

EISAV'S REWARD

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Parshas Divarim begins the final chapter in the life of Moshe and the nation's 40 years of wandering. Poised within sight of the Promised Land, Moshe presented G-d's final instructions to the generation that would soon take possession of the land.

In his introduction to Sefer Divarim Rav Hirsch explained that the focus of Moshe's final discourse was to prepare the Jews for the transition from their lives in the desert to their lives on the land. "Now the people are about to make the transition from constant influence by a central guiding power into a life of individualization in which, more than ever, the Jew needs to be constantly reminded of his calling."

The change would be extreme. In the desert the people were in close contact with the nation's leadership. In the desert the people were in sight of the Mishkan and its attendant services. In the desert they were fed and watered through miraculous means. In the desert punishment was swift and immediate. In the desert the tribes were in close proximity and contact with each other. In the desert the nation was isolated from the rest of the world. Contact with the other nations was limited and there was no fear of assimilation. However, all that would change once they crossed over the Yarden.

The nation would decentralize. Each tribe would settle in their assigned portion. Contact between the tribes would be limited to industry and commerce, the three Yomim Tovim when everyone gathered in Yerushalayim, and individual initiative. Contact with the nation's leadership would require effort and travel. For most of the people it would be limited to the three holidays, Pesach, Shevuoth, and Succos when they anyway had to travel to Jerusalem. Physical sustenance would follow the prescribed laws of nature and reward and punishment would be secreted within time and circumstance. The nation would come in contact with the inhabitants of Canaan and the surrounding nations and assimilation would become a real concern.

Divarim is therefore, "a compendium of those laws that had to be particularly noted by the authorities of the Law and by every member of the nation now that the nation was about to move from the wilderness into the land." (Rav Hirsch)

Considering the focus of Divarim and the its format as Moshe's final discourse, the entire Sefer was intentionally ordered and presented. Therefore, we are within our rights to question every nuance, expression, fact, and their placement in the discourse.

In 1:2 of the Parsha Moshe identified the setting of his final discourse as, "eleven days from Horeb, on the way to the mountain of Sair." In 2:1, Moshe again mentions the same mountain, "and we detoured many days around the mountain of Sair." Back in Parshas Chukas, the Jews asked permission from Edom to cut through their land, and Edom refused. Pasuk 20:21 in Bamidbar states, "and Edom refused..." Following the death of Aharon Pasuk 21:4 again states, "And they traveled from Har HaHar back toward Yam Suf in order to circumvent the land of Edom."

Har Sair is the western border of the lands of Edom. It is located south of the Dead Sea, between the Dead Sea and Eilat, and serves as the southeastern border of Israel. The lands of Edom were given to Eisav as his inheritance and were not part of Eretz Yisroel.

Why was the Torah so concerned about Eisav's lands, and why did Moshe mention it two times in his opening words of Divarim? The Jews had paid a terrible price to detour around Eisav's lands. Following the death of Aharon the Jews had a crisis of faith when Moshe began leading them back toward Egypt because of the detour. For forty years they had wandered. Finally they were at the Southern boundary of the Promised Land and they were heading back toward Egypt! They confronted Moshe and the incident with the serpents and the copper snake occurred. As the Pasuk in Bamidbar 20:6 states, "and a great many died because of the serpents." What was so important about the lands of Edom, and why emphasize it again in the beginning of Divarim?

The Medresh Rabah 1:15 on this week's Parsha explains why the Jews were obligated to circumvent Eisav's land. Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel explained that Eisav's extraordinary "Kibud Av V'aim - the honor Eisav had toward his parents, was the merit which protected his lands from being conquered by the Jews. Rabbi Shimon, in contrast with his own personal behavior explained that Eisav would specifically wear the same royal garments when serving and caring for his parents as he did when he went out into the public to conduct his business. It illustrated Eisav's unique attitude regarding his parents. He felt that serving them demanded the same concern, respect, protocol, pomp, and ceremony as he expected for himself as the king of Sair.

Eisav was and is the enemy of the Jew. Other nations who treated the Jews as he did, such as Ammon, Moab, Sichon, and Og were punished and ostracized for not forming an alliance with us. Yet, Eisav lands remained untouched. Why?

The importance of properly honoring parents is almost unequaled. As the fifth of the Ten Commandments clearly stated, "So that your days will be long upon the land that G-d has given to you." (Shemos 20:12) More so than that is the importance of honoring parents. Parents represent authority and discipline. Parents represent the closest link to the past and the wisdom of the ages. Parents are our first teachers and the ones most responsible for molding our character. Parents are the foundation of family and family is the corner stone of society. Without parents and family Torah and values can not be transmitted from generation to generation. As my Father Shlita says, "Family is the syringe that G-d created to inject values into the body of humanity."

As Moshe began his final discourse his primary concerns were for transition and continuity. How will the Jews fare once he was gone? Will they stand strong in the face of assimilation and adversity or succumb to the seductiveness of new ideas and idolatry? The easiest, most available, and most potent antidote against assimilation is parents and family. The most secured guarantee for continuity of Torah and values is parents and family.

Eisav's evil was the greatest frame for displaying his good. By contrast with his evil the good and its reward became more obvious and profound. Therefore, in emphasizing the importance of transmission and the place of family in securing the future of the nation against the onslaught of assimilation, Moshe highlighted the reward given to Eisav for his exceptional display of honor and respect.

Laws of Erev Tisha B-Av & Tisha B'Av

This year, Erev Tisha B-Av is Wednesday, July 21. Erev Tisha B'Av is no different than the rest of the Nine Days except in regard to preparing for the fast and the Seudas Hamafsekes (the dividing meal).

1. The accepted custom is to eat a large meal before Mincha in preparation for the fast. It is different from Erev Yom Kippur when there is a mitzvah to eat. On Erev Tisha B-Av there is no mitzvah to eat. In fact the Halacha suggests that a person who is able to fast on Tisha B'Av without eating a lot on Erev Tisha B'Av should do so.
2. After Mincha, before sunset, the Seudas Hamafsekes is eaten. This consists of a piece of bread, a cold hard-boiled egg, with the bread dipped in ashes. The meal is eaten while sitting on the floor, and three men should not sit together so that they avoid the need for making a Zimun. If three men do sit together they still do not make a Zimun. Regular shoes can be worn during this symbolic meal.
3. After the Seudah Hamafsekes it is advisable to verbally say, "I do not accept the fast upon myself until sunset".
4. Keep in mind that all the laws of Tisha B-Av take effect at sunset. Before sunset all eating and drinking must stop and leather shoes must be removed.
5. Some Poskim forbid learning Torah after midday on Erev Tisha B'Av, except those topics permitted to be learned on Tisha B-Av; however, many others permit it.

Tisha B'Av

Tisha B'Av, like Yom Kippur, is a 24+ hour fast, with additional restrictions.

The following are prohibited: Eating, drinking, wearing leather shoes (referring to leather construction such as the soles or uppers, not leather strips or ornamentation), washing any part of the body, marital relations, and the use of moisturizing creams, lotions, or oils. Anti-perspirant and medicinal ointments for rashes and irritations are allowed.

The prohibition against bodily washing is directed toward pleasure, not necessity. However, on Tisha B'Av the Halachik criteria for necessity are actual dirt. Therefore, washing one's face first thing in the morning is categorized as pleasure, and is prohibited. Netilas Yadayim is performed by washing the fingers till the knuckles. Women do not go to Mikvah on Tisha B'Av night, and it is recommended that all preparations for going to the Mikvah Thursday night, be done on Wednesday, Erev Tisha B'Av.

The distinction between Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av is in the reason for the restrictions. On Yom Kippur, which is a serious but not a sad day, we project an elevated sense of sanctity and purpose that renders physical pleasure and sustenance irrelevant. On Tisha B'Av, which is both a serious and a mournful day, we project a sense of loss and mourning that renders physical concern as unimportant. Therefore, on Tisha B'Av we have the following additional customs that reflect our status as mourners:

1. Until 1:00 p.m., we sit on the floor or a low stool (not higher than 12").
2. Like an Avel, we should not greet each other all of Tisha B'Av.
3. It is forbidden to learn Torah all day except for those topics relating to the laws of mourning or the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash.
4. One should not go to work on Tisha B'Av; however, if you feel that you must go to work, it is best to do so after midday - 1:00 p.m. Tisha B'Av is not to be used as a day to catch up on housework or repairs.
5. Tallis and Tefillin are first worn at Mincha, and Tzitzit should be put on in the morning without a Bracha.

Good Shabbos.

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