

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

D'VARIM-CHAZON

Parashat D'varim forms the opening of Moshe's final address to the Israelites before his death, where he prepares them for their long-awaited entry to the Promised Land. That opening within the Parasha divides into three parts. Firstly, he presents them as a quarrelsome, litigious, and burdensome people who need a complex hierarchical system to survive. Even that, implies the narrative second section, was not sufficient to prevent the mass hysteria following the Spies' report - nearly forty years before Moshe's final address. That fuses into the third and longest section where he recounts the course through the desert from the dying out of the generation of the Yetzi'at Mitzrayim, avoiding the lands of Edom, Moav, and Ammon which belonged exclusively to those nations, and the wars and conquests of lands of those who attacked the Israelites en route - Sichon, King of the Amorites, and Og, the King of Bashan.

It is this last section which several times seeks to clear up some confusions in local history and geography:

(a) With the lands of the descendants of Moav, the son of Lot, Moshe pointed out that 'it was previously

the territory of the Eimim, a great populous people as tall as the giants.' Moshe continued with: 'they were also considered as Refa'im, like the giants, and the Moavites called them Eimim' (2:10-11). Two names for a people that by then were there no more.

(b) With the lands of the descendants of Ammon, the son of Lot, Moshe pointed out that 'it is too considered the land of the Refa'im. The Refa'im dwelt there previously, and the Ammonites called them Zamzumim. They were a great populous people, as tall as the giants' (2:20-21). Again, two names for a people that by then were no more.

(c) Further west, in the area of Gaza: 'as for the Avim who dwell in open cities until Gaza, the Kaftorim who came from went from Kaftor destroyed them and dwelt in their place' (2:23).

(d) 'Sidonians would refer to Hermon as Sirion, and the Amorites would call it S'nir' (3:9).

Rashi and other commentaries explain these verses as relating to the title of the Israelites to the land of Canaan. G-d had promised Avraham's descendants the 'land of the Refa'im' but it did not include the areas mentioned, but rather the Argov and Bashan regions further north - 'that (only) is the land of the Refa'im' (3:13) which was gifted to Avraham (B'reishit 15:20). Not the lands further

south, which the Torah enforced as the rightful property of other nations. On the other hand, the Avim who were displaced by the Kaftorim were themselves without title to the land. The area they seem to have occupied was 'the Negev of the Keretim' (Shmuel Alef 30:14). They were likely to have originated from Crete - 'the island of Kaftor' (c.f. Yirmiyahu 47:4). Thus the area of Gaza was designated for Israelite conquest, although there is no textual (or archaeological) evidence that it actually came into their possession during the Biblical period. In addition, the connection of Mount Hermon to the lands of non-promised nations of Sidon and Ammon was insufficient to legally challenge the Israelite possession - they merely called it Hermon or S'nir, but they did not claim title to it.

Moreover, these four points of history and geography may be interpreted as a veiled part of a warning to the Israelites of the consequences of their leaving the teachings and values of their sacred traditions.

The Refa'im - whose final survivor was Og the King of Bashan (3:11), a giant whose bed was 'nine cubits in length and four cubits in width, the cubit being measured by the cubit of a man' (3:11) were great in their day, but then no more. By the generation of the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land, this nation of giants had already disappeared into

confused legend, into the rear of history. The memory of their greatness was so dimmed that nations were even unclear as to what they were called. The dispossessed Avim were so completely destroyed (2:23) that their land was known after the Sea People, the Kaftorim, one of the waves of Philistines who invaded and took over that coastal area during that period. And the name of Mount Hermon was also transitory: the name Hermon is derived from the root CHET-REISH-MEM (sacred), and like most high mountains (12:2) it was thought to be the residence of idolatry, whose name, Baal-Hermon, also served as the name of the mountain itself (Shoftim 3:3; Divrei HaYamim Alef 5:23).

That was the implied message from Moshe to the Israelites. The Israelites' title to the Promised Land was contingent on their keeping the commandments. If they continued in the idolatrous and corrupt traditions endemic to land of Canaan up until then, they would suffer similarly - become a displaced, destroyed, and ultimately forgotten people. For the Israelites would have been no better than those they had ousted.

It may be added that the reason Moshe makes these veiled references (as in the beginning of the Parasha, according to Rashi to 1:1) was a sign of respect to the intelligence and exclusivity of the Israelites, which would be well received and taken

seriously. It is as though he said to the Israelites: 'You are clever people, we are members of the same select fraternity, one or two words and we - yes only we - know exactly what we're talking out without having to spell it out.'

As an epilogue - even though the Israelites were to be exiled from the Land after the destruction of the First Temple, they retained their identity as they were to collectively 'return to the Lord... G-d' (30:2), and He would 'bring them back from captivity' (30:3). Indeed, history shows that it is the chain of Torah tradition marching on outside the Holy Land that has prevented the Israelite nation becoming forgotten and assimilated, right up until modern times...

Additional note: In addition, G-d's justice extends to all peoples. It is not exclusive to Am Yisrael. That is one of the key themes in Sefer Yona. The Torah tells us that after the Migdal Bavel, G-d dispersed the people in all different directions. Thus different city-states took root everywhere in the region, including in the Land of Canaan. Generations later, Avraham Avinu recognized the Almighty and His expectations. G-d promised him that the land of Canaan would eventually go to his children only far in future, well beyond his lifetime. The reason could be that by the time Avraham Avinu emerged on the

scene, all territories in the region that could be settled had already been settled. Thus Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov and their extended families and households found themselves having to make a living out of land that no-one else wanted to settle by moving from place to place as pastoral nomads, shepherds of sheep and goats. G-d was not going to turn any nation out of their city-states just because Avraham Avinu deserved it more than they did. For that to happen, the inhabitants had to be beyond redemption in the eyes of G-d, with no worthy qualities at all. G-d looked into the future, and saw that eventually it would be the people of Canaan that would be the people in the region that would forsake elementary morality common to humanity to that extreme degree: "for they would even burn their sons and daughters to death in service to their idols" (12:31). Which emphasized the responsibilities that G-d placed on Am Yisrael, their successors. As newcomers to their Land, their lifestyle had to be compatible with the kedusha that He gave to the Land; through Torah observance. And prolonged, persistent, and wilful failure incompatible with that kedusha would see their exile from the Land, whether due to idolatry with Churban Bayit Rishon, or to the groundless hatred in the time of Churban Bayit Sheini. 🌿📖