

Poems for Parashat Devarim

Eleh haDevarim asher diber Moshe. These are the words that Moses spoke. Today Anne has requested that people from Teshuvah share something creative with the congregation. We all have different talents and ways of expressing ourselves. One of the ways I sometimes express myself is through poetry: whether or not I am talented is another matter; however with your permission I thought I might share three or four poems of mine as my contribution to the service.

In today's portion, we see Moses, who having led God's people for the best part of forty years, and knowing that he would shortly be parted from them, felt it incumbent upon himself to impart a final exhortation to the children of Israel, and thus we have the book of Devarim (or 'Words').

In keeping with this theme the first couple of poems I would like to share were written by way of exhortation or encouragement for my eldest daughter – Abigail. As many of you will know my first marriage ended in divorce after five years and my daughter who was quite young was taken to live in Jersey. Obviously my heart went with her, but how does one fulfil one's obligation to instruct ones children in the faith when they are parted from you. I had bought her a children's Bible, but as there was no-one in her new home to encourage her to read it I felt further impetus was required.

The idea came to me one day, that I should write her a short poem to help her to understand the importance of the Bible, so I put pen to paper and wrote the following lines. Please excuse their extreme simplicity and bear in mind that they are intended to convey the point of the Bible to a young child.

A Light in the Darkness

God's word is like a little light
That helps us see which way to go:
It helps us learn to do what's right
And teaches what we need to know.

Our faith is like a little seed
Which our creator - God did sow,
And the Bible is the thing we need
To help that little seed to grow.

So take this little light with you
- A guide and comfort in the dark;
Be led by it in all you do
To help you not to miss the mark.

I wrote this out on a small roll of paper and slipped it around the battery cartridge of a small torch rather like this one, and then put it in the post. When I spoke to my daughter later that

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week via SKYPE I asked her if she had received it, to which she replied excitedly that she had and that it had proven very useful. When I asked her what she meant by this, it turned out that when my parcel had arrived, its contents had attracted the ridicule of her mum and step-dad, who quipped that it wasn't like they didn't have electric lighting in Jersey, so why would Abigail be likely to need a torch? For those of you who don't know Jersey is a small island in the English channel which owing to its relationship to the UK and its own independent tax law is something of a magnet for investors, and as a result is relatively wealthy, having one of the highest national income per capita in the world. Despite its size it therefore has very good infrastructure and every modern convenience. It was very curious therefore, that the Island was hit by a long lasting power cut that same week and the torch I had sent Abigail proved to be useful after all.

Coincidence perhaps? Or maybe not? I'll leave you to decide. As far as I understand, power cuts like that are a rare occurrence on Jersey and the experience proved to be a powerful object lesson for my daughter and left a lasting impression on me that God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to confound the wise, and even small and seemingly futile gestures on our part when surrendered to his service can be used by God for his greater glory.

The next poem I would like to share was also written to my eldest daughter. She would have been seven about this time, and if you had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would have told you that she wanted to be a princess. When she came to visit us on holiday, she loved to dress up as a princess as many girls her age do. On one occasion, she happened to lose one of the gloves that went with her outfit so I wrote this poem to illustrate an important lesson. At the time she said something which is seldom heard, put which must surely be the highest honour any parent can ever aspire to. 'Thank you Daddy, I will keep it for always'.

A True Princess

There was a young princess,
- Of fairy blood was she;
Who always liked to dress
In royal finery!

This maiden ventured far and wide
And made her home abroad
But though far off she did reside,
She was by all adored.

And when she came to visit,
Those of her native land
Her people thronged to see her;
They were a joyful band!

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Her father loved her dearly:
His firstborn child was she,
And tried to show her clearly
Who she was born to be.

A princess must have wisdom
With which to govern well,
And she must practice virtue
Wherever she may dwell.

For it is not a palace,
Which does a princess make,
Nor costly gowns, nor golden crowns
Does royal office take

It is her kind and loving heart
Her steadfast loyalty,
Not her clothes, however smart
Which certify her royalty.

So though you lose your hat or glove
Or royal gown beside;
Make sure you never lose your love,
And stay a princess inside.

For the theme of my next poem, I chose one of the parables of Yeshua, which I decided to retell in my own words for children and adults alike. You may follow the story in Luke 16:19-31 if you like.

The Man of Greed and the Man in Need

A man with riches very great
Lived a life defined by luxury
While in the dust outside his gate
Lay a man confined to poverty.

A purple robe, the rich man wore
His clothes were always of the best
In contrast with the man so poor,
That in such tattered rags was dressed.

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The rich man feasted every day
Kingly was his sumptuous fare
The fragrance blew where the poor man lay
And told of the treats he could not share.

His begging bowl was by his side
The rich man's crumbs he longed to eat
But he must learn to be satisfied
With the meagre pickings of the street.

Often the rich man passed him by
As he raised an outstretched hand
But the rich man ignored the beggar's cry
And closed his ears to his faint demand.

He'd no time to spare for the fellow there
For he'd far too much on his plate
He was well aware it might cost to care
So the poor man would have to wait.

While the rich man bathed, attended by slaves
Dust clogged the beggar man's pores
One was anointed and given a shave
While dogs licked the other man's sores.

Of God, the rich man seldom thought
Whose relevance he could not see
For he had cares of a different sort
Like what dishes to order for tea.

The poor man on the other hand
Had many a talk with the Lord
Who else would hear and understand
So his soul in prayer he outpoured.

There was none to bury him when he died
So the dogs and the flies did the deed
His companions in life, they stayed by his side
And faithful, took care of this need.

But through the portal of the grave
His soul was welcomed in great joy

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A humble soul, so true and brave
Could not death nor hell destroy.

To Abraham's side his soul was borne
God's kindly angels carried him
To where he would no longer mourn,
Nor hunger or thirst could harry him.

The rich man also passed away
And mourners crowded round his room
In regal pomp his body lay
Resplendent was his tomb

But after death did no joy wait
But blackest darkness and hell-fire
And truly pitiful was the state
Of the man the world admired.

In torment lifting up his eyes
To where deliverance might be found
A distant garden he soon spies
Where fruit trees bend to touch the ground.

And reclining in this paradise
On the breast of Abraham
By a fountain, cool as ice
There lay the beggar-man

That in this world had known no fame
While the rich man was well known
Henceforth he'd have a lasting name
While the rich man would lose his own.

Then parched lips parting in a cry
As the rich man sought relief
He lifted up his voice on high
In his misery and grief.

Oh Father Abraham I pray,
If you can hear me call
Then there must surely be some way
To grant one favour small.

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I ask that El'azar may come
Cool water to bestow,
- The merest drop upon his thumb -
On this poor wretch below.

An answer Abraham returned
But it could bring him little cheer
No hope of that for which he yearned
But confirmation of his fear.

My Son, a spanless gulf there is,
That these two places serves to sever.
You have your place, and he has his
Where you must each abide for ever.

In life he suffered while you prospered
But now your fortunes are reversed
For El'azar has found the blessing
While your latter end is cursed.

"Oh Father, if these things be so,
Five brothers have I yet.
Bid El'azar swiftly to them go,
And spare them my regret."

But Abraham said, "What need is there?
They have the prophets and the Torah
A tree of life, that all may share,
If they will hear and don't ignore her."

"Not so, father, for they have need
Of a more convincing proof
Send El'azar to them with all speed
And they'll embrace the truth."

Sadly Abraham shook his head,
"What Torah & the prophets tell,
If they won't hear, the very dead
Will fail to prove to them as well."

This tale was by a prophet told

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To us who are the rich man's kin,
That we should not make gods of gold,
But rather shun the rich man's sin.

Not in this world, but in the next
Our treasure we should lay in store:
Relieving those who are oppressed
And showing mercy to the poor.

For we are of the rich man's seed
And poverty dwells at our gate;
If we turn from greed to the man in need
Then for us, God in mercy will wait.

Though this story be so serious
And give little cause for laughter
If we hearken to this story
We'll live happy ever after.

The last poem I would like to read was written for a friend of mine on her birthday. She had been going through a very difficult time and was struggling to deal with certain events that had occurred that year. If like her, life has been tough for you too recently, then maybe this will speak to you too.

Making Sense

The seasons turn, a year is spent;
Who knows where the minutes went!
One chapter of your life is done,
Another one has just begun.

As you look back on your last year,
So full of heartache, grief and fear,
Do you suspect you lived in vain?
Would you turn back the clock again?

Life moves on with quickening pace,
And each of us must run our race;
And time and tide for no man wait,
Nor can we bid life's storms abate.

Do you feel burdened down with care?

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Confronted by unanswered prayer?
Or does life often seem unfair?
Do you wonder, 'Is God there'?

What is the purpose of life's mess?
This tangled skein of threads, no less,
We're in the dark we must confess:
God's plan for us we cannot guess.

But one day when our lives are done
God will reveal what has been spun,
He'll turn us over, and we'll see
Not broken threads, but a tapestry.

Or to put it in another way:
We're each of us like lumps of clay
And the potter shapes and kneads,
On his wheel at fright'ning speeds.

Then in life's furnace we are fired,
Though we may feel sick and tired;
But when the potter's work is through,
A masterpiece, he'll make of you.

So do not dwell on what's behind,
And be not troubled in your mind,
And let the future hold no dread,
But leave it all to God instead.

For he himself, has gone before,
And so he knows what lies in store,
And 'Man of Sorrows' was his name:
What you've been through – he bore the same.

So do not think you walk alone,
For he will not forsake his own;
But trust your life into his hand,
And he'll accomplish all he's planned.