

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Va'etchanan

The parasha opens with Moshe recalling his pleading with G-d:

Let me pass (over the Jordan) so that I may see the... Land... (But) G-d said to me: Enough! Do not speak to me again about it... You shall not pass the Jordan" (3:25).

The Ha'amek Davar places this and what follows into powerful context. His approach implies that what hurt Moshe Rabbeinu most was that, because of his immediately forthcoming death, he would not be able to complete his life's work: teaching the B'nei Yisrael the Torah to the level that their being G-d's People would be their pride, their joy, and their operating system. Furthermore, this could include his no longer being alive when they would settle the Land so that they would understand and practice the Torah in the context of day-to-day living there. Yes, he revealed and presented it to the people in the wilderness, but that would not be enough. It was not completely part of them: witness what happened with the loose Moabite women at Baal Peor when Moshe hints at with "We lived in the valley, facing Baal Peor" (3:28). The grass on the other side was greener, the idolatrous world was more attractive.

It is with this principle that he powers his final address to Am Yisrael:

"I have taught you chukim (statutes) and mishpatim (laws) as G-d commanded me... You must observe them carefully, and thereby you will present it, your wisdom and understanding, to the nations. When they hear about the statutes, they will say that that great nation is indeed a wise and understanding nation!" (4:5-6)

What the nations will see is that Am Yisrael is so satisfying and productively involved in living according to its sacred calling that they are a fully-fulfilled, productive, and exemplary people. They are not tempted to trade their G-d-revealed way of life to the evolved idolatry and transitory satisfactions and fads of the surrounding nations. And those nations will respect them for it.

But Moshe expresses deep regret that his people would not reach that level of existence in a sustainable manner during his own lifetime. Because he would not have the chance to re-present it when they would settle the Land. Temporarily, maybe he would have had the dramatic impact in his final speech, but in a generation or two, the people would start to forget. He therefore warned them: "Be constantly on your guard less you forget... and follow the cultures that G-d allotted to gentile

populations" (4:9-19). And then he explains his deepest concerns: "G-d was angry with me... thus I will die... and not cross the Jordan" (4:21-22) and be able to continue to teach you there.

His therefore urging his people to constantly engage with what he taught them places the learning of Torah onto the level of individual and communal responsibility. It is the only hope for making up for his no longer being able to look forward to teaching them himself when they would be living in the environment that was not merely promised, but their reality.

And that helps us understand the importance our Torah culture and heritage being the constant focus of life's engagement. And that it should be made accessible in a way that people will be able to relate to it with joy and ultimate fulfillment, to the degree that they will be taking in only the good, but not the bad and transient from the lifestyles and situations they will inevitably face, as Klal Yisrael has never been commanded to lead a hermetically-sealed existence.

In addition, bear in mind that as quoted above, Moshe twice adds his 'entry refused' into the Land as he urges his people to live according to his teachings. This may possibly be for the following reason. Moshe was

not just a leader and not just a prophet. He was not working with the Torah that was already existing and well-established in Klal Yisrael. Were that the case, he could have said: "I made a mistake, I struck the rock when I should have spoken to it." But Moshe's position was higher than that. He himself was the Torah, personified. The Torah was his cause, he had a key role in its being revealed, it was something much larger than himself. In not carrying out G-d's instructions even when under extreme pressure, he publicly demonstrated that he fell short of what he, in G-d's name, expected from others: obedience to the Law. Had he been allowed to continue, Am Yisrael may well have reacted: "How can the Law require obedience to G-d's command when the very person who gave and personified it disobeyed it in public?" That would have undermined the Torah in their eyes. The lawgiver could not be above the Law himself. The Law came first, it defines Am Yisrael's existence. And possibly for that reason, Moshe was not allowed to complete his task of leading and settling the people in the Promised Land. 🌿📖