

Isn't it curious that as we prepare for the High Holidays, with thoughts of Teshuvah and renewing our sacred commitments, as we stand before the Seat of Judgment on the Yom HaDin (the Day of Judgment), we read this Torah portion which is cast as Moshe's parting address to his people. Doesn't it sound like a pre-R"H sermon in a modern synagogue? I will endeavor, in this brief D"t, to give you the highlights of the Parashah and try to explain this seeming coincidence.

The opening words of the Parashah explain that what is taking place is a renewal of the Covenant. But it is all inclusive... Not just for the priests or the tribal leaders. ATEM NITZAVIM HA YOM KOOLCHEM... You stand before God...all of you. The call to reenter the covenant specifically includes men, wives, children, strangers or aliens, and even low status servants. Even more so, the Torah wishes to include those who are here (verse 13 & 14) and those who are not here, i.e., past generations and most important future generations.

Some commentators have explained that this inclusiveness is a statement about our people's unity. We are made up of scholars and leaders, judges and functionaries, workers and bosses, men women and children, converts, woodcutters and drawers of water, Ashkenazim and Sepharadim, religious and secular, Misnagdim and Chassidim. Is this not the Jewish community, especially in modern Israel?

Later in Chapter 29, we read again of the dire consequences of disregarding God's laws. Indeed, the themes of exile, return and repentance are central to this entire reading. The Etz Haim points out that the term SHUV=return from which we derive the term TESHUVA=repentance is mentioned 7 times in the first 10 verses of Chapter 30. Prof Fox believes that this may be a reference to the fate of the Northern Kingdom which was overrun by Assyria a century before King Josiah's discovery of the book we now call DEVARIM=Deuteronomy. He means that the message of exile, return & repentance was interpolated into the words of Moshe but really related to historical fact, not a prophecy. Whether this be true or not, the emphasis on TESHUVA is very traditional during this holiday season.

I find the verses 30:11-14 particularly fresh and modern sounding, again in the spirit of a R"H sermon. "Surely this instruction which I enjoin you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens that you should say, who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us that we may observe it. Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us, and impart it to us, that we may observe it. I have heard people who resist religious observance say things like that; it was OK in Europe (across the sea) but not for us here. Or it is too lofty or otherworldly (up in the heavens) only suitable for very religious and otherworldly people. But Moshe teaches that the Torah is very close to us, even now and even after 3500 years.

Finally, a word about the Haftarah. It is the 7th and last Haftarah of consolation, all from Deutero-Isaiah. The prophecy is universal peace, and restoration of Jerusalem as the center of Jewish worship, as well as the center of universal worship of God. Once again, another R"H theme is struck here, namely the universal acceptance of God's kingship as we recite in the Malchuyot section of the R"H musaf.

My hope is that this Parashah and its Haftarah with its themes of repentance, reaffirmation of the Covenant, and restoration of the kingship of God provide us with an easy transition to the sacred days before us. I would also urge more of you to volunteer to do a Dvar Torah as I have many slots still open. The D'var is not in the heavens nor is it beyond the sea.

Shabbat shalom and Shana tova.

SPK  
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