

## **Parshat Devarim**

**7/28/17**

### **Shabbat Hazon**

How long should a journey take? That is a question I want to pose for this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Devarim*, in which the Israelites are poised between ending one journey and beginning another. This Shabbat we begin the book of Deuteronomy. The Israelites are at the end of their journey in the wilderness and are about to cross over the Jordan to the Promised Land. Reviewing their route from Mt. Sinai (called Horeb in Deuteronomy) Moses begins by saying that it is an 11 days journey from Horeb/Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, which is on the edge of the Promised Land.

But wait, 11 days? Didn't it take them 40 years and 2 generations to get there! Are we now to learn that it could have taken 11 days? What is more, Rashi said that if you go back to descriptions of the journey earlier in the Torah, it actually took 3 days because the Shechina helped them

along. So why did such a short journey take so long? Why did a journey of 3-11 days take 40 years?

The medieval commentator Ramban suggests a reason. After the incident of the 12 Israelite spies who were sent to reconnoiter the land, the Israelites lost faith and actually sojourned *backwards*. The end of the journey, the Promised Land, was within reach. They could have arrived there quickly. But instead of moving forward to reach it, they went backward, and it took forty years and another generation to reach it.

We like to think that human progress is a straight line. We like to think that we get wiser and calmer and smarter and better day by day. We like to think that our society becomes more and more enlightened, just and advanced, that it tackles an issue, achieves progress, and moves on to the next one.

But our journeys, whether social or personal, aren't quite like that. They are more like the journeys of the

Israelites--two steps forward and 1 step backward.

Sometimes they are 11 days forward and 40 years backward!

We may make progress--progress on our addictions, on our temper on our impatience. We may make progress by being more open and loving to others and more faithful to our values. But it is rarely a straight march forward.

Some of us feel acutely this lack of straightforward progress in regard to our society today. Perhaps that is why last night at the Summer Institute Lecture, Secretary John Kerry talked encouragingly about social and political struggles that have been won in his lifetime. He talked about the victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act. He talked about the victories of the environmental movement such as the Clean Air and Water Acts, the establishment of the EPA, the Paris Climate Accords and the private sector's investment in renewable energy.

That message was welcome and inspiring. At the same time, many of us still carry a deep concern that with all this progress, we are also moving *backwards*. The Voting Rights Act was passed but there are still powerful forces trying to disenfranchise the black voters. The EPA was established, but that same EPA is now overseeing the dismantling of the gains of environmental movement. Health care access was won for more Americans than ever before, yet all that mayb still be in jeopardy.

We have had so many victories over the last 50 years. Some times it felt as if we were only 11 days away from the Promised Land. Yet we have also been going backwards, and wonder whether we too, like the Israelites, will have to look to the next generation to take us there.

Like Secretary Kerry, I also have hope and faith in our journey. What we do together matters. Our victories have been won because of hard work, faith and commitment. We have come a long way and many people have sacrificed much

to get us there. But I also want to acknowledge the frustrations, sadness and fear at this moment in the wilderness, this moment when, after having made such progress, we are turning around and moving in the wrong direction. We are going backwards. What I learn from the Torah, however is that some journeys, perhaps the most important ones, are indeed roundabout. That is not cause for despair. Going backward is not an abdication of the journey. It is part of it. Getting to the Promised Land is not a simple matter of good directions. We received those directions from our prophets from a long time ago. Inexorable progress, however, is not our lot. Our routes are round about and that is the nature of the human journey. Some journeys take just a moment of enlightenment. Some a few years of concerted effort. Others take constant watchfulness, a lot of help and generations of commitment. Our Torah teaches that we, like the Israelites, with faith, vision and commitment, *can* reach the Promised Land. Yet we need faith and commitment for

the journey whether we are moving forward or backward,  
because moving backwards too, is part of the march through  
the wilderness to the Promised Land.