

ADDRESSING THE CONCERNS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Book of Divarim can be analyzed from the perspective of G-d and Moshe's concerns for the changes that would take place once the Jews settled in the Promised Land. (See Rabbi S.R. Hirsch)

There were four fundamental concerns that G-d and Moshe had for the nation's transition into the Promised Land relative to their 40-year experience in the desert.

1. : Distance from G-d and the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and the lessening of G-d's overt presence in the lives of the individual and the nation.
2. : Distance between the individual tribes and a decrease in the feeling of national identity and personal responsibility for the national mission.
3. : Distance from Torah leadership and a diminution of the Mesorah's transmission of Torah from G-d to Moshe to all future generations.
4. : Contact with other nations and the fears of assimilation.

This week's Parsha begins with Moshe's emphasis on doing all the Mitzvos, especially those commandments that are taken for granted because they seem to be less important or because they are part of the daily routine. As Rashi associated the word "Eikev" with "heel"; meaning, "those Mitzvos that a person tends to trample with his heel." (7:12)

Moshe reminded the Jewish people of G-d's Bris (covenant) and Chesed (kindness) with their forefathers. (7:13)

Moshe reiterated G-d's assurances that the Promised Land would produce bountiful children, crops, and herds (7:13). Furthermore, Moshe explained that the Jews would be separated from the other nations by virtue of the fact that there would not be any sickness or infertility among the Jews or their livestock.

Finally, Moshe reassured them of military victory in the battles to occupy Eretz Yisroel. At the same time he forewarned them against pitying the cultures and religions of the Seven Nations for fear that the Jews would become "ensnared" in their values and begin worshiping their idols. (7:16)

The Torah is a system of rules and regulations that integrates awareness of G-d and His benevolence into daily life. While in the desert, G-d was in greater evidence than any other

time. Cloud coverings, food from heaven, and water from rocks are not the usual or the expected. However, even miracles become routine and are taken for granted when they happen every day. In the mind of the generation born in the desert, none of the miracles just mentioned were anything more than, "How else do you get food and water?"

On the other hand, the generation that left Egypt knew that the routines of the desert were clear and undeniable miracles. Nevertheless, even they grew accustomed to the clear evidence of G-d's mastery over nature and events. Therefore, it became essential that the miracles be identified and reviewed as often as possible. (Shema, Kiddush, Pesach etc.)

The Talmud in Tractate Brachos explained that Moshe Rabbeinu authored the first of the four blessings of the Birkat Hamazone (Grace After Meals). When the Maana descended upon the desert camp for the first time, Moshe was inspired to memorialize the event in a blessing that would be recited after every meal. At the time, Moshe did not know that the Maana would continue to fall for 40 years. As far as he was concerned it was a momentary display of G-d's benevolent majesty intended to tie over the nation until another more natural method for feeding the nation would be made available. Nevertheless, Moshe decided to capture the moment in a blessing that would fulfill the biblical injunction of "Eat, be satisfied, and bless Hashem your G-d." (8:10) Since that time, it has become one of the most popular and constant expressions of our awareness of the Creator.

To quote some wise old farmer, "You can bring a horse to water but you can't force him to drink." Grace After Meals notwithstanding, how many people utilize Birkat Hamazone the way Moshe intended? How many people reflect upon G-d's miraculous benevolence in sustaining the entire universe as well as caring about the individual? Birkat Hamazone was intended to be a constant statement of our faith in a personal G-d Who created and cares for the entire universe. It was intended to combat complacency and rote with routine driven awareness. The fact that many of us "trample with our heel" and do not pray the way Moshe intended is a personal fault, not a fault of the system.

Eretz Yisroel is called the Promised Land because G-d promised the forefathers that their children would inherit the land of Canaan. In Pasuk 7:13 Moshe reminded the Jews that G-d had made a "Bris - covenant" with them. The deal was simple. "Keep My Torah and you will have safety, health and prosperity." However, the Bris was with the nation, not the individual. Furthermore, lest someone believe that they or their ancestors deserved to inherit the Promised Land and deserved G-d's continued protection, Moshe did not only say "the Covenant." He specifically said, the Covenant and the Kindness. The very deal with the nation was an expression of G-d's kindness, not something they had earned or deserved.

Hashem's deal with the nation promised safety, health and prosperity. However, the promise was not just with that generation just as it was not a promise just to the forefathers. The

promise was to all future generations. That meant that it was incumbent upon the generation of the Exodus and Sinai to "transfer the deal" to their children. Each subsequent generation would have to be inducted into both parts of the covenant, both parts of the Mesorah. (a) Follow the Torah and remain aware of G-d's constant benevolence and (b) Hashem will take care of the rest.

In fact, G-d will keep to His side of the deal to such an extent that it will be evident in contrast to the other nations. All other nations suffer the norms of nature: prosperity and hunger, fertility and infertility, the bounty or famine of harvest and herd. Not so the Jewish nation. If they keep to their side of the deal and teach their children by word and example to follow the entire Torah, big Mitzvos and small, G-d guaranteed that the children and the economy would be bountiful and healthy.

Finally, in Pasuk 7:16, Moshe forewarned the Jews that contact with the other nations had its pitfalls and "snares." In order for the Jews to protect themselves from assimilation they must know who the other nations are and what they believe in. To successfully discharge the national mission of being G-d's kingdom of priests one might confuse "getting to know them better," with showing respect for their beliefs and values. Therefore, Moshe stated in unequivocal terms, "Do not show compassion for their philosophies or practices, do not serve their G-d's! You will become ensnared!" Ignore the lure of "understanding their religions." Avoid the temptation of assimilation. Study G-d's Torah and follow His commandments and the contrast between "us and them" will be more than evident. The nation's lifestyle of Torah and Mitzvos will be a beacon of truth and understanding for all the nations so that they will proclaim, "What a wise and understanding people is this great nation!" (4:6)

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