BS”D

Parshas Devorim

*It took 40 years of struggle, 40 years of testing until the Torah entered their hearts.*

“These Are the Words”

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The book Devarim begins, "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan in the desert, in the Aravah, near Suf, between Paran and Tophel and Laban and Hazeros and Di-zahav." (Deuteronomy 1:1)

What are "the words" referring to? There are two approaches in the classic commentaries. "The words" refer to the words of rebuke in the first several chapters. (Rashi. Targum Yonason, Ramban,Chizkuni, Sforno),  or "the words" refer to the Mitzvos in the later chapters. (Ibn Ezra)

Now as far as the place names listed, Rashi learns that they are not actually referring to places but they obliquely allude to numerous sins the Jews committed during the 40 years. Rashbam learns they are actual places and the Torah is giving the *exact* location of where Moshe spoke, i.e., near Suf, between Paran and Tophel. The Sforno also learns they are different places and that Moshe rebuked the Jews a number of times in these various places.

I would like to bring down the interpretation of the Ramban in more detail. “These are the words” refers to the Mitzvos that Moshe spoke. However, first Moshe Rabeinu gives an introduction explaining why it took so long to get to the land of Canaan. It was because of the Bnai Yisrael refusing to go to Canaan after the return of the spies. This introduction ends (4:40) with the statement, "Observe His laws and commandments which I command you this day that it may go well with you and your children ..."  Then Moshe gathers all of the Jews to hear the commandments. "And Moshe summoned all of Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O, Israel, the laws and commandments that I proclaim to your ears this day ...’" (5:1).

Moshe begins with reiterating the Ten Commandments (5:6-11). He goes on to tell the commandment of the faith in the one G-d, the "Shema," (6:4-9). Afterward, most of the rest of the book deals with specific commandments.

Moshe repeats many of the Mitzvos and explains additional details for many of them. Interestingly, he does not repeat the laws of sacrifices. Since they were already stated in Vayikra, they need not be repeated because the Cohanim who are in charge of those Mitzvos are very meticulous and need no extra reminders. The Jewish people in general, however, need to be reminded and exhorted. In some cases, Moshe repeats important commandments several times.

There are also some new commandments stated in our book that were not mentioned in earlier books. (For example, the laws of divorce and the laws of false witnesses). Perhaps these Mitzvos were not mentioned before is because they only went into effect upon entering the land. Perhaps some of the Mitzvos are very infrequent and it was not necessary to mention until the last minute.

By the way, the Abarbanel suggests that *all* of the Mitzvos in our book have, in fact, been mentioned, or at least implied, in the earlier Books.

The Ramban also has an original view on the understanding of the stories of the spies, the golden calf, and the other incidents during the years in the desert that Moshe recounts. It isn't simply rebuke as other commentators say; it is rather to show G-d's mercy towards Israel, and how despite their sins, G-d forgave them. This was meant to encourage the Children of Israel when they entered the land. No doubt they would err. They would sin sooner or later. But they should be aware that G-d is compassionate. The Jews should return to Him and He would forgive them.

The second passage in Devarim reads, "It is 11 days from Chorev on the route of Mount Seir until Kadish Barnea."

Rashi explains this sentence as meaning that the journey from Mt. Sinai (Chorev) until Kadesh Barnea usually takes 11 days. However, the Jewish people made it in three days. (Rashi explains in detail how we figured out that it was three days; see there). The Torah is telling the Jewish people how quickly Hashem wanted them to get to Israel. Yet they forfeited this by refusing to go to Israel when the spies returned and wound up spending 40 years in the desert.

The Mei Hashiloach explains that when the Jews received the Torah in Sinai, it was only received intellectually. For Torah to penetrate them totally, they had to enter the land of Israel. When they traveled an 11- day journey in three days, the Jews thought that the Torah had entered their hearts, and they were ready to enter the land. Actually, it took 40 years of struggle, 40 years of testing until the Torah entered their hearts. There are no short cuts to becoming an authentic person. It takes hard work, pain and suffering to internalize Torah into the core of our being.

This Shabbos is Shabbos Chazon, the Shabbos preceding Tisha B'Av, which marks the failure of the people of Israel to enter the land as well as the destruction of both Holy Temples. We cannot explain or understand our nearly 2,000-year history since the Temple's destruction. But we must know that somehow the struggle and pain that we have gone through in the exile is helping make Torah a part of us. After all, that is the point of the Messianic Age:  "Then G-d will open your heart ... to love the L-rd, your G-d."  "For the land will be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as water covers the sea."

May we merit this speedily in our day.