

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Devarim

Parshas Devarim ushers in the Torah book of the same name Sefer Devarim; in English, the book of Deuteronomy. The fifth of the Five Books of Torah presented to us by Moses as dictated to him by G-d, Sefer Devarim covers the last few weeks of Moses' life as he sought to convey his final messages to his beloved people.

Throughout, Moses passionately rebuked, warned, instructed and guided us with various methods. At times he elaborated, at times he merely insinuated by way of a single, pointed word. Nowhere is the latter, i.e. the hints, more obvious than in the very first verse.

These are the words which Moses spoke to all of Israel across the Jordan; in the desert, in the plains, opposite [Yam] Suf, between Paran and Tofel, and Lavan, and Chatzeros and Di Zahav. Devarim (1:1)

In the style of opening lines, this might be categorized as an exact dateline with several coordinates providing an exact location. Rashi, among other commentators, immediately notes several discrepancies. Firstly, not all of these places were in the same vicinity. Moreover, several of the locations mentioned, such as Tofel and Di Zahav, are glaringly absent from the rest of the Scripture. Clearly then, these are discreet references to previous episodes.

With regard to Di Zahav specifically, (lit. enough gold), Rashi, citing Talmud (Berachos 32b) explains He rebuked them for the [episode of the golden] calf which they made as a result of the large amounts of gold they possessed. Rashi (ibid.)

Examining the aforementioned passage in Talmud yields some more discussion on the matter. Moses was apparently focusing heavenwards and declaring, "because of all the gold You gave them, they ended up creating the golden calf." The serving of the golden calf as a god was considered one of the most egregious failings in our national history. Almost immediately following the revelation at Mount Sinai, having heard G-d Himself command "You shall not have another god in My Presence", they faced this golden calf and declared "These are your gods, O Israel." Yet, Moses felt there was some level of charge towards Heaven. He seemed to believe that it was an inevitable consequence of their abundant gold.

The sages of the Talmud (**Berachos 32b**) took this concept further, providing an analogy. A king had his son washed and beautifully clothed, provided him with food and drink, and equipped him with a pouch of money. He then left his son in front of a brothel. The Talmud concludes "Is there any hope the boy will not sin?"

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, (ca. 1873-1936), a leading Torah scholar in pre-War Poland and one of the greatest ethicists and educators of his generation, observed the above Talmudic passage with fascination. Many people assume that the beginning of a wrongdoing lies in a corrupt decision. When a human, endowed with free will, takes a bad turn on his spiritual journey, he has set the stage for the almost inevitable fall. It is evident, asserts R' Levovitz, that the wheels have been set in motion far earlier. The sages, indeed Moses, perceived that the root of a sin lies much farther back, well before the decision-making transpires. To refer to the earlier parable, there is nothing whatsoever wrong with feeding or bathing the prince. Moreover, with any fair assessment there seems to be no connection to his later misconduct. If the prince disappoints the royal family with weak judgment, should we not just leave it at that?



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

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The Baalei Mussar, those who promoted regular, systematic introspection and passionate studies of Jewish ethical works, placed tremendous emphasis on introductions and early causes. There is a tremendous responsibility to foresee possible outcomes. While amassing much gold is not intrinsically bad, Moses felt that therein lay the Golden Calf. It had become the inevitable.

The message here is not simply to shrug off responsibility. Common sense dictates that responsible people are just that. Responsible. The point is, rather, that one can accomplish so much more when focused from the outset. Consider a salesman. A sluggish response to his morning alarm clock should not necessarily forecast a ruined day. However, it just so happens that on the same day he takes longer selecting his breakfast cereal, wastes an inordinate amount of time searching for his car keys, and conveniently remembers several long forgotten friends who merit large segments of his schedule in the spirit of reconnecting. Needless to emphasize, this not a record-breaking day of sales. Is it related to his lethargic first moments? A resounding yes!, writes R' Levovitz. In order for the day to proceed productively, the earliest parts, the foundations must all be directed in the same direction.

Maimonides (1135-1204) in his Guide for the Perplexed (1:34) writes

"one of the reasons people fail to attain wisdom is they lack the necessary prerequisite introductions. The wisdom [itself] is easily attained, although one must first acquire its introductory precepts. Fools despise introductions, seeking only the main point.

This comment is generally explained as a reference to philosophical pursuits. Of course, Maimonides, well acquainted with and completely supportive of, our sages values, can also be understood in light of their above mentioned teachings.

Many people, including fools, would love to learn Torah at the same level as the wise. What separates the wise from the fools? It is the initial approach. As Rambam writes, "the wisdom [itself] is easily attained"; accessible even to those with limited capacities. The "wise" student prepares himself adequately. Not sufficing with the prerequisite knowledge base, his mien and poise are attuned to his scholarly pursuits. External circumstances, seemingly insignificant, are duly considered and weighed in respect to the focus at hand. Contrast that with the approach of the "fool". While possessing similar faculties to his colleague, the comprehensive approach with all its minutiae exasperates him. Choosing to ignore the periphery, he "gets right to the point." The unfortunate, time-tested result is often a disillusionment, with the student simply forsaking the project for some time.

There are times when we feel we are up against a wall. We may partly believe the maxim "if at first you don't succeed, try again". It might serve us well to examine the foundations upon which our endeavors are based upon. At times, earlier settings and seemingly unrelated details and attitudes have more of an impact than we may care to acknowledge. This might prove useful in our quest towards greatness.

Shabbat Shalom

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