

V'etchanan I pleaded

D'var Torah by Barbara Kavadias, Executive Director Masorti Foundation
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Today's Parsha is the second of Devarim (The Words) or Deuteronomy. This book is a series of Moses's final words to us and, in essence, a repetition of the important themes of the Torah. The one G-d, the loyalty we owe this G-d, the nature of this relationship, the importance of living this relationship out, the benefits of doing so – Israel, and the punishment – exile, we will experience if we do not.

In today's Parsha, we relive the revelation and receipt of the 10 Commandments and we receive from Moses the basic Torah we must follow in order to live successfully in Israel. We receive these words and we are taught why they are important. We are commanded to remember the revelation, to teach its lessons and the experience of it to our children and grandchildren, to study the words and laws and to love G-d with all of our heart and soul. All of our faculties, all of our senses are involved in this parsha. What we see, hear, remember, experience, feel, think. We are to be all in.

This is a big parsha, Grand in its scope, awesome in its command and impact. Much of what we see here we see in our daily prayers and siddur. And yet how does it open? On a very personal note. A raw, heartfelt, impassioned plea. Va-Et-hanan. I Plead. I Moses. The man tapped to do a huge job. The man who got more than the revelation at Sinai, but who got all of the Torah and was the intermediary between G-d and the people Israel, who shared the Torah with the people. I, Moses, pleaded to be allowed to enter the Promised Land and see it. He was not asking to live there. He was not asking to keep being the leader. Just to enter and see.

I am struck by the passion of this request. By it being shared with us. At getting this glimpse of Moses as a person, as a man with such emotion.

And I am struck by the bitterness he expresses at being denied his request. He says at the opening of the passage; "But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me." And then again later at 4:21-22 he says, "Now the Lord was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that the Lord your G-d is assigning you as a heritage. For I must die in this land; I shall not cross the Jordan. But you will cross and take possession of that good land."

I also imagine that some of this bitterness seeps out when he prophesizes what will happen to Israel if, after we are settled in the land we get complacent with time and become idolatrous. Moses says, "I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out." Realizing he maybe went too far, he then says, "But if you search there for the Lord your G-d, you will find Him, if only you seek him with all your heart and soul...For the Lord your G-d is a compassionate G-d, he will not fail you (can't you hear him

saying even though He failed me?) nor will He let you perish (again, I hear the unspoken, even though I will perish here)..."

I see parallels to this passion and bitterness when I look at what is happening with the Masorti/Conservative Movement in Israel. Then Israeli President Shimon Peres addressed the Masorti movement at its 35th anniversary gala on January 5, 2012. President Peres said that Masorti has "quietly, systematically and guided by a love of Israel...succeeded in establishing itself in Israel, building a large number of communities and synagogues throughout the country, and winning hearts." But this year, Israel's Religious Affairs Minister, David Azoulay, of the Shas Party, said, referring to Reform Jews and by extension Masorti (as he lumps us all together), "I cannot allow myself to call such a person a Jew". And that was him being nice.

I recently returned from a learning tour of the Masorti Movement in Israel as the new Executive Director of the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel. What started as only two synagogues that identified as Conservative in the country until the mid-60's -Jerusalem's Emet V'Emunah Congregation, dating back to the mid-1930s, and the Moriah Synagogue in Haifa, established in 1955 by the father of David Siegel, who until this month was the Consul General in LA from Israel, is now nearly 80 strong, all across the country, in rural and city settings.

- There are 21 chapters of NOAM, the youth movement, with weekly activities, the highlight of which is,
- a new permanent summer camp up near Kibbutz Hannaton, a Masorti Kibbutz, in the land of the Mishna,
- scores of new buildings, a new advocacy arm, Jewish Pluralism Watch,
- cemeteries, schools, ganim or nurseries, two wineries that want their hechsher to come from Masorti but are currently barred from doing so,
- Marom, a young adult program, a Mechina or army leadership training program,
- The Adraba Center which brings bar and bat mitzvah training to hundreds of differently abled youth across the country plus a Beit Midrash program for handicapped adults,
- Its siddur, *Vaani T'fillati Siddur Yisraeli* has become a best seller in Israel
- and more.

The Masorti movement was incorporated in 1979 and its early pioneer was Rabbi Moshe Cohen, who worked under the aegis of the United Synagogue of Israel. After making aliyah in 1964, Cohen labored for almost twenty years founding Masorti congregations throughout the country. The drive to establish a movement was launched by Rabbi Michael Graetz, who made aliyah after the Six-Day War and served from 1973 as the pulpit rabbi of the Masorti synagogue in Omer (outside Beersheva). I met with Rabbi Graetz while I was there and he told me a story that exemplified the struggle to establish our movement, and also why we need a long term vision.

- As a young Rabbi, before they built their building, he was walking to the services he would conduct in a community center in Omer with his daughter, who is now a Rabbi

herself. She was all dressed up for Shabbat and they ran into one of her young classmates. Her classmate, seeing her all dressed up, thought that she had perhaps not been invited to a party that others were going to. She expressed her alarm and asked, "Whose party are you going to?" Rabbi Graetz's daughter said, "No, I am not going to a party. We are on our way to Kabbalat Shabbat services. Would you like to join us?" The girl's eyes bugged out; "Me, go to a Masorti service? No way!" About 30 some years later, Magan Avraham, the congregation in Omer, had its own building and had added a youth center. They had advertised that they were starting a new after-school program, with homework help, snacks, and Judaica and were hosting a prospective parent's night. About 70 families showed up and as Rabbi Graetz arrived, there sitting in the front seat, was his daughter's friend, all grown up, with her two children.

- Masorti kehillot or congregations are primarily made up of Israelis as the movement has grown beyond its Olim (new immigrants) roots. While it is hard to quantify membership, as "joining" a congregation is not all that common in Israel since most (Orthodox) congregations are tax supported, numerous research projects, including a study done by Chabad and Israeli census data, put adherents of Conservative and Reform Judaism on equal or greater footing to Haredi Jews. Masorti Jews are now somewhere between 7-10% of the population with thousands more reached at Yom Kippur—we are a rapidly growing stream in Israel.

There is a pioneering spirit to the people in the movement, a passion for combining modern Israeli life to traditional Jewish beliefs while promoting equality and inclusion. And while they are not pleading to G-d to be allowed into the land, they are pleading before the courts, and fighting, organizing, arguing, making their case to the public and the government for equal treatment and the full religious freedom and freedom of conscience promised in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State, the Israel Declaration of Independence. It says,

"THE STATE OF ISRAEL will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture;"

The bitterness? The bitterness comes from those people fighting so hard to be treated fairly in their land, our homeland.

- It comes from those of us in the Diaspora who feel for our brothers and sisters, our children and our parents.
- Who see the promises of the government to establish an egalitarian space at the kotel go unfulfilled.
- Who see women get arrested for carrying a Torah into the Kotel space.

- Who see the obstacles put before those who don't want to or can't be married through the Rabbinut.
- Who see a B'nai Mitzvah celebration for handicapped children get derailed in Rehovot by a hateful mayor who will not let it happen with the Masorti Rabbi who presided over the program.
- Who watch with dismay as the Knesset votes into law blatant discrimination against Masorti and Reform Jews, not allowing us into state operated, publically funded mikvaot.
- Who see hundreds of thousands of dollars go to Orthodox Congregations for schools, rabbinic salaries, synagogue buildings and almost nothing go to ours without a court order.

But, as former President Peres said, guided by a love of Israel, we persevere. The Masorti Foundation raises money to pay those salaries, to build the synagogues, to expose the actions of the Knesset to the Israeli, and American, public.

When G-d spoke to us at Sinai, Moses reiterates in today's Parsha that HaShem spoke to the whole congregation at the mountain. All of us were at Sinai. Israel is our homeland. We all have a responsibility to see Israel live up to its ideals. We all deserve to be treated with respect and without discrimination, whether we are there for one week, a summer, or a lifetime.

The movement in Israel, with the Foundation in the States, is going to be launching a major petition/letter drive during the holidays, that I hope you will join, calling on the government to live up to its promise of building the egalitarian space at the Kotel, recognizing the Masorti Movement, and fulfilling both the vision of Sinai and the ideals of the Declaration in allowing Religious Freedom for all in Israel.

Moses was barred from the Promised Land. He pleaded with G-d but, as we saw in today's Parsha, he was disappointed and bitter. We are in the Promised Land, but the vision Israel was founded on, of religious freedom and conscience, of justice has, so far, been denied to us. We must do more than plead.

We must win.

Shabbat Shalom.