not the time nor the place to explore these issues further. Regardless of source, Deuteronomy clearly marks the transition of the ancient Israelites from nomads to a new settled society. The interesting connection that can be made for us in this congregation is the concept of religious revival that is connected in the Book of Kings with the origins of Deuteronomy. With our transition to the leadership of Rabbi Claudio, we too hope for a type of religious revival to go along with our already high activity in other areas.

If Rabbi Pavey was the Moses who led this congregation through the turbulent times of communal split and other challenges, and if Rabbi Claudio will be your Joshua who will appeal to a younger generation of future leaders in this Jewish community, then perhaps I have been your Caleb, a quiet figure who urged the Israelites forward into the Promised Land despite the negative report of the ten spies in the Book of Numbers. As a reward for his faith, Caleb was allowed to enter Canaan with the new generation of Israelites.

Since I did not finish my Masters Thesis at the U of S this past Spring, I will be staying in Saskatoon as a member of our congregation during this coming year. I have confidence that Rabbi Claudio will provide wonderful religious leadership, pastoral care, education, and Interfaith involvement to bring our community forward in a vibrant manner. Please give him all your support and respect, and work with him in whatever ways he requests.

Transitions are often a mix of excitement and trepidation. For three weeks we have chanted the *Haftarot of Rebuke* leading to tonight's observance of *Tisha B'Av*, during which we commemorate the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. by the Babylonians, and again in 70 C.E. by the Romans. For the next seven weeks we will chant the *Haftarot of Comfort*, leading to *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. In our Jewish religious calendar, this *Shabbat* is truly a moment of communal transition.

As we begin to chant the Book of Deuteronomy, the final section of our *Torah*, let us resolve to look forward to new leadership and new opportunities for growth as a Jewish community. Let us strive to find a balance between serving the needs of our growing young families while also meeting the needs of our middle and older generations. Let us strive to look inward to strengthen our community while still looking outward, doing all those interactions with the general community that bring us the respect of our neighbors.

Most of all, let each of us *look inside ourselves* and ask *what we can do as individuals* to help accomplish all of these essential tasks. For five years I have done what I could to provide "grounding and continuity" for this community, given my skills and experience - it is now time to move forward with new leadership and build a brilliant future in Saskatoon.