

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Devarim

“AND THESE ARE THE WORDS ...” (DEVARIM 1:1)

**This was of critical importance**

THE RAMBAN, in his introduction to Sefer Devarim, writes that Moshe was recounting how *B'nei Yisrael* sinned at various times during their sojourns through the desert, and how Hashem showed them great mercy. This narrative had a three-fold purpose. Firstly, to teach the Jews how much kindness Hashem has for his chosen people. Secondly, to rebuke the people with strong words as a warning not to repeat their misdeeds, lest they be destroyed as a punishment for their sins. Thirdly, to strengthen their hearts, by showing *B'nei Yisrael* Hashem's overwhelming mercy – the attribute He would always use in His interactions with them. This was of critical importance, the Ramban explains, so that they would not lose hope. Without the reassurance that Hashem will deal compassionately with them, the Jewish people would think, “No one is perfect, and we are going to sin sooner or later and then the attribute of strict justice will demand our immediate destruction!”

**Doesn't one message undermine the other?**

The Ramban's second and third purposes cited above seem to be in contradiction to each other. On the one hand, Moshe is exhorting the Jews with fear of punishment – don't sin or you'll be destroyed. At the same time, he reassures them that Hashem is compassionate and forgiving, so they don't give up hope. Doesn't one message undermine the other? In addition, the Ramban's words imply that had Moshe not focused on Hashem's great kindness and mercy towards *B'nei Yisrael*, they would have despaired of attaining forgiveness and returned to their sinful ways. This is surprising if we think about the generation that was hearing Moshe's words. This nation had witnessed amazing miracles on a daily basis: Hashem protected and fed them in the barren and desolate desert with the manna, clouds and the well of Miriam. They had spent all their days during the forty years in the desert learning Torah from Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest prophet of all time. Many of them saw the ten plagues in Egypt, and the earthshaking revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Do these enlightened folk need Moshe to highlight Hashem's kindness in order for them not to “throw in the towel” and degenerate into sinners? Would their fear of Hashem disappear without the constant reminder of His mercy? Even without focusing on His kindness, they should still fear His awesome power and wrath!

**Let us work on both areas**

The Ramban reveals to us the complexity of the human spirit and the delicate blend and balance that we need to maintain in serving Hashem. *Yiras Shamayim* – fear of Heaven – alone is not enough to save us from sin. Without the constant vision of Hashem's mercy and kindness, we would lose hope. We would despair of ever reaching higher plateaus and we would begin to sink. And this is true even after seeing the amazing miracles of the exodus and the desert! Fear of Hashem must go hand in hand with a powerful dose of understanding the *chesed* of Hashem.

As we mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple and contemplate how to repair our ways that have contributed to this long and painful exile, let us work on both areas: fear of sin and, simultaneously, Hashem's love and compassion for us. We can motivate ourselves to do a real *teshuvah*, avoiding our bad habits from fear of punishment, while being mindful of the hope that Hashem is there waiting to forgive us if we sincerely improve, and bring us back home to the rebuilt Temple in Yerushalyim, speedily in our days.