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שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש

Friday 24 July 2009 - 3 Menachem Av 5769
Sedra Devarim - 9th of Av

A WAY OF BECOMING

DOES THE TORAH TEACH US A WAY OF BEING, OR A WAY of becoming? The Sedra¹ this week begins the fifth Book of the Torah, Devarim (Deuteronomy). It is set in a time of transition. The Jews have spent many years in the wilderness, now they must prepare to enter the Promised Land. On one level, this is a descent from a spiritual mode of existence: fed by the Manna from Heaven, drinking from the Well of Miriam, in the presence of the sacred Sanctuary. Instead they will have to plough the land, reap the crops, care for cattle and sheep, live ordinary lives.

On another level entry into the Land meant reaching towards the essence of what it really means to be a Jew: to live in the sacred Land of Israel, carrying out all the Mitzvot of the Torah, many of which concern agriculture and could not be carried out in the desert. This was with the ultimate goal to have the holy Temple in Jerusalem as a light to all nations, rather than the secluded Sanctuary in the desert.

This suggests that the process of becoming something more than one is, involves steps which might seem problematic and questionable. In a sense this applies to the chain of Torah tradition. The Torah starts with clear laws at Sinai, and then the words of the written Torah Scroll. But in order to bring Judaism into the future there is also the chain of the Oral Law, the Sages who explain and expound, and add decrees and interpretations we might never have imagined².

A person might sometimes feel that these commentaries and

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explanations cover over the original purity of the word of G-d in the Torah. But in fact they are the garments of Torah which enable its subtleties and depths to be carried from the ancient past into the very different epochs and societies of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Modern times and Tomorrow. Within the garments, the essence of the Torah and its amazing ability to bond us with G-d, and G-d with us, remains pure and radiant.

There is a parallel message to us in the approaching Fast of the Ninth of Av, which begins on Wednesday evening (29 July) and continues till Thursday night. The Fast expresses our grief at the Destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem and at our long Exile among the nations of the world, who have often been supremely hostile to us. Yet Exile too is a mode of becoming. Despite the times of bitterness and of darkness, we can see it as a process which leads on to further, luminous stages, in which the Essence of the Divine will be revealed³.

The Fast of Av and the days leading towards it remind us that according to Jewish teaching, we should want something more than a cessation of hostilities, on all the different fronts of life, whether political or personal. As Jews we pray daily for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, which will signify genuine world peace and a new epoch of goodness and holiness. There will be peace for humanity, and for families, and even for each individual dealing with the struggle within his or her own heart.

The message that our future consists in moving down into the real and difficult world, into its patches of darkness, and discovering the radiance which is there, is in our Sedra, always read before the Ninth of Av. Indeed, there are tears, but the tears of grief can also be changed into tears of joy.

Our task as Jews is to realise that our aim is not to 'be', in other words to exist in the relatively relaxed present. Our goal is to 'become', to urge ourselves and the world forward another step, and another, to become something more: a realm of spiritual beauty and unity, a dwelling for the Divine.

1. Deut.1:1-3:22. 2. The Fifth Book of the Torah, Devarim, is in a way the start of this process, since it consists of Moses teaching the Jewish people about their past, described in the first Four Books of the Torah, and preparing them for the future. 3. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.4 pp.1087-91.

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SEDRA DEVARIM

NEW BEGINNINGS

Leila trudged up the garden path and heaved a sigh of relief as she knocked on the front door. Her mother opened it promptly and with one glance at her daughter's face knew that today had not been the best first day of school that Leila had so earnestly hoped for.

"Welcome home darling, it looks like you've had a long day", she sympathised while taking Leila's bag and handing her a cool glass of her special home-made lemonade.

Leila took a long sip and slumped exhausted onto the couch. As soon as she began to speak, her day's complaints seemed to rush out all at once. After explaining all the unhappiness of her day, she looked at her mother miserably, "See, my whole year is ruined. I've started it all wrong and now I can't change anything....I can't...right?"

"Darling", her mother gave Leila a tight squeeze and brushed her hair away from her face, "It sounds like today was a real challenge, but tell me...there must be something, at least one thing that was good about your day?"

Leyla took a minute to think before her eyes lit up in excitement, "Yes, you're right, there was. I was so upset I nearly forgot to tell you! On my way home, I met Shoshi in her front garden! I never knew she lived so close!"

"Shoshi, you mean the girl who joined your class last year and whom you've wanted to be friends with every since?"

"Yes! In fact, we're planning to walk to school together tomorrow." Leila exclaimed, "I can't wait!"

“Leila, listen to yourself, you’ve answered your very own question about whether we can really change things in life. Of course we can! Just like tomorrow, because you’re happy with having a friend you’re looking forward to walking to school instead of hating it!”

“But I can’t change today. I can’t take back what happened,” Leila remarked unhappily, looking miserable again.

“Not so simple my dear! Just look at how the Book of Devarim begins: ‘These are the words which Moshe said to all of the Jewish people’. As if to tell us to ‘**Look at these words!**’ - with excitement, as if for the first time! You see, Hashem teaches us to treat our life the same way. To look at each day anew, as if it were a new page and a new beginning.”

“Fair enough Ma, but how can I change my disastrous first day of school? I can’t begin school again” Leila observed miserably.

“Ahhhhh but you can... and that my dear, is the miracle of a good night’s sleep.”

“Really?” Leila asked curiously. “Of course,” her mother replied. “Imagine if we didn’t sleep, there would be no tomorrow to start out fresh. Life would be one long day, where every disaster would spoil every other part of our life. But as the sun sets we find a chance to leave the past day and all its disasters behind us. And with every sunrise we can open our eyes anew and welcome the chance to see our world differently and make our own new beginnings.”

“Oh Ma thank you!” Leila exclaimed. She gave her mother a hug. Then after she had supper, spent some time on homework, and some time on the phone, her mother was surprised to see her bounding upstairs, two steps at a time.

“Where are you going?” her mother exclaimed.

Leila’s reply came from upstairs. “I’m getting ready for a new beginning!”

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