

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Devarim

Devarim is the last of the five books of the Torah and it records Moshe's lectures to the Jewish People. Moshe inspires them to be all they can be: To fear G-d, to love G-d, and to lead a Torah lifestyle. Devarim does contain many new mitzvot, however its primary focus is internalizing the lessons of the first four books.

Devarim begins with the Jews encamped on the Jordan River, poised to enter the Promised Land. Surprisingly, their precise location is described with a string of unfamiliar place names: "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel on the east bank of the Jordan, in the desert, in the *Aravah*, near *Suf*, in the vicinity of *Paran*, *Tofel*, *Lavan*, *Chatzeroth*, and *Di Zahav*" (Devarim 1:1). This doesn't help us much. Nobody has ever heard of these places. It is for this reason that many commentators maintain that these aren't really place names at all. The Torah is speaking symbolically here. These words are descriptions of abstract places, terrible incidents out of our past.

The last "place" mentioned is "*Di Zahav*", literally, "Enough Gold". The Talmud states, "What is '*Di Zahav*'? The Academy of Rabbi Yanni taught, 'This is what Moshe was telling G-d, 'Master of the World, because you kept giving the Jews gold and silver until they exclaimed 'Enough!', that's what caused them to make a Golden Calf!' ... Rabbi Yochanan said, 'This is comparable to a man who wine, dined, and pampered his son. He hung a money bag around his son's neck and brought him to the door of the brothel. How could the boy possibly abstain?!'" (Berachot 32a).

The Talmud seems to be saying that wealth weakens our spiritual muscles. However, the truth is far more complex than that. Elsewhere the Talmud tells us that the high priest had to be the wealthiest kohen. If the most suitable candidate for the position didn't have the money, then we give it to him and make him wealthy (Yoma 19a). Well, if money has such a negative impact on people, why in the world would we require the high priest to be wealthy? Don't we want him to be holy?

A brilliant explanation is offered by the Alter of Slabodka (Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, (1849-1927). People grow by exercising their free will and making the right choices in life. When someone is poor their options are limited, so there are fewer decisions to make. However, when you have wealth you have options. You are in a position of power that challenges your morality. Every one of these challenges is an opportunity to exercise free will and make the right choice. In this way, wealth can act as a catalyst for personal growth. It is perfectly understandable why we want the high priest to be the wealthiest kohen.

Poverty and wealth do have one thing in common. They will both either make you or break you. Wealth can drag you down into narcissistic materialism or it can prod you to greatness. Poverty can



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make you jealous and bitter or it can lead to the healthy carefree attitude of the man of faith. The choice is yours.

In the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746), “Man is actually in the midst of a raging battle, for every situation in life, whether good or bad, is a test. Poverty on the one hand, wealth on the other. In the words of King Solomon, “Maybe I will be satiated and become atheistic, and I will say ‘Who is G-d?’. Or maybe I will be poor and steal...” (Proverbs 30:9). Serenity on the one hand and suffering on the other; man finds himself surrounded by battles. If he will be a good soldier and be victorious in all of his battles, then man will be truly whole...” (The Path of the Just, chap. 1).

The challenges of both poverty and wealth are powerful, but they are not identical. Wealth can lead to denial of G-d and even to a golden calf. Poverty comes with its own set of challenges. The first rule of war is, “Know your enemy”. We need to recognize G-d’s tests and respond accordingly. To put our heads in the sand and convince ourselves that we are not being challenged at all is to surrender to the enemy. The battle will be lost even before it was to begin.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (1810-1883) was the father of the Mussar Movement, a revival that promoted intensive study of the classic Jewish ethical teachings. One of his most famous followers was Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam, the Rabbi of Alcsot. Reb Naftoli was a very poor man. The story is told that one evening when he came home to his wife, she told him that she had purchased a lottery ticket. Rabbi Naftoli was deeply troubled. “My dear wife”, he said, “All my life I have trained myself in the art of serving G-d faithfully as a poor man. Now you want to make us rich? I have no experience in dealing with the challenges of wealth. Nor do I have any interest in learning how to fight new battles. The one that I’m familiar with gives me a hard enough time.”

May we recognize that all situations in life are personalized tests, and become greater people by living up to the challenges that G-d sends our way.

Shabbat Shalom

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