

CHOOSING A VISION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha of Dvarim traditionally precedes the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, Tisha b'Av. There are many connections between the parsha and the fast day but I feel that the main connection lies perhaps in the word "dvarim" itself. The word means "words" and, as Rashi points out, the nuance of the word in Hebrew is almost harsh. The words of Moshe in Dvarim are stern and reprimanding. They are the bitter truth that people are so loath to hear.

Soothing promises and vague commitments are much more popular and acceptable to the public. The rabbis of the Midrash emphasize the statement of Solomon that it is better to hear criticism from a true friend than to hear flattery and compliments from an enemy. These are words that are always to be remembered. The enemy that the Midrash refers to is Bilaam and the friend is Moshe. The flattery of Bilaam led eventually to thousands of deaths among the Jews. The words of Moshe have preserved the Jewish people for countless generations. And this is the story of Tisha b'Av and its connection to the parsha and the word "dvarim."

The prophets of Israel, Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, Amos, Hoshea and others all spoke harsh words to Israel and warned of the impending tragedy. The false prophets who are always to be found in our midst retorted with soothing words and lies that were sweet to the ears of the public. Thus, the destruction of the Temple and Jewish sovereignty became inevitable. We always prefer to hear sweet lies than to have to listen to harsh and painful truths.

The haftorah of Shabat Dvorim is always the first chapter of Yeshayahu, which begins with the Hebrew word "chazon." In fact, the Shabat preceding Tisha b'Av is always named Shabat Chazon after this first word of the haftorah of parshat Dvarim. "Chazon" means vision, prophecy. Vision can be positive or otherwise. A madman has a vision of world domination and the extermination of other human beings. A righteous person has a vision of a better, more peaceful, moral society. The great Chasidic masters stated that a person is judged in heaven not only on what that person accomplished and omitted to do but on the visions and goals that motivated that person in this world.

It is not only what a person is, it is also important to realize what that person wishes to be in order to be able to judge the person correctly. Though "chazon" can many times indicate a negative or sad prophecy, the word itself is a neutral one. One can choose whatever vision one wishes to choose.

Therefore Yeshayahu chooses the word "chazon" to begin his book of prophecy. What is the vision

of the Jewish people? What kind of a nation do they wish to be? This choice is particular and pertinent to individual human beings as well. Hearing the words of Moshe and of Dvarim can be of immense help to us in deciding what our "chazon" - national and individual, should be.

Shabat shalom. Tzom kal.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com