

JULY 16, 2018

## Parashat Devarim

### Moses' Last Days

And it came to pass in the fortieth year (Deut. 1:3)

וַיְהִי בָּאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה (דברים א:ג)

The situation in Gaza is wretched. As Hamas hijacks vast fortunes of international humanitarian aid and uses it to purchase weapons and materiel to attack Israel, the terror group's spokesman recently dismissed the notion of a U.S. peace plan, calling it "worthless" despite never having seen it. Yet, in the face of this challenging scenario, the United States is focused on improving [humanitarian conditions](#) in the Gaza strip. A senior official explained that helping relieve the humanitarian crises in Gaza reaffirms the United States' commitment to the well-being of Palestinians, helping bring Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to the negotiating table as our government attempts to help resolve the conflict. Proposals recently reported in Israeli and Arab media have indicated Israel is willing to take a number of steps to ease the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

This week we begin reading the fifth book of the Torah, the book of Deuteronomy, or, in Hebrew, *Devarim*, meaning "words." The name relates particularly to Moses' last teachings. Moses reviews the Israelites' journey through the desert, admonishing the people for their mistakes and encouraging them to forge a path of righteousness as they begin building a nation in their new land.

While Moses repeats certain laws from earlier in the Torah, we often find them emphasized differently in Deuteronomy, highlighting a broader and more inclusive outlook. For example, the laws of Sukkot, first seen in Leviticus, are related as follows in Deuteronomy: "You shall make yourself the festival of Sukkot for seven days...And you shall rejoice in your festival—you, your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are in your city." Here we find a new focus: a message of love and solidarity with the weak of society. Many other commandments are presented similarly. Deuteronomy underscores Shabbat's social concerns: "The seventh day is Shabbat...in order that your manservant and your maidservant may rest like you" (Deut. 5:14-15). Moses' reframing of the commandments emphasizes that the Jewish people must empathize with the weak and the poor, and hold the highest ideals of mercy and love for every human being.

Despite the threats it faces from Gaza in the form of terror kites and rockets, Israel—and the United States—have not lost sight of the humanitarian issues facing the people suffering under the rule of Hamas. According to figures from the Palestinian Trade Center, unemployment in Gaza is nearly 50 percent, and 68 percent of those between the ages of 20 and 24 are jobless. [Gazans](#) are frustrated with Hamas for its failure to provide basic services and with the Palestinian Authority for cutting the salaries of Gaza employees.

Yet, [Israel](#) continues to transfer humanitarian aid and building materials to Gaza. While the United States continues to support Israel's right to defend itself and protect its borders, it simultaneously is working closely with Israel to continue to improve Gaza's humanitarian situation. Earlier this spring, the Trump administration hosted over 20 countries to explore solutions to the humanitarian and economic conditions in the Gaza strip. As we embrace the value that *Parashat Devarim* places on the Jewish people's outward commitments to the weak

and poor, we must also work to strengthen Israel and the United States' work to improve Palestinian lives in Gaza and work toward finding a solution that will bring security and peace to all who live in the region. ■

## Israel to the Rescue

**These are the words that Moses spoke (Deut. 1:1)**

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה (דברים א:א)

The book of Deuteronomy opens with the Israelites in the land of Moab, shortly before they enter the Promised Land. It begins: “These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel.” In addressing “all of Israel,” Moses specifically speaks to the children of the original Exodus generation, who was decreed to die in the desert. Perhaps most noteworthy in this address is Moses’ rebuke of the Israelites’ setbacks. Rashi notes that from one perspective, Moses’ words are exceedingly harsh, rendering them a stern opening to his farewell address to the nation. But from another perspective, the reminder of failure is a reminder of the Israelites’ strengths: their high calling, their new identity, and their preciousness as God’s people. Moses sought to inspire the new generation of Israel to go forward and take responsibility for the promise of Zion. It’s for this reason that Rebbe Yaakov Yitzchak of Peshischa, known as the Holy Jew, is said to read from Moses’ rebuke of the people every day, for he believed that those words had a special ability to penetrate the heart.

In pushing the Jewish people to constantly improve personally and nationally, Moses establishes one of the great teachings of Judaism: an insistence of *cheshbon-hanefesh*, soul searching. As Jews, we seek to improve our own way of living so that we can conduct ourselves with greater empathy, kindness and concern for all people. In 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson welcomed Israeli Prime Minister [Levi Eshkol](#) to the White House, he recognized that Israel and the United States “share many common objectives...chief of which is the building of a better world, a world in which every nation can develop its resources and develop them in freedom and in peace.” This mission of building a better world is rooted in the Jewish nobility of self-improvement and perfecting the world underscored in this week’s *parasha*. Daily, the modern state of Israel seeks to assist in times of crisis and fulfill its mission.

We saw Israel’s commitment to “the building of a better world” recently in the rescue of the 12 youth soccer players and their coach who had been trapped in the caves of northern Thailand. Part of a beautiful display of humanitarian international cooperation, Israeli rescuers not only joined in extracting the children from the flooded cave, but significantly contributed to the effort. Maxtech NetWorks, an Israel company that develops technology that does not require a cell phone tower, donated its mobile communication tools to be used by the first responders and overcome the lack of reliable communications. Further, Israel’s ambassador to Thailand, Meir Shlomo, visited the site during the rescue efforts. He said that he visited at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “to see how Israel can help its friend Thailand.”

Israel has excelled in empathizing with the plight of people across the globe under duress or in crises. Israel continues to reach out internationally, sharing her know-how and resources and aiding in overcoming crisis situations wherever they may be. Whether it is sending an emergency response team to Mexico following a recent earthquake, heading to the Philippines after a typhoon or its recent work in Thailand, this is the way of Israel, offering vital support in crisis scenarios to all nations. ■