



TEMPLE
BETH-EL
OF GREAT NECK

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TBE Dvar Devarim 5782 - August 5th, 2022
Repairing a Broken World with Words
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This Shabbat we begin to read the book of Devarim. It's been 40 years since Moses led them from Egypt and 37 days hence, he will reach the end of his life.

Standing atop a lofty height, Moses begins his lengthy resummation of the events leading up to this point and of all the commandments given by the Eternal. It is only human to look back on this past and rewrite events in a way that is more rosy than real. Yet Moses, our best, most humble and definitely flawed teacher, does not shy away from the truth.

At nearly every turn, Moses has demonstrated how not to be a successful leader. He has stumbled his way into success though more often than not falling on his face when he fails. The Jewish people have reminded him repeatedly of how things were better before he led them from Egypt. They have risen up, grumbled and rebelled. God punishes them, though often not before Moses intercedes on their behalf. Eventually God scolds him too, his chosen prophet, for taking too much upon himself.

But with the passage of time things seem to have changed. The mantle of leadership is about to be handed off, a generational shift is taking place. The people are motivated, even organized. The Ephraimites and Reubenites and Gadites who want to reside east of the Jordan River, outside the promised land have agreed to take responsibility for their cousins and be the chalutzim, the shock troops in the conquest of the land. It all seems so gosh darn hunky-dory.

And so on the precipice of entering the oh so promised land that he will not enter, words pour forth from Moses' mouth. He speaks and speaks and speaks and so much of it makes sense, because he's repeating what we've already heard. Deuteronomy means second telling after all; so we've heard this all before.

And somehow in the midst of all this, we've missed something important. Something so barely perceptible has happened that we haven't even noticed. This time, instead of falling on his face, Moses is standing before all the people. This time Moses isn't stuttering, slow of speech and slow of tongue reluctant leader. He is speaking eloquently, at length and in full sentences. What has happened?

As we begin the book of Devarim, we are just 21 Days until Elul. 29 Days Hence until Tishrei. And in my world, that means we are on the precipice of the time to start to freak out. There's liturgy to review, services orders and sermons to prepare, a new Rabbi to break in, befriend and support. And that's to say nothing of my personal life.

We blink, turn around and it's Yom Kippur, as we say in Unetaneh Tokef, *U'mal'achim yechafeizun*, Even the angels are in disarray, *V'chil u'ra'adah yocheizun*, and seized by fear and trembling, *V'yomru*: they declare: "*hinei, yom haDin.*" Behold the day of judgment is... well it's not quite here yet but it...is... coming.

And yet we've heard this all before, too, right? It's no big deal, repent don't repent, you'll have another chance in a year. Show up in nice clothes but an hour and a half into for a 2 and half hour service. What does it matter? It's okay if we, your clergy, bat our heads against the wall. That's our job. We're there from the start to the finish no matter what. But what exactly is the point of beating our chests half-heartedly and mindlessly reciting an alphabet of woe? *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi...?*

I mean really? What is the point when we look around and the forests are on fire, the rivers are flooding, insurrections are being investigated, there is madness in the streets and monkeypox lurking. Have we really been here before? Has it ever been quite like this? It's time to really ask ourselves, what in the world are we doing when we recite these words, *Heevinu, v'Hirshanu, Zadenu, Hamasnu, Tafalnu shaker...*

Because here is where we *are* at. By we, I mean us, collectively, one Jewish people, all of us. Tomorrow night is the 9th of Av. And we begin the process of recounting the year that has passed. In the process, we also stop and realize that the burning, the flooding, the rebellions, the sickness and the shootings- they are all too real. That's the brokenness of our world. Those are the scattered, shattered pieces of the universe we are charged with helping God repair, *l'takein olam b'malchut shaddai*, as it is written in the Aleinu prayer.

Just as real is the brokenness in our hearts. The pain of sickness, loss of loved ones and friends. The battered, tattered feelings we all have ourselves experienced. How did we love? When were we indifferent? When were we victorious? When did we fail? Who did we lose? And in the process, did we lose ourselves along the way?

Tomorrow night Jews the world over reflect on this brokenness. Some will bemoan the burning of the ancient temples, others the martyrdom of our people in massacres. Some will sit on stools and some will fast. Many, including us, will read from Eicha, the Book of Lamentations, tomorrow night here at 8pm at TBE. And we will light candles of memory to try to light the pathway forward to a better world.

And that better world, it doesn't come by someone just scotch taping it all up and poof it's all good again... Nor can we get there by lighting candles alone. Somehow we know that the raging inferno we all want to put out isn't just something that happened thousands of years ago. The ancient Temple burns again tomorrow night, in our minds, our memories, and we sit and watch in horror as the fire rages and the smoke billows.

What needs doing is naturally what follows in the wake of that *Khurban*, that disaster. The rebuilding. It takes work, serious work as a community, as a people, as a nation, work that is ongoing to this day. And some years we don't do it.

We simply show up at the High Holy Days, and hope it's okay. It usually is, even if our lives are poorer for it. We repent or maybe not, or we do it half-heartedly. And still, when the Sefer Chayim is signed and sealed we will still probably make the cut.

Say what you will for a Theology of Indifference, but if we want that showing up, the standing and sitting, the fasting and praying to mean something more, it takes work and reflection that begins tomorrow night as we examine the brokenness in our lives.

But it also takes words, or in Hebrew, Devarim, both private meditations and public declarations. Devarim, the name of this new book of Torah and our weekly Parsha. It is through Devarim, the spoken word that God created this universe and it is through **our** spoken words that we can start to repair it and repair ourselves.

Once more we can learn from Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher, not just by the content and truth of his speech but by the very act of his doing so. We must speak the truth aloud to one another not just about where we have succeeded and triumphed, but more importantly where we have not, of where we failed and are ashamed.

To acknowledge aloud God's majesty and malchuyot is to also acknowledge our own human failings, but also vice versa. Perhaps this is why therapy and communal confession are so very Jewish where private confession is not. It is to proclaim the fragility of the world around us is to admit that despite our bravado, we too and everything we love are so very fragile. That this world is broken and we are too. We must name these things, and use our words... *Ya'atznu rah. Kizavnu. Latznu. Mahrahdu. Niatznu. Sararnu...*

Why is this so important? There are 2 types of Mitzvot, we are taught. There are those which are *Bein Adam L'Makom*, between a person and God, and those which are *Bein Adam L'Chavero*, between one person and another. Once might think that the first is the more important, that one's relationship with God is the most important. Not so.

From the *Mishneh Torah* we learn sins between people and God are likewise distinct from those between people, and further, that our petitions are not heard in heaven until the latter are righted in restitution and pacified through our speech. Until we speak the words of our brokenness, our loss, our failure aloud and to one another, we have not begun the work of *Teshuva*, the return and repair that our hearts so desperately need.

Using the language of recovery, until we name the issues and admit we have a problem, we can't begin to fix it or pretend it doesn't exist. Where there is smoke, there is fire, and tomorrow night, the Temple burns again to remind us that it cannot be ignored.

As we look ahead to the new year in just 50 days, we also look back to the year that has nearly passed. Let us learn from Moses- let us take off the rose colored glasses, let us begin to see what we've really done this year. *Avinu, Pashanu, Tzararnu, Kisheenu Oref.*

Let us, like Moses, find our voice and speak aloud *Devarim*, words of truth. Thus may we review our deeds, and begin to repair the world around us and the world within. Ay ya ya yay...

Shabbat Shalom.