Devarim – 5782

Last week, we read the double parsha of Mattot and Masei. We did that because this week’s parsha always is read on the Shabbat before Tisha B’Av. You might be interested to know that today is actually Tisha B’Av but long ago, the rabbis determined that when Tisha B’Av was actually a Shabbat as well, the fast begins AFTER Shabbat so as not to detract from the meaning and purpose of resting on the seventh day. In any event, last week, as we closed the book of Bamidbar, we knew that the mantle of leadership was being passed from Moses to Joshua. We read the exact plan for what was to happen as the Israelites entered and settled the land given to them by HaShem in the original compact and foretold to Abraham. We were also given specific instructions as to where each of the tribes was to settle and what that settlement was to look like. In very specific terms, the span of the holy land was described. In this morning’s parsha, the narration delineates exactly who inhabits the land that the Israelites will pass through on their way to settling it and who they are to avoid interacting or with or challenging for control.

In light of the troubled birth pains of the modern State of Israel and the ongoing struggles with the Palestinians, it should be pointed out that Devarim clearly implies that the Israelite people were to ensure that they lived in peace with their neighbours. While told that they would inherit this land as their birthright, they were not told that the were to dominate the neighbourhood. I point this out because I have, from my earliest years as a Zionist, struggled with how we were to create our own state and seemingly being intent on ignoring the existence of another people already living there. I hope you can see the parallel with today’s parsha text. Over 3000 years ago, the Israelites didn’t exactly stumble onto a barren, uninhabited piece of land. There were peoples there who they were going to have to struggle with for the land and that struggle was foretold by Moshes and, through him, HaShem. But there were others whose rights were to be acknowledged. If you read the text, you will read about the right of the descendants of Lot and Esau and Moab, just to cite a few.

I shed light on this little part of the parsha because the reality of politics in Israel today are that the far-right wing, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, believe they have the right to lead the charge on those who would claim a part of the Holy Land for a Palestinian state. I have always had mixed emotions about the Palestinians. I believe they have a right to their own piece of the land and that we have the obligation, which I think is confirmed by the verses in this week’s parsha, to find a way to live in peace with them. There is however a difference between the intellectual acceptance of that right and course of action and the emotional response to what we all know to be the rejection of Israel by her neighbours from the very beginning.

As so often is the case, our tradition calls out to us in so many ways how we ought to feel about this struggle and what actions we ought to take, but it is one thing to acknowledge it and another thing to accept it. The book of Devarim, Deuteronomy in the Christian world, reminds us throughout of the nature of the world we are to strive for. We are meant to seek to be at holy nation and a light onto the nations. In a world where other nations struggle for their place in the sun, too often, our beloved state seeks to deny that in so many ways. This denial plays itself out in far too many ways that we read about wherever we pick up news items. We are meant to seek to uplift those who are downtrodden and strive for a society marked by equality of opportunity and status and yet for years, the State has made sure budgets reflected the needs of the Israelis before it acknowledges those of the Arabs living in their midst.

Lest you think me naïve and favoring one side over the other, let me point out that time after time our Torah teaches us to pursue justice and that means not just for us but for others as well because we are not to forget that we were once slaves unto Pharoah in Egypt and so therefore have had lessons that should help to show us the way to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. As a teacher educator, I taught my student teachers how important it was to respect everyone and to try to be empathetic enough to be able to see the world through the eyes of the other.

Believe me, I know it ain’t easy. You can only take so much rejection and it is natural to want to use a fist rather than to turn the other cheek. However, we need to remind those around us that it is never right to do to someone else what you would NOT want them to do to you. WE each of us have to engage the next generation in frank discussions about where the politics of Israel versus her Neighbourhood ends and where the tolerance and understanding between peoples needs to begin. WE want our young people to understand that our faith preaches one thing, but people sometimes do not live up to their principles. If we are not to break apart as a people and see a wedge driven between us and Israel, we need to constantly be able to see BOTH sides and try to ensure what is best for both. I know that is possible because I read about so many instances of two nations, two peoples, looking for ways to come together. We just need to be patient and do our part along the way. As Yul Bryner says in The King and I, so must it be written, so must it be done. Shabbat Shalom.