

We live in a different world than our parents and grandparents- we travel with an ease they did not experience, and are connected through technology in ways they could not have imagined.

This morning we have guests from all around the world—and are connected to Jake's grandfather on a distant continent, in real time, through the wonders of technology. My drash too has its roots in our changed world. In 2011 we began a program at Shir Hadash for our 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders called Jews Around the World. In addition to learning about Jewish communities in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and Latin America, we also travelled to visit with a Jewish community abroad and to participate in community service projects. So far we have travelled to Costa Rica, to Panama and to Guadalajara Mexico, and hope to return to our namesake city San Jose Costa Rica this February. My words this morning come from a note I received from Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik, from Panama, and his observations about the Torah portion.

The fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, Devarim, the book which we are reading now, is very consistent in its style and distinct from the other four books.

If you come to services at this time of year with any consistency you will soon recognize the set themes of the book and the way they are expressed. I could pull

a paragraph out from anywhere in Deuteronomy, and someone familiar with the Torah could immediately identify it as coming from this book, rather than for example, Genesis or any other.

One phrase which is repeated quite often is Shema- Listen, pay heed. The words Shema Yisrael which have come into our prayerbook as a key prayer, actually occur several times in Deuteronomy, including in this week's Torah portion.

What my rabbinic colleague from Panama pointed out to me was the difference in order between Moses' advice in this Torah portion and the way the Israelites respond to the giving of the Torah in the book of Exodus, 40 years previous. At the time the Torah is given at Mt Sinai, they are so overwhelmed by the spectacle, by the mountain shaking, by the sound of the ram's horn and the thunder, that they respond: Naaseh venishmah. We will do and we will hear. That is they agree to obey God's commands without first taking the time to learn and study them.

Unfortunately that doesn't work out so well. When the thunder and lightning disappear, and the mountain is no longer covered in smoke, when Moses is away for a couple of weeks, 40 days to be exact, receiving the rest of God's law on Mt. Sinai, the people quickly fall away from their commitment. They insist that Aaron build a Golden Calf- something expressly forbidden.

Rabbi Kraselnik, explains that Moses knowing about the outcome of their initial commitment, takes a different tack, and now insists, first you will listen, first you will learn and understand, with the hope that once they have assimilated the Torah into their being they will be more likely to live out its commandments.

He writes:

It is possible that the exodus generation, overwhelmed by the transforming events they had experienced, articulated their commitment with the covenant expressing their conviction of immediate action, without needing a previous theoretical understanding of the principles and values reflected in such action. Nevertheless, beyond all the good wishes and the initial enthusiasm, understandable in those who had repeatedly witnessed divine intervention, the proposal did not work. The midrash (Midrash Hagadol, Ekev 7:12) affirms that Moses perceived that the Israelites had quickly wandered off from the covenant when they made the golden calf, and therefore understood that his primary role should be to make them understand the action, if he really aspired to achieve responsible behavior from the people. Hence throughout his speech, he insists on using the verb “To listen”, as a requisite to the observance of the precepts. (Deut. 4:1, 5:1, 6:3, 11:13, 12:28.) In that sense, Moses was able to establish an alternate religious model, possibly closer to contemporary praise. In his mature and adept vision, the religious ideal is not expressed through intellectual submission but rather from our ability to discern the experience’s profound meaning (*Shema*: understand); the manner in which commitment emerges and only after is translated into action.

I know that the students here at Shir Hadash wonder sometimes- isn't enough that we can chant our Torah and Haftarah portions, why all this effort to have us understand them, to put them into our own words, to have us write about them, even delivering our own D'var Torah.

I believe in doing this we are taking after Moses. We do not want to depend just on the emotional impact of this special day, however wonderful we are sure it will be. We hope that your understanding will be deeper, will penetrate your heart and soul, and so it will become part of you. IN a modern world, there is no submission to authority, to ancient text or even to family teachings of long standing. We must make the effort to educate so that the acceptance of Jewish teaching, is as we read last night, out of recognition that it is tov lach, it is in our interests, designed to make life better for ourselves and the world.

It is like a tree- if its roots are shallow, a strong wind can blow it down. But if its roots are deep, spread broadly into the earth, then it will not be moved and will endure.

So we pray for Jayden and Jake, a strong and deep attachment, build on continuing learning and understanding, strong enough to carry them and our community forward.

