

TORAHSCOPE: Devarim (Words)

by Mark Huey posted 16 July, 2010 www.outreachisrael.net

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22
Isaiah 1:1-27

“Review, Recall, Repent”

As the fifth book of the Torah begins, *Devarim* or Deuteronomy,¹ the reader is reminded of how Ancient Israel’s forty-year journey in the wilderness is coming to a close. The punishment for the previous generation’s having believed the bad report from the spies (cf. Numbers 14:33-35) is now over. Moses is in the waning days of his life, and he knows that he will not be able to enter into the Promised Land, because of his transgression at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:8-13), and also having been recently told that when the war with Midian is over, he will die (Numbers 31:1-2).

Recognizing that he has very little time remaining with Israel, Moses gathers the assembly together, and as leader repeats the events that have transpired to bring Israel out of Egypt to the very edge of the Promised Land. The Hebrew title for both our Torah portion and the entire book is *Devarim* (דְּבָרִים) or “Words,” although there are many Jewish traditions that refer to the fifth book of the Pentateuch as *Mishneh Torah*, meaning “repetition of the Torah.” In many respects, the Book of Deuteronomy is a repetition of much of what has been witnessed previously, repeating the Law that God has given Israel:

“Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law, saying...” (Deuteronomy 1:5).

According to Rabbinical sources,² the Book of Deuteronomy records the last five weeks of Moses’ life as he encourages the “Joshua generation” to remember God’s instructions and His charge to them. Moses gives clarification to previously given commandments, and he prophesies concerning Israel’s future. In *Devarim*, Moses reviews various leadership responsibilities,³ recalls the bad report of the ten spies,⁴ and then describes the calamity of attempting to enter the Promised Land without the presence of the Lord.⁵ Then, recollection of the travels around the lands given to Esau, Moab, and Ammon is considered, as well as the victories secured over peoples in Gilead and Bashan.⁶ Moses reiterates details about how the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh are going to occupy lands east of the Jordan.⁷ Our reading for this week concludes with a word of encouragement given by Moses to Joshua, his successor:

“I commanded Joshua at that time, saying, ‘Your eyes have seen all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings; so the LORD shall do to all the kingdoms into which you are about to cross. Do not fear them, for the LORD your God is the one fighting for you’” (Deuteronomy 3:21-22).

Timing is Everything

In many respects, Moses’ orations witnessed in the Book of Deuteronomy are a summary review of the previous forty-year journey through the wilderness, allowing the people to consider where they have been—but **most importantly where they are going**. Moses knows how Israel has a propensity to disobey the Lord, and so a review of Israel’s history is necessary so that the

¹ The traditional title Deuteronomy is derived from the label given to the fifth book of Moses in the Greek Septuagint, *Deuteronomium* (ΔΕΥΤΕΡΟΝΟΜΙΟΝ), meaning “second law.”

² Scherman, *Chumash*, 939.

³ Deuteronomy 1:12-15.

⁴ Deuteronomy 1:23-40.

⁵ Deuteronomy 1:41-46.

⁶ Deuteronomy 2:1-3:11.

⁷ Deuteronomy 3:12-17.

consequences of previous disobedience will not have to be repeated. God knows that His people need to spend some time remembering and reflecting upon their history. How does the saying go? *Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it!*

As I pondered over our Torah reading for this week, the concept of reviewing the past, recalling some of Ancient Israel's transgressions and iniquities, and repenting of my own previous errors—reverberated throughout my thoughts. Human beings have definite tendency to wander away from God. Just a few weeks earlier, near the close of the Book of Numbers, the Reubenites and Gadites had attempted to alter some of His plans in conquering the six nations of Canaan. Moses' rebuke of their request indicates a deep concern about Israel's ability to properly follow directions, even after forty years of sojourning in the desert (Numbers 32:14-15). Since he recognizes that his death is soon coming, throughout Deuteronomy he hopes to impart—through recollection and repentance—the qualities that will allow Israel to both persevere and prosper when they take the Land, entering into their inheritance.

As a Torah student, the concept of reviewing the past makes sense to me. Examining the weekly Torah portions every year, especially the days before Israel's conquest of Canaan, enables us to ask important questions of ourselves. The annual Torah cycle that has been in place for several millennia, and the repetition practiced by the Jewish people, has been used by the Lord to help maintain them as a coherent society. Somehow, through all the persecutions, pogroms, inquisitions, and the Holocaust itself—these people who have clung to a study of the Torah, have been able to have a testimony of existence before the nations of the Earth. Perhaps the Divinely inspired wisdom of Moses, to review Israel's history, has been used by the Lord to create a repeated pattern that has preserved the Jewish people?

Thoughts about reviewing, recalling, and repenting percolated in my spirit as I read through our Torah portion—so I investigated some of the patterns established by the Jewish Sages for a diligent study of the Torah. I discovered a few things that—what for me was new knowledge (2003)—were things that have been a part of Judaism for centuries.

The Three Weeks and Shabbat Chazon

When *Devarim* arrives on the annual Torah cycle, with the Book of Deuteronomy winding down the yearly examination of the Torah—you are usually well into the Summer months on the Jewish calendar. It is during these Summer months that a number of important events have occurred within Jewish history, which have been memorialized for reflection and observance. These things are easy to overlook for many Messianics, as they are not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, although many Messianic Jewish congregations remember them to some degree.

The most recognized date during the Summer months is the Ninth of Av (Heb. *Tisha B'Av*). Next to *Yom Kippur*, the Ninth of Av is a day of great remorse accompanied with fasting and prayer. The Ninth of Av is an infamous day that commemorates the time when Ancient Israel believed the bad report from the ten spies (m. *Ta'anit* 4:6). The Ninth of Av is one of the saddest days on calendar for the Jewish people, because *many more* tragic events have also occurred on this very day throughout history. Alfred J. Kolatch summarizes the main significance of the Ninth of Av in Jewish tradition:

“Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, is a day of mourning for the destruction of the First Temple in the year 586 B.C.E. by the Babylonians, and of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E. by the Romans. (According to tradition, both Temples were destroyed on the same date.)

“Next to Yom Kippur (a biblical holiday), Tisha B'Av (a post-biblical holiday) is the most important fast day in the Jewish calendar. It marks the final day of a three-week period of intense national mourning for the events that led to the loss of Jewish independence with the destruction of the holy shrines of Jewish life.

“Aside from these two major historical events, other happenings in Jewish history have been said to have occurred on the ninth of Av. These include the fall of Betar (the

last Jewish stronghold during the Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome) in 35 C.E. and the beginning of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. The importance of Tisha B'Av as a fast day was emphasized in the Talmud (Ta'anit 30b), where the comment is made: 'He who eats or drinks on the ninth day of Av must be considered as guilty as one who has eaten on Yom Kippur.' The fast of Tisha B'Av, like Yom Kippur, begins at sunset and ends the next evening with the appearance of the first three stars."⁸

There have been some other tragedies which have been associated with the Ninth of Av throughout history, but the most important have been the destruction of the First and Second Temples—which have been used to literally change the face of Israel in Biblical history. One might argue that the Ninth of Av is a time when the Jewish people have reflected on some of their specific their faults before God—which caused the destruction of the two Temples—and have desired restitution for past errors. At the same time, remembering the Ninth of Av can be employed as preparation for the even more serious Day of Atonement.

During the past two weeks, several significant Haftarah readings have been employed (Jeremiah 1:1-2:3; 2:4-3:4), which are supposed to admonish people to recall the impending judgment of Israel at the hands of its enemies—if it is unfaithful to God. Ronald L. Eisenberg notes how during these Three Weeks, traditional mourning rites are observed, including “abstention from weddings and other joyous celebrations, instrumental music, and entertainment and the prohibition against the purchase or wearing of new clothing or the eating of new fruit.”⁹ Indeed, even in a Messianic community that will often remember the Ninth of Av, very few of us are aware of how seriously Judaism has viewed this time in history.

On the third week prior to the Ninth of Av, the Haftarah reading is Isaiah 1:1-27, which corresponds with *Devarim*. All three Haftarah selections are to *drive people to repentance before God*. The weekly Sabbath which precedes the Ninth of Av has a special name, *Shabbat Chazon* or the “Sabbath of Vision.” The Hebrew term *chazon* (חֲזוֹן) or “vision”¹⁰ is found in the opening verse of this week’s Haftarah reading, where the Prophet Isaiah describes many of the reasons why the Temple was going to be destroyed:

“The vision [*chazon*] of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the LORD speaks, ‘Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, *but* Israel does not know, My people do not understand.’ Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him” (Isaiah 1:1-4).

So much of what I have witnessed in Messianic congregations over the past several years has frequently overlooked some of the rather serious, and sober themes, leading up to the Ninth of Av. We often attend weekly *Shabbat* services that are full of vibrant music, dancing, and laughter—with **no mention of the Three Weeks before the Ninth of Av**. Perhaps Believers think that because they possess forgiveness and redemption in Messiah Yeshua that they do not need to reflect on the consequences of sin, and fast at certain times of the year? Christian history is certainly replete with the examples of men and women who would go through rigorous times of introspection, fasting, and self-denial to appeal to the mercy of the Holy One. Even if we do have salvation—we still need to pray for those who do not! As always, the Ninth of Av is a perfect time to lift up our Jewish brethren in prayer *who do not yet know the Messiah of Israel!*

Discovering some new information about how important the Jewish community has considered the weeks approaching the Ninth of Av, I considered how this annual pattern has been

⁸ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1981), 286; cf. Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp 304-305.

⁹ Eisenberg, 304.

¹⁰ More expanded definitions of *chazon* include: “*vision*, as seen in the ecstatic state,” “*vision*, in the night,” “*divine communication in a vision, oracle, prophecy*,” and “*vision*, as title of book of prophecy; of other writings of prophets” (BDB, 302).

incorporated into the Torah cycle to begin preparing hearts for the more serious Day of Atonement coming in just a few months. After the fast on the Ninth of Av, the Haftarah readings for the next seven weeks come from the Book of Isaiah,¹¹ and are more directed toward the redemption of Israel.

It is my hope that today's Messianics all learn to appreciate this season of the year, and its messages of both God's chastisement *and* forgiveness.

Serious Conviction

Reflecting on the Three Weeks prior to the Ninth of Av, and how this time of the Summer is to prepare hearts for *Yom Kippur*—I am extremely convicted. I frequently find that even though I have read the Bible for years, *including the Old Testament*, that I really have had a limited amount of knowledge regarding traditional Jewish ways of reading the Torah (2003). Obviously, over the past several millennia, the Jewish people, who have been entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:2), have been able to formulate some beneficial methods that enable the observant to focus on the history of Israel and its relationship with Him. *Messianic Believers can certainly benefit from this as well.* If we know that bad things have taken place in the past, in reviewing them and thinking about them, **we can see to it that they are never repeated.**

Over the years, I have known about the tragedies associated with the Ninth of Av the destruction of the two Temples. As a non-Jewish Believer, who trusts in the redeeming work of the Messiah of Israel, my past thoughts have admittedly been a bit skewed by some teachings received over the years about my body *only* being the “Temple of God.”¹² From my reading of Paul's teachings to the Corinthians, and from what I had been taught in the past, I was a little callous toward thinking about the destruction of the two Temples. I was told I had “a much better deal,” because my body was to be considered the “real Temple of God.” In fact, much of the “Temple teaching” I heard was really just designed to keep me from drinking, smoking, or abusing my body. As Paul writes,

“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Some of the popular teaching that is witnessed in today's Christianity from these verses has been right to emphasize personal holiness regarding one's physical actions. But, as I think back on some of my previous instruction with a Messianic understanding, I realize how sophomoric some of it was. While I was correctly taught to not abuse my body and to consider myself a vessel of the Holy Spirit, I was not taught to heed the message of the destruction of the two Temples. Paul certainly wanted the Corinthians to understand how they were functioning on the same kind of level as the Jerusalem Temple, causing them to appreciate the Jerusalem Temple—not look down upon it.

I was not taught to be empathetic to my Jewish neighbors about what the Ninth of Av might mean to them. Because much of what I was taught came from a dispensational bias of believing that Israel and “the Church” were separate, my teachers rarely talked about the Temple in any other way except in regard to the fulfillment of future prophecy (after the pre-tribulation rapture, no less). We were not taught that the Temple contained important object lessons that mature Believers were to understand. We were not taught how to appreciate what the Temple represented, and then personalize it to some degree in our lives of faith. *I am glad that this has now changed.*

In this day of restoration as the Messianic movement grows and matures, we can be reminded that the Lord is using things like knowing what the Ninth of Av is, to begin to bridge the gaps between all of His people. All Messianic Believers can use the Ninth of Av as a specific

¹¹ Isaiah 40:1-26; 49:14-51:3; 54:11-55:5; 51:12-52:12; 54:1-10; 60:1-22; 61:10-63:9.

¹² And, even this has been challenged with me having to realize that the “in you” referred to in 1 Corinthians 3:16, *en humin* (ἐν ὑμῖν), is in the plural and not the singular—meaning that it is in reference to the corporate assembly of Believers, and not individuals exclusively.

time to fast and intercede for Jewish people who do not yet know Messiah Yeshua. As we move ahead in our reading of the Book of Deuteronomy—we can review, recall, and repent for any of the sins we might have—which could be preventing us from entering into everything that the Father has called us to be. We can learn things about where we have been, **but most importantly where we need to be going.**

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