

Torah Sparks

*Sponsored by Susan Julius; Prepared by Rabbi Michael Gold
Edited by Rabbi Moshe Levin, Saul Beck and Avital Beck*

DEVARIM

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Haftarah: p. 1000

This week's Haftarah will be chanted by Avital Beck.

Summary of the Parashah:

The fifth and final book of the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy, is sometimes called Mishneh Torah, literally "the second teaching of the Torah." It consists of a series of speeches Moses delivers to the people Israel shortly before they enter the Promised Land. These words follow 40 years of wandering through the wilderness, when the older generation dies off and a new generation grows up. Most of this opening portion of the book contains a repetition of the history of the Israelites during their wanderings. It is Moses' last opportunity to repeat the wisdom of the Torah to the people Israel.

Moses begins his retelling of the Israelites' history when they are still encamped at Horeb. G-d told the Israelites to go forward and capture the land of the Canaanites. Moses complained about the burden of the people and picked leaders from the various tribes to act as judges. Moses then retells the story of the 12 scouts who went into the land. The story differs slightly from the original in the book of Numbers. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites asked G-d for permission to send spies into the land; in Numbers G-d commands the Israelites to send the spies. In both versions, 10 spies speak evil about the land and two speak positively. G-d punishes the entire generation, telling them that they will wander for 40 years until the current generation dies off.

The portion continues with the story of history of the Israelites during the last year of their wandering. It includes the conquering of the two great kings - Sihon king of the Amorites who lived in Heshbon and Og king of Bashan. After conquering the kings the Israelites are encamped on the eastern shore of the Jordan. They can look out into the Holy Land.

This portion is read every year on Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath before the fast of Tisha B'Av. It is the saddest period of the Jewish year. This is a portion about history. But history is not a series of random events; history has a purpose. The prayer book teaches, "because of our sins were we thrown off our land." The reading of this portion becomes a time of soul searching over past sins and future redemption.

From Destruction To Creativity

(Isaiah 1:7) *"Your land is a waste, your cities burnt down; before your eyes, the yield of your soil is consumed by strangers – a wasteland as overthrown by strangers!"*

DISCUSSION

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in their book *The Universe Story* wrote that destruction is a component built into the universe. "Violence and destruction are dimensions of the universe. They are present at every level of existence: the elemental, the geological, the organic, the human. Chaos and disruption characterize every era of the universe, whether we speak of the fireball, the galactic emergence, the later generations of stars, or the planet earth" (pp. 51 - 52). They make a strong case when they claim, "out of destruction comes creativity."

Is it true that creativity comes from destruction? It is possible to accept that idea, given some examples from the natural world around us. The explosion of a supernova leads to the manufacture of matter necessary for life. The destruction of hydrogen at the heart of the sun causes the creation of energy which sustains that life. Volcanic and geological activity releases the chemicals necessary for life. New higher forms of life emerge from the death of lower forms. From destruction comes creativity.

What is true on the cosmic level is true on the human level as well. Some of the most creative periods of human history grew out of some the most destructive. Throughout history, war and tragedy has led to creativity and growth. Perhaps Nietzsche was right in his famous statement that has become a cliché, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

This week's portion is always read on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the Jewish year. Tradition teaches that both the first and the second Temple in Jerusalem were destroyed on the ninth of Av. It was a day of destruction the like of which the Jewish people had never known. Yet out of destruction grew creativity. A wise rabbi, Yochanan ben Zakkai, was able to escape Jerusalem by hiding in a casket. He approached the Roman general leading the siege and asked for permission to set up a center of learning in Yavneh. The general gave permission, and out of this center grew Talmudic Judaism, one of the most creative periods of Jewish history. Through the Talmud, Judaism survived. Can you think of other examples of Jewish creativity that grew out of Jewish tragedy? Can you think of bad events in your own life from which you derived some good? What were they?

Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of Av, is a fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples, one on the 10th of Av by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the second on the 9th of Av by the Romans in 70 C.E. (we commemorate both on the 9th). Of the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, a number of them coincidentally have occurred on the ninth of Av, most notably the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

Tisha B'Av is the culmination of a three week period of increasing mourning which began with the fast of the 17th of Tammuz. During this three week period weddings and other parties are not permitted, and people refrain from cutting their hair. From the first to the ninth of Av, it is customary not to eat meat or drink wine (except on Shabbat) and from wearing new clothing.

The traditional restrictions on Tisha B'Av are similar to those on Yom Kippur: to refrain from eating and drinking (even water); washing, bathing, shaving; wearing leather shoes; engaging in sexual relations; and even studying Torah because it is a source of joy. Work is also restricted particularly by those who are fasting. It is the longest fast of the year because it occurs in summer. Many people fast only a half day.

This year Ner Tamid has invited four other groups (Beth Israel Judea, the Coastside Torah Circle, the West Bay Havurah, and Beit Yaakov to join us for a potluck meal before the fast. It will be followed by a serious discussion dealing with the question of how we should continue the mourning practices of Tisha b'Av in light of the existence of the State of Israel and a reunited Jerusalem. Representatives of each group will teach texts, lead songs that deal with these events, and chant Eikha, the Book of Lamentations to candlelight. Please join us.