

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

D'varim

The main content of the Book of D'varim is Moshe Rabbeinu's final address to the Israelites before his death. He opens by reminding Am Yisrael of their past sins and rebellions from Yetzi'at Mitzrayim onwards:

"See, I have put the land before you. Come and possess it..." (1:8)

But instead of immediately recalling their behavior following the evil report of the Spies, he detours by exclaiming:

"How can I bear - alone - your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?" (1:12)

The S'forno interprets contentiousness as personal squabbles, and quarrels as disputes in law and monetary claims.

The S'forno explains that they were setting out from Egypt to the Promised Land with G-d's assurance that it would be theirs. They were going from poverty to affluence, from being slaves to being landowners. But instead of putting the past behind them, they continued with their own quarrels, feuds, and vendettas; their "contentiousness, burdens, and quarrels". They would not agree to sink their differences and restart on a

new page. To a similar end, the Maharal suggests that the challenge facing the Jews as a people is that their strong personalities, strong personal opinions, and capacity of their individuals to effectively push their causes and viewpoints (c.f. Beitza 25b) all need to be directed into the right channels and to be open to corrective advice. Like a pack of lions, they resist authority and can be highly contentious. Indeed very early on, Moshe found himself settling disputes day and night (Sh'mot 18:13): "How can I bear - alone - your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?" He therefore had to set up an elaborate hierarchy to ensure that all could readily access justice (1:13-18).

The attitude of the Israelites may be compared to a leader assembling the poorest and most deprived people in the city with the following proposition. "Several week's journey away, huge vaults crammed with gold are waiting for you. There is enough there to make each and every one of you very rich indeed, for life. They will be yours, with my personal guarantee. Nobody will take them away from you. Come with me, and I will take you to your gold."

But once they are on their way, the people start bickering. The long-established personal traits come into the foreground. They go back to struggling over past claims worth a

few dollars, a jibe here, a slight there. They fritter away their energies and their leader's patience and goodwill over relative trivia, completely losing sight of the gold waiting for them at journey's end. The leader sighs, and finds himself dragged into a plethora of petty squabbles. Soon, the people start planning to drop out of this fabulously enriching expedition, and return to their troubles and their poverty.

Thus the S'forno shows that Moshe was rebuking them about their pettiness forcing him to have to introduce a bureaucracy. That happened because the Israelites would not see how trivial their disputes were in comparison with the great gifts of Eretz Yisrael that were waiting for them. 🌿📖