

**SPEECH ON HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TORAH'S SEFER DEVARIM**

Today's parsha is within the Torah's 5<sup>th</sup> and last, book – the book of Devarim.

This last book of the Torah repeats many things that were already stated in the previous 3 books of the Torah. For that reason, the Talmud calls this last book "Mishna Torah" – meaning "repetition of Torah". Interestingly, the English name – Deuteronomy – means the same thing.

This last book of the Torah consists of a long farewell speech that Moshe delivered to the Jews just before he died, when the Jews were encamped [here], about to cross the Jordan River into the promised land

Moshe's farewell speech has 3 main subjects:

- summaries of laws that the Jews must follow when they live in the promised land
- explanations of WHY Jews should keep those laws
- summaries of historical events that occurred over the previous 40 years in the desert

What happened during those 40 years in the desert?

3500 yrs ago, when the Jews left Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea [here] and travelled toward Mt Sinai.

On the way, they stopped at a place called Marah. The only water available there was too bitter to drink. Moshe used wood from a special tree to filter the water and make it drinkable. Interesting, Anshel Epstein (of Cedar Sinai Synagogue in Cleveland) told me that during the Yom Kippur War, when he was an Israeli soldier stationed in the Sinai Peninsula, he saw the spring of Marah. He said it stunk of sulfur

Then the Jews travelled to the desert of Sin desert [here]. The Jews ran out of food. Gd provided manna for the Jews eat, and continued to provide manna every morning, throughout the years the Jews were in the desert.

Then the Jews travelled to Refidim [here], where there was no water to drink. Gd instructed Moshe to hit a rock with his staff. Moshe did that, and water flowed out. Later, Amalekites attacked, and the Jews fought back.

Then the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai [here], located in the Sinai Desert. They prepared 3 days for a close encounter with Gd. On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, the Jews stood at the base of the mountain. They witnessed 7 things – fire, smoke, lightning, dark clouds, loud noises, shofar blasts, and Gd's loud voice reciting the 10 commandments. Moshe ascended the mountain. He stayed there 40 days, during which time, according to tradition, Gd taught him the oral law. Gd wrote the 10 commandments on 2 stone tablets, and gave it to Moshe. Moshe descended the mountain. When Moshe saw the Jews worshipping the golden calf, he was so angry that he threw down and broke the stone tablets. Gd was so angry that he wanted to annihilate the Jews, but was placated by Moshe. Then Gd told Moshe: ascend the mountain again and stay for another 40 days, and I will write 10 commandments again for you, but this time YOU supply the stone tablets (since you broke that last ones I gave you),

After the 10-commandments episode, the Jews remained in the Sinai desert [here] for another year. During that time, the Jews constructed the mishkan (Tabernacle). They also performed their first Passover seder.

After staying a year in the Sinai desert, the Jews started travelling northward toward the promised land.

They stopped at a place [here] later named Kivrot Hata'avah. The Jews complained that all they have to eat is manna. They said the food was much better in Egypt, and that they wished they had meat. Gd said, you want meat? I will make sure meat – quail meat – is all you eat for 30 days "until it comes out your nose". And that is what Gd did, and He killed 24,000 Jews in a plague.

Then the Jews travelled to Kadesh [here] in the Paran desert. They sent 12 spies to scout out the promised land. The spies returned 40 days later. They reported that the land is beautiful, but the gentile nations there are too strong for us to conquer. The Jews cried and complained, saying things like: we wish we were dead; why did Gd bring us here to die? It would be better to return to Egypt; in fact, lets select a new leader and return to Egypt. But the complaint that seemed to anger Gd the most was the adults crying our children will die in this desert. Gd's response was NO, your children will live and enter the promised land. It is YOU ADULTS that will die in the desert. Gd declared that the Jews will remain outside Israel for 40 years, until the ADULT generation – who witnessed Gd's miracles and yet did not have faith He would fulfill his promise – die out.

The Jews (according to tradition) remained in Kadesh 19 years. During that time, Korach led a large following of Jews contesting the Moshe's authority. Korach asked why is Moshe more special than other Jews; we are all holy and we all heard Gd's voice at Mount Sinai. The earth opened up and swallowed the leaders, and a plague killed Korach's followers.

After 19 yrs in Kadesh, the Jews started travelling along [this] long circuitous route for 19 years, until they ended up back where they started, in Kadesh.

Then Gd decided that the 40 year period in the desert was about up (about 1 year in Sinai desert, 19 years in Kadesh and 19 years along the circuitous path). Gd instructed the Jews to start the last leg of your journey to the promised land. But the Jews could not travel directly northward to the promised land, because Gd said don't provoke Edom (because Edomites are distant relatives of Jews, since according to tradition they are descendants of Abraham's grandson Esav – in fact Esav's nickname was Edom). Instead, travel around Edom.

Then the Jews traveled to another place called Kadesh (later called Mai Mriva) -- this one in Tsin desert. The Jews complained there is no water. Gd instructed Moshe to SPEAK to a rock (in contrast to 40 years earlier when Gd instructed Moshe to HIT a rock with his staff), but Moshe HIT the rock with his staff. Water flowed out. Gd informed Moshe that now you won't enter the promised with the rest of the Jews.

Just before this rock episode, Moshe's sister Miriam died. Just after the rock episode, Moshe's brother Aharon died. A Canaanite tribe attacked, and Jews fought back and destroyed the Canaanites' cities. Then the Jews complained: why did Gd take us here, no bread, no water, we are sick of disgusting manna. So Gd sent snakes to attack the Jews.

When the Jews finished circling around Edom [here], Gd instructed them not to provoke Moav or Amon either,

## Historical Background of Torah's Sefer Devarim

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because they, too, are distant relatives (since, according to tradition, Moabites and Ammonites are descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot) but instead to go around them.

That left the Jews [here]. They asked the king of southern Emori for permission to pass through Emori to get to their destination [here] at the Jordan River. But the Emori king refused. So the Jews battled and defeated the Emori. They then battled and defeated the northern northern Emori kingdom of Bashan. The Torah makes a big deal about the king of the Bashan Emori being "Og of the last of the giants" whose bed was 9 arm-lengths long. Moshe divided up the southern and northern Emori land between 2.5 Jewish tribes.

Finally, the Jews arrived [here], in the plains of Moav (Arvat Moav) along the Jordan River, just north of the Dead Sea.

Moshe begged Gd "Please change your mind and let me enter Israel." Gd said no, but you may view the promised land from afar.

Moshe realized he was reaching his end, after leading the Jews for 40 years. And it was here that he delivered his farewell speech that constitutes the last 1/5 of the Torah

In the last paragraph of the Torah, Moshe, at 120 years old, ascended Mount Nvo, viewed the promised land and died there. He was then buried (the Torah does not indicate by who) in an adjacent valley.

There is a kabalistic custom that once a year, on Succot, for Jews to congregate and hear the chazzan read the entire book of Devarim, from a Torah scroll, from beginning to end, non-stop. It takes 3 - 3.5 hours. When I used to attend Rabbi Blum's shul (Khal Yereim) on Taylor Rd (in Cleveland), we used to do that each year.

Recurring concepts in this last book of the Torah are:

- 1) Periodically gathering together: Moshe says that although now in the desert, we are all encamped together, after settling in the promised land, you will be spread out. At least 3 times a year, everyone should make a pilgrimage to the "place Gd will choose for his name to reside there".
- 2) Be happy: What should do DO when you are gather together? Be happy. The word "simcha" ("happy") occurs only once in each of the first 4 books of the Torah, but occurs 12 times in this last book, mainly relating to being happy when you assemble together. It states "you should JUST be happy". And not just YOU be happy, but make happy "your family, servants, Levite, widows and orphans". It also says a husband (at least for the 1<sup>st</sup> year of marriage) should make his wife happy.
- 3) Love and care for others: Moshe says Gd loves you / you should love Gd / you should love strangers ("hagair") who live among you - "Remember you yourselves were once strangers in Egypt" / give charity to the those who have diminished means -- Levite, stranger, widow & orphan.

