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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Devarim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The people of Israel had wandered in the wilderness for forty years and were now on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses had been their leader, their liberator, their link with the Almighty. Now, during the last days of his life, Moses re-emphasized his role as teacher—Moshe Rabbeinu. The book of Devarim records Moses's memories, chastisements, and his hopes for the future of his people.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wisely observed that Moses's last messages to the Israelites went beyond instructing them on how to conduct themselves. He sought to inspire them with the underlying meaning of their covenant with God. He addressed not only the How of Torah life—but the Why. He reminded them that "they are God's people, the nation on whom He has set His love, the people He rescued from slavery and gave, in the form of the commandments, the constitution of liberty. They may be small but they are unique. They are the people who, in themselves, testify to something beyond themselves. They are the people whose fate will defy the normal laws of history. Other nations, says Moses, will recognize the miraculous nature of the Jewish story."

Moses set an example for rabbis, teachers, parents, grandparents…all who are involved in the transmission of the Torah tradition. We need to communicate a sense of mission, a deep awareness that we are part of an amazingly powerful worldview that is life-transforming. Judaism is an adventure. It addresses every aspect of our daily life but puts things into a cosmic perspective.

Moses taught us to strive to go beyond our "ordinary selves" and aspire to live according to our "best selves." It's not only a matter of how we live…but why. Without the spark of idealism and striving for transcendence, life becomes insipid.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel lamented the decline in religiosity among moderns. For some Jews, religion has become a matter of rote. People follow the rules by habit, not by inner spiritual connection. For others, Judaism is honored for its past, but not granted a serious role in life today. And yet for others, religion is disconnected from the ongoing crises of everyday living, the challenges facing society at large.

He wrote: “When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless” (A. J. Heschel: Essential Writings, p. 49).

A story is told of a Rosh Yeshiva who was overseeing his class of Talmud students. As the young men pored over the texts and engaged in heated discussion, the Rosh Yeshiva suddenly slammed his hand on his desk with a loud thud. He called out: “There is a God!” The students were startled…and surprised. Of course there is a God; why was the Rebbi shouting what we all know? But the Rebbi explained: it often happens that we are so engrossed in the texts we forget why we are studying, we forget the divine source of our studies, we need to be reminded: There is a God. An important lesson for the students, and for all of us.

Moses taught the Israelites: There is a God. Life must be lived with awareness of this grand reality. We study and observe Torah not only to learn How. We study and observe to know Why.