

WE NEED BACKDROPS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha contains two of the basic pillars of the Jewish faith - the Shema and the Ten Commandments of Sinai. This parsha also contains Moses' plea for entry into the Land of Israel - an entry that is denied to him - and the explicit warning that the stay of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel is conditional upon the people's loyalty to the God of Israel and to the Torah. Thus the Land of Israel is also seen as a supreme value in Jewish life - hence, Moses' prayers and entreaties to be allowed to enter there - but its importance is nevertheless dependent on Israel's worship of God and the study and observance of His Torah. This interdependence too is one of the pillars of Judaism established for us in this parsha. The Land of Israel as a Jewish value can only exist and flourish if it is kept in tandem with the other basic values enunciated in the parsha - the Shema and the Ten Commandments from Sinai. As a singular, isolated value in itself, it will be unable to support the structure of the house of Israel. In these difficult, heart-wrenching days, we here in Israel, are painfully aware of this statement. The Land of Israel is a religious value to Jews, not merely a national one. Cut adrift from its religious moorings, it will eventually, over time merely drift away in the sea of problems, adversities and lost ideals.

This parsha, as is part of every other parsha in the book of Dvarim as well, emphasizes a review of the Jewish past. The past plays a major role in all Jewish life and thought. The past is our reference point for where we are currently. Moshe constantly reviews and recalls the past - Egypt, Sinai, the sojourn in the desert, etc. - in order to instruct and inspire the people for the tasks that lie ahead. When walking uphill here in Jerusalem (and wherever one walks it is always uphill) I often stop and turn around to survey how much of the hill I have already traversed. I gain heart and renewed vigor at seeing how far I have already come going up that hill. I think that the same is true for the Jewish people generally and especially at this time. Seeing how far we have come after the disasters of the past century, knowing our past both distant and near, is a necessary component for continuing to climb our hill. The Torah always emphasizes knowledge of the past. We pray to the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, we constantly recall the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation of Sinai. We are obsessed with our past for this is the only way to assure our future. Moshe's review of the past is timely in all generations. It will continue to strengthen us in our current hour of need.

Shabat shalom.

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