



5 facts

about *Tisha Be-Av*

At time of writing this week's Torah portion falls on the Sabbath (Saturday) before a major fast day called *Tisha Be-Av*. This day commemorates the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians (586 BCE) and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans (70 CE). A few brief facts follow. If you have Jewish friends, ask them about *Tisha Be-Av*.

1. Date

Tisha Be-Av is Hebrew for: 9th day of Av. Av is one of the months of the biblical (lunar) calendar.

2. Remembrance

As well as mourning the destroyed Temples, other catastrophes in Jewish history are recalled on *Tisha Be-Av*; e.g., the expulsion of Jews from England (1290) and Spain (1492).

3. Synagogue

The Book of Lamentations and a series of liturgical poems are chanted in a dimly lit synagogue service held on the eve of *Tisha Be-Av*.

4. Observance

Mourning practices observed include abstinence from eating, drinking, bathing, sexual relations, anointing with oil, wearing leather shoes. Even Torah study is restricted on *Tisha Be-Av* as it is considered a joyous activity.

5. Torah

The Midrash associates *Tisha Be-Av* with the episode of the Spies in Numbers 13-14 where a tragic incident led to the Israelites' entry into the promised land being delayed by forty years.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

As this *Light of Torah* series unfolds, parishioners are invited to become acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, the commentators of the Jewish tradition, the lectionary and festivals of Judaism. In doing so, we engage in a practical response to the teaching of Vatican II that calls us to respect the irreplaceable Jewish presence and witness in the great mystery of faith.

This week we open Deuteronomy. The Hebrew title of this book is *Devarim*: 'Words'. Its English title 'Deuteronomy' comes from the Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase referring to a 'second' or 'repeated' law. This book consists of a series of speeches in the voice of Moses as he retells Israel's history for a new generation about to enter the Promised Land.

As we noted in a previous year's reflection on Deuteronomy 1-3, Moses' retelling of events is not exactly the same as those events told in the Book of Numbers. A certain re-interpretation is involved. Perhaps you noticed this in your reading. Join us this week as the sages continue to teach us to be prayerfully attuned to the details of the sacred text.



Deuteronomy 1:1—3:22

Devarim: 'words'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 1:1—3:22

In the opening verse of the book of Deuteronomy we read, *“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel...”*

Devarim: ‘words’. What ‘words’? These are the farewell speeches of Moses to the people of Israel as they stand on the plains of Moab, ready to make their final journey, across the Jordan River, to enter Canaan. They will make this journey without Moses who prepares to die as the Lord foretold (Numbers 27:13).

Tasting Torah

Read Chapter 2 of Deuteronomy. Give particular attention to how Moses recalls the Lord’s instructions to the Israelites as they journeyed through foreign lands:

The land of Seir: *“Be very careful not to engage in battle with them”* (2:4-5).

The land of Moab: *“Do not harass Moab or engage them in battle”* (2:9).

The land of the Ammonites: *“Do not harass them or engage them in battle”* (2:19).

How do you interpret this repeated command to refrain from warfare? Remember: in traditional Jewish approaches, repetition in the bible is a signal to pause, to creatively ponder the spiritual depths of God’s Word.

Touching Torah

It may be helpful here to engage the voice of Maimonides.¹ He points to the forty years spent in the wilderness as God’s way of preparing the Israelites for the Promised Land. Emerging from Egyptian slavery they lacked courage and confidence in their own resourcefulness. The wilderness provided a schooling to toughen their character.

Yet the Israelites addressed in Deuteronomy were not raised in slavery. They are the next generation, raised in the desert, full of strength and confidence. The character challenge for them is not lack of courage but the need to curb their aggression. This is one interpretation as to why Moses’ speech contains the threefold reminder of the importance of restraint.

Depthing Torah

But if restraint is the issue, what are we to make of the next scene where God calls for war against the King of Sihon? *“Begin to take possession by engaging him in battle”* (2:24). Especially puzzling to the sages is the way Moses responds to this new command in 2:26-29. Instead of declaring war he sends messengers of peace! He would appear to be repeating the non-violent actions discussed earlier. Surely he has placed himself in a predicament, says Abravanel.² For if the King of Sihon were to accept peace (which in fact he doesn’t, v.30) then Moses would be either disobeying God by making peace, or breaking his word to the King by then declaring war. How do you interpret Moses’ actions?

One of many answers is cited in the Midrash:³ Moses is not disobeying God, he is being faithful to another aspect of God’s Torah where it is written: *“Seek peace and pursue it”* (Ps. 34:14). While ultimately Moses does engage in battle against the King of Sihon (as per God’s instruction), he does so while in the pursuit of peace (also God’s instruction!)

Doing Torah

Perhaps this midrash reminds us of our own delicate juggling of diverse teachings. E.g., if my teenager refuses to go to church, how do I as a Catholic parent respond? The church teaches the obligation of Sunday Mass, *and* parental responsibility to teach the faith, *and* the values of gentleness, compassion, *and*...



Faith & Life

The wilderness journey held different lessons for different generations of Israelites. In our day, too, the character-building challenges faced by our children are often the reverse to those of our grandparents. E.g., perhaps our grandparents battled poverty in the Great Depression, but our children now struggle to resist materialism. If our grandparents struggled with a rigid moral code, our children struggle to avoid the moral relativism rampant in society.

Continue this discussion...

1. 12th c. Torah scholar.

2. 15th c. Torah scholar

3. Midrash Tanhuma (Chukat).

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.