

SHABBAT DEVARIM
4 Av 5760 / August 4, 2000

Service Leader: MICHAEL MAIN

Introduction:

Last week we ended a book of Torah; the Book of Numbers, the Book of Bamidbar. And we say a blessing each time we finish a book of Torah: "CHAZAK, CHAZAK, VNEET CHAZEK - Be strong, be strong, and together we will be strengthened." It reminds us to look inward and be aware of our own inner strength and look outward and around us and be reminded of the strength that surrounds us; the strength of family, the strength of friends, the strength of our BCC family.

It is also a reminder that we are embedded in the many interlocking cycles of Jewish ritual and Jewish time; and this is the cycle of Torah readings as tonight we begin the Book of Deuteronomy, the Book of Devarim. Last Shabbat was also Rosh Chodesh, the Festival of the New Moon, and so we were reminded of the cycles of the seasons and of the waxing and the waning of the moon, and so we began the new month of Av this week. And we are also embedded in the cycles of the Jewish holiday calendar, and we are caught up in a time of sadness right now but looking forward to a time of renewal and new strength. Let us explore a little of these cycles and holidays and sadnesses and happinesses as we prepare for Tisha B'Av and look forward to the cycle of High Holidays which is rapidly approaching.

Drash:

Tonight we begin the the Book of Deuteronomy, the book of Devarim. The story is that at the time of the Judean king, Josiah (around 621 BCE), a new book of Torah was "found," which was this book of Devarim, written by Moses and presenting all that was needed to live a good life. Josiah was worried about what had become of the Jewish people, and he began a powerful reformation as he crusaded to restore the moral and theological foundations of his kingdom. These reforms apparently worked for the people were eager to hear the book read to them, and they promised to turn their lives around in accordance with Torah teachings. But the reforms did not last long because a mere thirth-five years later the Babylonians, under the order of Nebuchadnezzar, ended Jewish sovereignty, exiled and scattered the Jews, and destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem. It was a bitter exile that was to last for two thousand years.

So perhaps to honor these reforms of Josiah, and looking ahead to the observance of that time that the Temple was destroyed, the first Torah portion of the book of Devarim, which we read tonight, is read on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, which falls this year, next Wednesday, on August 9. Tisha B'Av --

when we remember the destruction of the Temple and the sadnesses that have befallen the Jewish people.

Arthur Waskow in impassioned poetic statements gets us in touch with this, as only he can, I think, with his introduction to Tisha B'Av in SEASONS OF OUR JOY. He writes: "It is the heart of summer, hot as a furnace. A breeze is a forgotten memory. The earth is panting in exhaustion; and people are exhausted too. We feel burnt out. The whole world is being put to the torch by the summer sun.

On one such scorching summer day, God's holy house on earth was burned. The Temple in Jerusalem was put to the torch first by Babylon in 586 BCE, and then again by Rome in 70 CE, and the people were dragged into slavery and scattered into exile.

But we know that the moment of exhaustion and destruction is but a moment. We know that earth passes safely through its too-hot exposure to the summer sun, and that the Jewish people will harvest something new in exile. But to do this we need to experience fully the moment of burn-out, the moment of fire and thirst. And our tradition does this with Tisha B'Av, the day that mourns the destruction of the Temple."

Among the very traditional, haircuts, buying or wearing of new clothes, musical celebrations, and even weddings are avoided. A general atmosphere of somberness is encouraged. Even the three Shabbats preceding Tisha B'Av are colored this way. Passages from the Prophets are read in traditional services that warn of the destruction of Jerusalem and rebukes the people for choosing destructive paths of life. Tonight is Shabbat Chazon, the third of these three Shabbats, named after the opening words of Isaiah 1 which would be read at this time and which refers to the "vision -- chazon" of Isaiah. If you come here on Wednesday night for Tisha B'Av, you will walk into a darkened synagogue lit only by candles placed on the floor, you will sit on the floor on pillows (as very traditional mourners would do), and read from the Book of Lamentations.

But there is redemption. The spirit of redemption runs deep and true in the Jewish spirit. We are told that the Messiah would be born on Tisha B'Av, and immediately after Tisha B'Av, we begin seven weeks of comfort with next Shabbat already being called the Shabbat of Comfort where traditional Jews would read from Isaiah 11, "Comfort you, comfort you, my people." These are the seven weeks that lead from the depths of Tisha B'Av to the renewing strength of Rosh Hashanah with its commemoration of the birth of the world and the beginning of the New Year.

Such roller-coaster emotions! And to realize that this last book of Torah, this Book of Devarim, is the last great monologue of Moses before his death. He is preparing his people to cross the Jordan and inhabit the Promised Land. He will review the entire course of their forty-years wandering in the wilderness and highlight the difficulties they had faced, and he will give them the courage they need to cross over. He will have a hand in appointing Joshua as his successor, and he will take one final look at the Promised Land from Mount Nebo before his death.

Do we have the strength to go from destruction to redemption? What do we have to face as we prepare ourselves for the coming High Holidays? The resilience of our ancestors, the growth of Moses from a stuttering shepherd at the Burning Bush to a leader of our people speaking eloquently on his own in his Book of Devarim give us countless examples to help us in our own journeys.

For me, it has been dealing, for the last several months, with the offering of aid to children coming to terms with death. I work as a licensed psychotherapist in the Glendale schools, and there have been senseless killings and suicides occurring among the adolescents there. These horrifying events occur, and right on the heels of those acts come the adolescents (and adults) left behind . . . trying to make sense of what happened, dealing with their fears and their angers, dealing with their grief.

So I have run groups and counseled students individually helping them walk the rocky paths that I did not have to walk when I was a student in junior and senior high school. Schools give them permission to leave class when they feel overwhelmed, and they come to the room that I and my colleagues staff -- to talk, to draw pictures, to write poems, to cry, and to make sense of it all. It is sacred work, and I feel moved to be given the opportunity to be there and offer these young people safe haven in a world that is torn apart for them. I offer comfort and I offer strength and I offer them a compassionate ear.

And therein lies our strength . . . to be there for each other as we experience Tisha B'Av but also the birth of the world, to grow as Moses did to face the challenges that life presents to us all. Echoing from last week: "Chazak, chazak, veneet chazek - Be strong, be strong, and together we will be strengthened."