

August 1, 2023, "Shabbat Chazon Erev Tisha B'Av Parashat Devarim"

At the beginning of the book of Devarim, Moses does something that if not strange, at least cries out for some kind of explanation as the rabbi say, *darsheni*, in other words, give some account whether literal or holi about why this goes on. And what Moses does, that one would not necessarily expect, is he recounts all the places that he and Israel have been together.

Some of them monumental things happened, other incidents are not so important. And so the rabbis ask why is it that Moses goes through this litany of place, names that they have shared before he goes on to the substance of his speech.

And the answer that Rashi gives is that Moses wanted to remind Israel of all the terrible things they had done because he's going to exhort them to behave better in the future. And the way to do that is of course, to let them know how they have misbehaved in the past. But he wants to be a little more gentle than to say, you did this here and you did that there, so instead he just tells them the names and allows the associations to well up in their own mind so that they can remember. When Moses mentions Massah and Meribah, what they did at that place... And it is a very plausible explanation considering the fact that Moses' speech here is by and large a speech of rebuke. He's telling them what they did wrong.

But it is possible to see it differently. And this came to me this week because this week my wife and daughter and I moved into a new house. Thank you. I appreciate that. And it occurred to me that... here I am, just about a little more than a month away from 40 years old. And since I was 17, I have not lived any place more than two years. And this house is a place where I hope I will be for a long time. And as I was sitting there the first night that we moved in and thinking about that and also thinking about why the workman hadn't come on time, why after they came, they brought the wrong stuff, why they broke what they were supposed to fix and they charged too much... While I was thinking of that and trying to extract a sermon from the experience, I began to think back on the places that I lived in those almost 25 years.

And I remembered when I left home and I went to the dorm rooms at college, and you knew that they were designed for one year and they were small rooms and of course supposed to be uncomfortable. I remember the dorm room that I lived in at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland where the winters in Scotland are cold. They have a special kind of chilling cold there that pierces the bone and the heat in the dorms was insufficient, so in each dorm room, they have this small, I don't know what you would call it here, it would be a sort of portable heater, but there it's built into the wall. It's a coil that heats up, but it costs five pence. You have to put in a five P coin to get it to heat, and then it goes for about 20 minutes. So what you have to do is you have to keep feeding it all day, which is not a problem except when you go to sleep at night because then you put in a coin, you go to sleep, and then in the middle of the night you wake up freezing and you have to scrounge around your room to find another coin to put in the heater so that you can sleep for another half hour. And this went on until some enterprising American, I must say, figured out how to break the thing so it stayed on, and all the Americans were warmed throughout the Scottish winter.

I remember coming back from Scotland and then I had to find myself an apartment, and I found what is euphemistically called a studio, which means a room on a ground floor apartment in Philadelphia, which was so run down the windows and screens were so broken and in disrepair that I remember waking up one morning and opening my eyes and feeling something on my chest, and there was a squirrel looking at me, and all I could think was “rabies!” I thought that's what squirrels do in the world, that their function is to carry rabies to unsuspecting college students. We stared at each other for what seemed to me like an eternity. I mean, I didn't know what to do until finally he got bored and ran away out the window. A week later, my apartment was robbed, and I think the squirrel showed them the route.

But I had a couple of apartments like that until I could actually afford in Philadelphia an apartment that had two rooms. It had a bedroom and a living room, which posed the problem of furniture. I had no furniture, but it didn't matter because my father told me, don't worry, there's a member of the congregation. For those of you who did not grow up in rabbinic homes, this is a famous line. There's a member of the congregation. I need a suit. There's a member of the congregation. So I needed furniture. Now, I had really no money, but there was a member of the congregation.

So I went to his outlet. I went, I don't know how to describe his furniture. He had furniture like 7-11 has lunch meat. That's all I can say, right? That's the kind of furniture we're talking about here. And of that, I had to buy the cheapest furniture he had, which was basically cardboard covered with a drop cloth. That's what it was. And I brought it back and I had a couch! For the first time in my life I had a couch. But the thing about the couch was when you sat on it and then you got up, it didn't know the difference because the impression of everyone who ever sat on that couch stayed on that couch for as long as I owned it.

But I lived there actually fairly happily for a year. The thing that I remember most fondly about that apartment, which lets you know obviously that I was a bachelor in my early twenties, is that I had a clapper. Now, some of you may not remember what that is. That is a light where if you clap your hands, it turns on and if you clap your hands, it turns off, which means that you don't have to go through the effort of standing up to turn on the lights in your apartment. You just clap and they go on. This novelty kept me amused for a good year until I left the apartment and the clapper to the next graduating college student.

I went through a couple of other apartments until I finally ended up in rabbinical school and there, of all the apartments I had both here and in Israel, I won't tell you about the one in Israel where we squeegee the floors—that's how you clean floors in Israel. You just pour a lot of water on the floor and then you squeegee it around until it dries—I remember one another studio in New York at a hundred fifth and Broadway, which if you know New York is not the safest neighborhood that one could live in, especially not some 15 years ago. The floorboards of this apartment were like a mountain range. You could have marble races down the floor of my apartment because first of all, just from age, they had buckled. Also, I shared this apartment with innumerable cockroaches. Sorry, but those of you who have lived in New York know that

this is not a feature of low rent districts. This is just a feature of the territory. It may have something to do with the fact that around the apartment there was the highest density of takeout Chinese restaurants of any place in the world.

Although I must say that living in New York, this is just an aside from the main theme of the sermon, but living in New York is a remarkable experience because I had a friend over on Christmas Eve when nothing in the world is open, and we blew a fuse in the apartment, and on my block, there was a place that sold fuses on Christmas Eve. So you know you're living in New York and for that convenience, people are willing to put up with apartments that are about the size of this podium and a kitchen in which you basically could do a pirouette. But there was no room to sit down and certainly none to cook, which I must say presented no hardship to me.

And then I came back to Los Angeles and got a job, and then I met the woman who was to be my wife, but I didn't know it yet, although she did. And when I met her, I was actually planning to buy a house when I met her. Now, the house was very small and very dark, but I didn't really know that it was a house. And I sort of exemplify what the comedian Rita Rudner exemplified says about men that she realized when she met her husband to be and saw where he was living, she said she realized that men are basically bears with furniture.

So I was planning to make my lair this house, and my wife said, well, perhaps you should wait. You shouldn't rush into anything. I couldn't figure out why not. It seemed like a perfectly nice house to me. But I did wait, and we ended up buying a place that had windows. Then we moved to an apartment and then finally to this house, which also has windows, no blinds. But that's another story. They were supposed to come, but...

Now why do I tell you all this? Some of you may suspect that the reason I'm telling you this is that I moved this week and therefore I didn't have time to write a sermon. I deny it. The reason I'm telling you all this is because your reaction was my reaction. That is, none of these, for various reasons and some I haven't even gone into, none of these was really an ideal place to live. And now I'm not saying that my new home is the promised land, or that my parents' home was Egypt.

But the analogy does strike me, that in fact, in all these places, despite the fact that there were problems and difficulties, it is in some way the problems that makes them so sweet in my memory. That's what I love about them. When I think about my apartment in Israel, the first thing I think is, oh, I remember the night, Friday, it was a Friday night at Shabbos dinner. We went *next door*, for Shabbos dinner, we came back and the apartment was cleaned out. In Israel. On Shabbos. Not I'm sure by Jews, but in Israel, on Shabbos.

But you know what? At the time it was a terrible tragedy. We were students. That was everything we had. Now, in a way, I'm glad it happened because it gives me a memory that gives that place some character. Something happened there. We went through something there. My roommate and I, I was living with another rabbinical student, and when we talk about the apartment in Israel, we say, we remember how we came back and we saw wax all over the floor

because whoever it was was smart enough to just use a candle to walk around the apartment so we wouldn't see lights on since we were only next door.

The incident with the squirrel is what I remember about that apartment and the fact that all sorts of things happened there, like the squirrel brought back his buddies to clean the place out. I remember how tiny and cramped and unsafe the apartment was in New York. That's what gives it a dear spot in my memory. In the apartments where I lived that were nicer and nothing happened, they're not as dear to me. I don't think about them as much. They don't mean as much because it's only where you go through something and usually it is something painful that you feel this sense of connection and even of love.

If you ever lived in a place where everything was fine and happy from the moment you walked in to the moment you left, it doesn't have, I think, the same kind of deep tug as in a place where things started out bad and then turned good, where you had some struggle and some pain and some darkness.

And that is to me part of why Moses is doing this. He's saying, look, all these places, terrible things happen, but we were in these places together. Remember, we keep talking about the fact that Moses wants them to go into the promised land and to succeed in conquering the promised land, and that is true. But Moses's territory is the wilderness, and I have to believe that Moses also wants them to remember the wilderness with love, because as long as they remember the wilderness, they'll remember Moses. If all they remember is Israel, Moses will be gone because Moses won't be in Israel.

And so when he says, remember this place and that place, and remember the terrible things that happened, I see in my mind's eye something of the same smile that you had when I was telling you about my apartments and you were thinking about yours. That is, yes, terrible things happen there, but to some extent I also remember it with fondness, and if you say—look, there's a difference obviously. I mean in the desert, people died. There were tragedies. There were plagues. It's not that a squirrel broke into the apartment.

That is true to some extent, but in another way, this Shabbat contradicts that because this Shabbat is after all the Shabbat of Tisha B'Av, and Tisha B'Av commemorates the greatest tragedies in the history of our people, up to the 20th century, the destruction of the Temples, the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, all of them were bundled together in one day of commemoration, and these were tragedies in which thousands upon thousands of our ancestors died.

But you know what this Shabbat is called? It is not called the Shabbat of tragedy. It is called *Shabbat Chazon*, the Shabbat of vision. We read of the vision of Yeshayahu, of Isaiah. Why? Because out of tragedy and out of pain comes a vision of possibility. There is no vision in Oz. There is only vision in Kansas. Once you are there, once everything is fine and in color, nothing happens. Remember, if you remember the movie, it only gains poignancy when everybody

realizes that the wizard is a fake, he's a fraud. That even there not everything is happy. Then there is the possibility of meaning.

And the same thing is true in our lives. If everything is going fine and everything is perfect, then you're in a space where you cannot touch the depths of yourself. It's in all those spaces that we travel in our lives that are wilderness, where there is pain, even when there's real suffering, that there is vision.

So in my mind, what Moses is doing this morning is he's not reminding them to rebuke them. He's reminding them to evoke their love. He's saying, everywhere you go—and remember that according to the tradition, Moses with prophetic vision knew that one day the Jewish people would be exiled from their land—he's saying, wherever you go, remember that the tragedies of the wilderness are dear, that they are where I spoke to you, they're where I created you from a ragged band of slaves into an *am kadosh*, into a holy nation. And when in your lives, each of your lives, each of our lives, you endure some pain or some tragedy, remember that it is a stop along the journey and that without that pain, there is no vision. And without the journey, there is no promised land. Amen.