

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

DEVARIM

VAETCHANAN

EKEV

RE'EH

SHOFTIM

KI TEITZEI

KI TAVO

NITZAVIM

VAYELECH

HAAZINU

VZOT  
HABRACHA

## HAAZINU

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## THE PURSUIT OF WISDOM

In response to their sins, Moses rebukes the Jewish people, calling them a 'loathsome [*nava*] and unwise [*lo chacham*] people'.<sup>1</sup>

This week's *parasha*, *Ha'azinu*, is described by the Torah as a song, and in keeping with this poetic style, Moses often employs more than one adjective to describe a particular matter. Generally, when offering more than one description within a given phrase, Moses begins with the lesser description and then proceeds to proclaim something more substantial. For example, the aforementioned verse continues with Moses rhetorically asking, 'Is He not your Father, your Creator, who made you and sustains you?' God is first a Father and then a Creator, first a Maker and then a Sustainer. In both of these cases, the former description is on a smaller scale than the latter.

In this context, one would expect that when describing the nation, Moses would adopt the same style, saving the more significant adjective for last. However, a

surface reading of the description suggests otherwise. The term 'loathsome' seems far worse than the term 'unwise'. Given the nature of Moses' other statements in this poetic section, why does he change his style here? Why does he not continue to employ successively more intense adjectives?

There are two aspects that make up who a person is - one's thoughts and one's deeds. The question is, however, which of these two elements is definitive. A talmudic passage dealing with the nature of marriages that are based on false conditions unexpectedly sheds light on this question.<sup>2</sup> If a woman agrees to marry a man on the condition that he is wealthy, and subsequently discovers that he is actually poor, then the marriage is not binding. If a marriage takes place on condition that the groom is wise, in order for the marriage to be valid, he must display some wisdom. And yet, if one marries on the basis that the groom is a righteous person and that he performs good deeds, the

marriage remains binding even if his ways are completely evil. Why? For 'Perhaps he pondered repentance in his mind.' The underlying premise is that despite a person's actions being loathsome, if he simply contemplates correcting them he has the ability to turn his life around. This case shows that **righteousness can be obtained instantaneously, while the previous case shows that wisdom cannot.** This suggests that thought, rather than action, is the more definitive indicator of one's nature.

In light of this, one can better appreciate why Moses' rebuke of the Jewish people starts with describing them as loathsome and goes on to describe them as unwise, even though this is contrary to his previous pattern of building upwards in severity. Ibn Ezra identifies the former term (loathsome) as referring to the Jewish people's actions and the latter term (unwise) as referring to their thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

We can now understand that Moses is in fact consistent in his style. His description of the Jewish people's lowly status gets progressively more severe, first outlining their actions in sinning against God, and then describing their more reprehensible lack of wisdom, which essentially defines them as sinners. **While one's actions are external to oneself, wisdom defines one's essence. The first step to acquiring wisdom is taking the time to acquire knowledge in the search of truth and of a more meaningful life.** It is for this reason, perhaps, that a marriage based on a misrepresented level of wisdom is not binding. For unlike repentance, abundant good intentions, remorse and regret cannot bring expert knowledge. Rather, it takes time and effort; it requires one to seize the moment and apply oneself to in-depth study for an extended period. **The next stage to wisdom is the experiential application of the knowledge acquired - the act of harmonising accumulated theory with a sensitive practice in reality.** In other words, the actions follow the thoughts.

In order to improve our actions, according to Moses' implicit advice, the acquisition of wisdom is essential as a first step. Opportunities pass by quickly and these moments can never be regained. While it is never too late to repent, we must learn before it is too late. I often speak to adults who have developed great fitness and muscle tone through working out daily in the gym. These same people are often highly qualified with undergraduate and master's degrees in the fields in which

they practice. Yet many who have worked so hard on their physical and mental achievements are ignorant and impoverished when it comes to their knowledge of Judaism and their spiritual well-being.

In light of the common practice of amassing wealth in every other facet of life and prioritising other, more superficially attractive pursuits, Solomon, the wisest of all men, teaches us:

Take my guidance rather than silver, Knowledge rather than chosen gold. For wisdom is better than rubies; And all one's desires cannot compare.<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 32:6.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 49b.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 32:6.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 8:10-11.

#### Parasha Fact:

Following his 'song', Moses is told to ascend Mount Nevo to look at the land of Israel. This is the closest he would get to the land before his death. How fortunate we are that we can so easily do what Moses prayed endlessly for, experiencing our homeland firsthand.

שבת שלום



Next week in V'zot Habracha:

*We have become accustomed to the pomp and ceremony that surrounds the funerals of national leaders. Governors, royalty, presidents and politicians all come together to pay their homage. Wreaths and bouquets are laid down on the leader's resting place, in their honour and in their memory, marking the spot for all to see. The press and media are prevalent, with live streams and broadcasts of the ceremony, maximising respect to the deceased and to their legacy. And yet, at the tremendously poignant and sad time when Moses passes away, his soul quietly leaves this earth. No pomp. No ceremony. Not even a known burial place. How is it that when the greatest leader of all time passes through his final moments on earth, the Torah's description is so understated?*