

Taking Responsibility

Parashat D'varim: [Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22](#)

Haftarah: [Isaiah 1:1-27](#)

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The rabbis had two names for the book of the Torah we begin reading this week. It is, on the one hand, known as D'varim, after one of its opening words, just as other books of the Torah are named. Yet on the other hand, it is also called *Mishneh Torah*, a “repetition of the Torah” (indeed, the translation of this phrase into Greek, *Deuteromion*, gives us the common name by which we know it in English, Deuteronomy). It is an apt name, as much of the book is taken up with Moses speaking to the Israelites – reviewing their history, reiterating laws (and adding some not previously mentioned explicitly in other books), exhorting and warning them about their future behavior – as they complete their wanderings in the desert and a new generation prepares to enter the Land of Israel.

As I began looking at this parashah in anticipation of writing this drasha, there was a particular verse that leapt out at me. Moses does not proceed through past events in an entirely linear fashion, and in Chap. 1 of D'varim speaks to the people of the episode of the twelve spies, their report, and the communal lack of faith that followed, thereby leading to the decree that the generation that left Egypt would be condemned to die out over 40 years of wanderings (Num. 13 and 14). In the course of discussing this incident, Moses adds the following comment (Deut. 1:37):

גם בי התאנף ה' בגללכם לאמר גם אתה לא תבא שם

The Lord was incensed at me too because of you, saying you too shall not enter there.

There is (at least) one very obvious problem with this verse and one more subtle and significant one. The obvious one is that if the reader recalls the narrative in Numbers, it is not because of the events relating to the spies that God punishes Moses this way, but rather because of something related to Moses having hit rather than spoken to the rock to bring forth water at Meribah (Num. 20:2-12). Indeed, what it is that Moses did to warrant the degree of punishment he received is one of the great mysteries of the Torah, but in any case it does not seem to have anything to do with the sending or return of the spies.

But Moses' account here does far more than confuse the chronology and context of the decree that would keep him from the Land. This statement appears to rather significantly shift causality as well – Moses, it would seem, is blaming the people for what is happening to him, rather than taking responsibility for his own actions that led to this result. Nor is this the only time he will do so; similar statements appear also in next week's parashah, in Deut. 3:26 and 4:21 (the

latter even using almost the exact same phrase as here; see also Psalm 106:32). What are we to make of this picture of Moses, of all people – the person considered to be the greatest leader in our history! – attempting to pass the buck?

A number of commentators have attempted to answer one or both of these concerns. I would like to highlight here a comment made by the medieval scholar and commentator, Ramban, one that addresses the latter, and to my mind deeper, of the questions I've posed above:

שהיה הכעס על משה ועל אהרן כאשר הכו הסלע פעמים לפני העם ולא עשו כאשר נצטוו, והעם הרהרו בדבר, והוא מה שאמר (להלן לב נא) על אשר לא קדשתם אותי בתוך בני ישראל, שלא היה העונש אלא מפני שהיה הדבר בתוך בני ישראל שלא נתקדש הכבוד לעיניהם

For the anger against Moses and against Aaron was because they struck the rock twice before the people and did not do as they were commanded, and the people reflected on the matter. And this is what it says (further on, Deut. 32:51) “for you did not sanctify Me among the children of Israel” – that the punishment was only because the matter took place among the children of Israel, such that the Glory was not sanctified in their eyes.

That is, in the Ramban's reading, Moses is not blaming the people for what happened in the sense that it was their fault and not his own. Rather, he is telling them that it was their presence that established the gravity of his own sin, a sin that is now understood as a failure to set the example expected of someone in Moses' position, a failure of leadership. What a leader does or does not do, especially when it is done publicly and will influence others, can be of ultimate significance. (For a similar approach, one that also ties this event into the episode of the spies, see also the commentary *Kli Yakar*, by Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz.)

As I sit to write this drasha, it is Rosh Hodesh, the 1st of Av. I woke this morning to hear that Anat Hoffman, one of the leaders of Women of the Wall and a tireless advocate for religious and gender rights in Israel, was arrested today at the Kotel for carrying a Torah scroll in the women's section, questioned by the police for five hours, fined, and barred from the Kotel for 30 days. The Kotel, of course, is one of the few remnants of the Temple Mount, where the 1st and 2nd Temples stood. It is especially ironic that this incident should take place on this particular day, as we begin the “9 days” leading to Tisha b'Av, the day on which Jews mark and mourn the destruction of both Temples (and other historical national disasters as well). In the 5th chapter of the Talmudic tractate Gittin, the rabbis give an extended account of the reasons for the destruction of the 2nd Temple, an account that resonates both with the verse I have been discussing above and today's events. The destruction began, says the passage, because of a man who had a friend named Qamtza, and an enemy named Bar Qamtza. When his servant errs, and invites Bar Qamtza to a feast instead of Qamtza, the

host attempts to throw the errant guest out, ignoring the latter's offer to pay for his own food, then half the feast, and finally the entire cost of the party. But tellingly, it is not (only) the host whom Bar Qamtza holds accountable for having been publicly shamed:

אמר: הואיל והווי יתבי רבנן ולא מחו ביה, ש"מ קא ניהא להו
He said (to himself): Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not prevent him (from acting this way), one can learn that it (such behavior) is acceptable to them. (Gittin 56a)

How leaders respond, especially before others, matters. In his anger, Bar Qamtza informs the Roman Emperor that the Jews are rebelling against his authority, and arranges a trap for the rabbis by sending a sacrifice to the Temple which he has subtly blemished in a way that disqualifies it according to Jewish (but not Roman) law. Failure to accept the Emperor's gift would be a significant insult, of course, and a grave danger to the nation. But again the rabbis find themselves unable or unwilling to act (either to accept the sacrifice, or to eliminate Bar Qamtza) out of concern that on-lookers might misinterpret the law. As the rabbinics scholar and NYU professor Jeffrey Rubenstein has observed about this passage (in his book *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*), an underlying theme of the narrative is the difficult, but necessary responsibilities of leadership. Of the two episodes described here, he writes:

The sages first fail in their role as social and moral exemplars...Then they fail in their role as community leaders...This time, true, the choice is more difficult...This progression suggests that when they fail to take the necessary action a second time, then the next decision will be even more painful. (149)

As the Ramban recognized about Moses' sin, so too the author and editor of this passage recognize about their rabbinic forbearers – while the people (such as the host of the party or Bar Qamtza) may act sinfully, leaders bear an extra level of responsibility for how they respond. And, moreover, failure begets new, increasingly difficult choices. What people see from their leaders, or fail to see, has cosmic consequences.

So what did we see in Jerusalem this morning? We saw the leaders of the city and the state choosing to drag a woman away from the very site of the great destruction for the mere act of wanting to hold a Torah scroll – not even to read from it; at the time of the arrest the group was in the process of moving to another site because reading from the Torah scroll is currently forbidden in the women's section. Because of leaders who fail to stand up to forces of extremism and intolerance, or who actively collude with them, the message coming out of Israel today, for all to see, is that the Torah – which according to rabbinic tradition was read in the women's section of the Temple, to the entire people, during the *hakel* ceremony once every seven years (see Deut. 31:10-13; Yoma 69b and

Sotah 41b; I thank my friend Rivka Haut for this insight) – can no longer be allowed to belong to the half of all Jews who are women. Or the great majority of Jews who are not haredi Orthodox. This is a public message with potentially grave import, as the large majority of Jews in Israel and across the world come to experience themselves as less than equal in the place they should be most equal before God. Will our leaders, or we who are leaders, accept responsibility for the consequences?

Shabbat shalom.