

This week's parashah is Devarim, the first Torah portion of the book of Deuteronomy. It is also known as Shabbat Hazon, the Shabbat of vision, named after the first words of the Haftarah, from the beginning of Isaiah, which opens, "Hazon Yeshaya/A Vision of Isaiah. . ." This particular combination of Devarim and Hazon always falls on the Shabbat before Tisha b"Av, which this year will be on Wednesday/Thursday.

Both the Torah portion and the haftarah contain some rebuke, and in fact, Hazon Yeshayah is the last of three of haftaroth of rebuke, in the Three Weeks preceding Tisha B'Av. But I think there is something even more relevant than the rebuke going on.

Devarim is at its most macrocosmic about context and memory. As I mentioned last week, the set-up of the whole book is that Israelites are encamped at the plains of Moab, ready to enter the promised land, and this is Moshe's final speech to them. He opens it by reminding his listeners of the past – not retelling the journeys of the previous generation exactly as written in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers (thank goodness!) but emphasizing the points that he most urgently wants to impress, leaving out some details and embellishing others.

Moshe doesn't start by saying, "Remember that Hashem brought you out of Egypt." Or "Remember that you accepted the Torah at Sinai, you'd better follow it." Moshe starts his narrative with the point after the Israelites are ready to leave Mt. Sinai. Literally, the first words of his speech, in Deut, 1:6 are "Hashem our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain." As he goes on, the first instructions he recounts are the instructions to move, to go to the promised land. Now it may be that he is starting here because he is speaking to the next generation at the culmination of that journey, as they are poised to enter the land. But this framing also reminds us that the point of Torah was not just to leave Egypt, not just to receive revelation, not just to build a mishkan, not to wander around in the wilderness in a state of heightened

holiness, as tempting as it might be – but ultimately to create a responsible nation.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has taught about Parashat Shelach, “Much of Torah is about things not conventionally seen as religious at all: labour relations, agriculture, welfare provisions, loans and debts, land ownership, and so on. It is not difficult to have an intense religious experience in the desert, or in a monastic retreat, or in an ashram. . .

But that is not the Jewish project, the Jewish mission. God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law, and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise...”

As the first instruction Moshe recounts in Devarim is the instruction to move toward the promised land, the first failure he recounts is the failure of the people to take the land, the failure that resulted in everyone over age 20, including Moshe, sentenced to die in the wilderness without seeing the land.

Tisha B'av itself commemorates that failure. According to Masechet Taanit 26b: **On the Ninth of Av it was decreed upon our ancestors that they would** all die in the wilderness and **not enter Eretz Yisrael; and the Temple was destroyed the first time**, in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, **and the second time**, by the Romans. .

Before even the two destructions of the Jerusalem and the holy Temple, the earliest calamity that the Talmud assigns to this day is the first collective failure that Moshe mentions in this parashah – that rebellion against entering the land,

which Rabbi Sacks has understood as a rebellion against responsibility for building a society.

On this Shabbat before Tisha B'Av, even as we prepare to mourn our exile from that land and the autonomous society we built there, we are reminded that our ancestors failed at their very first chance to build that society.

Of all the catastrophes that have befallen our people, of all of the failures that led to calamity, why the focus on this one? This year, I am beginning to suspect that we are not only supposed to understand it as a catastrophe, but also for a model of how life goes on after and throughout failure and grief.

Over the course of Deuteronomy, Moshe reminds the people of their parents' failure to enter the land. He also predicts their descendants' future failures and exile, and their future return to the land. He situates them in history and reminds them that their story is neither the beginning nor the end of a much longer story. The generation that left Egypt was expected to enter the land of Israel, and they failed. Hundreds of years later, the prophet Jeremiah will explicitly tell the people that destruction is coming; they must accept the yoke of the Babylonians. The generation of Jeremiah has the task of accepting exile.

Our people's story is one of exile and renewal. And exile, and renewal. Over and over. This is not to say that history repeats itself without any progress, - *chas v'shalom*, God forbid. Our failures change and our successes change, as we learn from what came before. It is rather to say that neither success nor failure is an end, that history spirals and human moral and societal progress is not linear. Each generation has a different task.

In each historical moment, the task is to create the most moral society we can with the tools we can.

We may fail again. And I say "we" broadly. Certainly, the Jewish national project, the state of Israel, is moving in a societal direction towards calamity. But as we all live through pandemic, as we witness the essential tasks the governments are

supposed to fulfill for citizens breaking down here in our diasporic community, I think Moshe's teaching in Devarim on the eve of Tisha B'Av is essential. Failures happen. We must grieve from and learn from them. And then we must bear the memory of them, and use that memory to build the communities, the societies we can, with what we have left. We must use the memory of what we've lost to inform what we yet hope to create.

Rebecca Solnit advises, "Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair," the theologian Walter Breuggeman notes. It's an extraordinary statement, one that reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and the worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope...