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D'var Torah

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Today's Torah portion, *D'varim*, means "The Words." For forty years Moses led and stood with the Israelites. In forty years you have a lot of conversations, many arguments, and many breakthroughs, but these words carried an unique significance than the conversations before-these words set the foundation for the future.

In the previous years and previous Torah portions, Moses had in many ways been passive, allowing his brother Aaron to speak for him, saying that he himself was not a good or comfortable public speaker. In *D'varim* Moses shares his words with strength and conviction - but not in a way that calls on the Israelites to listen to him as a leader. Instead, his words call on the Israelites to feel empowered to lead themselves. His words would be a thread that ties them together across lands and time. When I think about our world today, our words have needed to function in a very similar way. A few months ago, our actions to one another held great significance. We could show our love by spending time with one another or giving a hug. We could have heated arguments in a room together and then calm the tension with a shared meal. Today, we rely on our words to be the thread that keeps us connected. Knowing the power of our words today, we can imagine the power of Moses's final word of instruction to the Israelites.

In his speech to the Israelites Moses recounts their journey together as a way to prepare them for the future to come.

When speaking to the Israelites Moses recalls how at Horeb G*d told them, "You have stayed long enough on this mountain." When I reflect on the moment we are living in I find myself telling myself the same thing. We have stayed long enough at this mountain. Our mountain is our history repeating itself. I have been feeling that our country has been stuck on a mountain for far too long. And on this mountain there have not been inspired words of Moses, but instead cycles of hate, racism, anti-semitism and oppression taking on new forms. We cannot expect the mountain to disappear or change. We have to move ourselves.

Anshe Emet's Koleinu - Our Voices - is a new committee committed to racial justice. The aims of the committee are to lift up the voices of Jews of color in our community, create communal conversations on race and racial justice, and strengthen connections between members of Anshe Emet Synagogue with predominantly black communities in Chicago.

When Moses guided the Israelites on how to lead he said, "I charged your magistrates at the time as follows, 'hear out your fellow Israelites and decide justly between anyone and a fellow Israelite or a stranger'." Moses understood that conversations between people of a variety of backgrounds would be necessary for the

growing community to thrive. Koleinu ensures these conversations happen in ways that are meaningful and sustainable.

Our synagogue is blessed to have Jews of Color as part of our community. Individuals, couples, and families who are Black, Latinx, Asian, and more. Our synagogue, and the Jewish community as a whole, is ever growing in its diversity. In a 2019 study conducted in partnership with Stanford, it is estimated that the Jewish community comprises 12-15% Jews of color, with that number growing each year.

Activist Lilla Watson said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." We cannot overcome anti-semitism without fighting racism. And racism cannot be overcome without fighting anti-semitism. The black community, the Jewish community, and Black Jews, like me, are at the mountain together. We must agree that we have stayed at this mountain long enough. That our people need to walk hand in hand and leave together. And in our journeys we share the stories of our histories, of our struggles, of our shared oppression and progress. On our walk away from the mountain we can hear Black spirituals sung alongside the Shema. We can share the recipes of our aunties and bubbles and bring a new kind of latke to Hanukkah this year.

When Moses speaks to the Israelites he spends a great deal of time recounting the battles they faced together. This was not as a way to give the Israelites a chance to feel proud of their military victories, or to boast the physical strength of the group, but to remind them that progress is hard and uncomfortable, but they should not fear those hardships. It was because of those battles and fights that the Israelites could grow in number and move forward. When recounting the battles Moses did not call out one individual responsible for the victories.

When sharing the leaders of the tribes he did not single out an individual leader as having the most power or success. Instead, he spoke of the group as a collective and even emphasized his own limitations as a single individual saying, "I cannot bear the burden of you myself." And when Moses proposed that each tribe choose a leader for themselves, they responded by saying "What you propose to do is good." On the one hand, we can interpret this as the group saying that what Moses has proposed is agreeable. I choose to interpret "good" in this phrase as meaning that what Moses has proposed is an *act of goodness*. Moses empowering the Israelites to lead themselves, empowering them to choose leaders from a diversity of backgrounds and skills, and including the highest of the highs and the lowest of the lows of the community in the conversation, is an *act of good*. And we shall do the same. Just as the battles could not be won by individuals, and just as it was necessary for a variety of leaders to move the community as a whole, we will empower ourselves and empower each other to go on this journey together.

Koleinu means "our voices" and *our* voices will really be what is needed for us all to have a healed and thriving future. We invite everyone to take part in the initiatives to follow. Christie Chiles Twillie will bring us together

through music, there will be a book club where we can explore topics of racial justice as a community, I'll be offering a workshop for us to explore the intersections of race and our Judaism, and much more. We do all of this work in partnership with Na'aseh, Anshe Emet's Social Justice community which has been doing ongoing social justice initiatives inside our walls and out. Please join Koleinu in the conversation. There are regular facebook updates and announcements in the newsletters. We are all here to move from this mountain, together.

Shabbat Shalom!