

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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Parashat Devarim | July 27 - August 1, 2014 | 29 Tammuz - 5 Av 5774

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (or Nothing New Under the Sun)

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



As Israel wages a fierce fight against an amoral enemy, and as Jews all over the world are facing vicious anti-Semitic riots and acts of violence, the customs of the Nine Days and the mourning of Tish'a B'Av unfortunately resonate with us more than ever. God has lifted any veil between the loathing of the Jewish State and the loathing the Jewish people. Jews know more than anyone that self-criticism and motivational critiques of others are important parts of a moral world, but the hypocrisy and hatred that our enemies – and enemies of civilization – spew on the streets and in the press take the world away from its moral compass. It feels like Eicha all over again.

I vividly remember observing the fast of Tish'a B'Av fourteen years ago: Senator Joseph Lieberman's nomination as the Democratic vice presidential candidate served as a backdrop. He talked about his Orthodox religious beliefs and practices, and Christians all over America loved it. As a rabbi in Chicago, the location of the Democratic National Convention that year, I remember how difficult it was to get into the sad, depressed mood that Tish'a B'Av is meant to conjure up. Not so this year. While Israel is strong and the Jewish people are unified in supporting her, this is a year where we understand Jeremiah seeing all the nations unite against Judah, celebrating as Babylon destroyed our Temple. The UN might as well have existed then, with Babylon and Edom leading the votes condemning poor Judea.

Fortunately, there is one thing we can change from Jeremiah's time: The way we treat each other. The periods leading up to the destruction of both Temples were marked

by oppression of the weak, internal fighting, and moving away from God and God's values. The feeling that Jews are more united now than ever before is palpable. We need to foster this, to work on our unity, our love for each other, and our love for Israel in concrete ways. All indications are that Israelis want Americans to be with them in Israel – physically – as much as possible during this difficult time. Many people, like Rabbi Avi Weiss, are making trips to Israel to be with our brothers and sisters. I look forward to being there in two weeks. We have to be resolute – as much as our lives allow it – in not cancelling trips to wait for easier times. On the contrary, let's use any excuse we have to get to Israel! Let's also concentrate on being not only welcoming to and respectful of our fellow Jews, but on responding to any negative remarks Jews make about each other (*chas v'shalom!*) with equanimity and what Rav Kook called "baseless love."

The traditional hate for our people – which has existed from the days of Lavan to Pharaoh to Rome to French "comedian" Dieudonné – is exposed this year. Tragically, things around us have not changed. But inside, we can change: We can create a loving, unified people committed to God's ways and God's teachings – the Torah. This can change the course of our history. This Tish'a B'Av, we will sit on the floor thinking about how familiar the world of Jeremiah and the Crusades look today. But let us help each other up from sitting for Eicha or a long morning of Kinot, let us hold each other and support each other as we try, with God's help, to change the fate of our people and the direction of the world. We can do it!

FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

Parashat Devarim: Now Say it Back In Your Own Words

By Rabbi Dov Linzer

What happens when we repeat a story or lesson in our own words?

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Does it improve in the retelling, or does it worsen? Is the message lost, or is it made more relevant? What is the point of retelling? Why not just repeat things verbatim?

Parshat Devarim opens with an epic retelling. It is the speech of one man, Moshe Rabbeinu, delivered over the course of a little more than a month. It is the retelling of three books of the Torah: Shemot, Vayikra, and Bamidbar. And it is told not in God's words but in Moshe's.

Note, says the *midrash*, who is doing this expounding (Devarim Rabbah 1:1). It was Moshe, the very man who said of himself, *lo ish devarim anokhi*, "I am not a man of words," who now expounds on the entire Torah, opening with *elah ha'devarim*, "These are the words" (Shemot 4:10). Why is a man who is not an *ish devarim* the one to relate the entire book of Devarim? We might equally ask why Moshe was chosen to be God's spokesperson. Why not pick an *ish devarim*? Because such a man, being himself a person of words, might contaminate God's message with his own words or ideas. Moshe, challenged in speech as he was, was certain to communicate God's word without embellishment, without change. By the same token, it is just such a person who is *most* suited to tell over the Torah in his own words. With Moshe Rabbeinu – his humility, his desire to act only as a vessel for the Divine, his being a person not in love with the sound of his own voice, not interested in always asserting himself and his ideas – the message was sure to stay pure. It would be God's words which would be communicated through Moshe's words. And, hence, it was Moshe's words which then became part of the Torah itself, which became, in essence, God's own words.

Yet something *has* changed in the retelling. The Gemara tells us, for example, that even if literary juxtapositions of two *mitzvot* are not significant in the rest of the Torah, they are significant in the Book of Devarim (Berakhot 21a). Why is this so? The Shita Mikubetzet (*ad. loc.*) explains that since Moshe was now reordering *mitzvot* that had been already given in a different order, the reordering is communicating a particular message. When we retell a story, the organization of the material, the order that we put things in, what we choose to emphasize, and even what we choose to omit all shape the story we are telling; all of these are part of the message.

It is thus that we find that an enormous percentage of *Torah she'b'al Peh*, of the Oral Law, focuses on the verses, on the wordings of the *mitzvot*, in the book of Devarim. The Oral Law emerges naturally from Devarim because Devarim is

already part of Oral Law. It is already the engagement of a human being – Moshe – with the Divine Word of the Torah. As the Sefat Emet states:

וזהו עיקר משנה תורה שהוא בחי' התקשרות תורה שבע"פ לתורה שבכתב כי מרע"ה היה בחי' תורה שבכתב ובאי הארץ הי' בחינת תורה שבע"פ לכן משנה תורה כולל משניהם שהוא שער המחברם

This is the essence of Mishne Torah, which is the category of the interconnection of the Written Torah with the Oral Torah. For Moshe Rabbeinu was in the category of the Written Torah, and those about to enter into the land were in the category of the Oral Torah. Thus, the Mishne Torah contains both of these, for it is the passageway which connects them.

To retell the Torah was to take it out of the context of those who left Egypt and bring it into the context of those about to enter into the Land. It was to take it down from Mount Sinai, out of the Wilderness, and bring it into society, into the real lives of the people. Moshe's retelling of the Torah was true to God's word but also a reframing of God's word. It was the beginning of the Oral Torah, the beginning of the religious enterprise of engaging God's word with integrity while at the same time retelling God's word in our own words, in each generation and for each generation.

There is another form of retelling, and that is the act of translating. We are told at the beginning of our *parasha* that "Moshe began to expound this Torah" (1:5). Rashi, quoting Tanchuma, comments on this: "He explained it to them in 70 languages." When we translate, there is a risk. Things often do get lost or changed in translation. Perhaps this translation will not be exactly what God said.

But there is also an opportunity. First, such translations allow the message to reach the widest possible audience. In fact, echoing the *midrash* of Moshe's translating into 70 languages, we find that many rabbis allowed the Torah scroll itself to be written in any language (Megillah 8b). People have been translating the Torah into the vernacular for millenia, and with every translation, the Torah becomes more accessible, more widespread.

When something is written in someone's native tongue, it becomes intelligible to him or her for the first time. And when something is spoken in one's own language in the metaphorical sense, when it is relayed in a way that someone can relate to and understand, then such words are

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not only comprehensible but also meaningful. Such words can resonate and enter into our mind, into our heart, and into our soul.

Translation however does more. It not only disseminates the Torah, it can also provide a fuller, truer realization of its meaning, of its essence. The Sefat Emet uses the metaphor of clothing in discussing the translation of the Torah.

Language, he says, is a type of outer garment to the meaning, the essence, of what is being conveyed, which is itself beyond language. Hebrew is one of these garments. Other languages provide others. Clothing, on the one hand, conceals; it covers our naked bodies. But clothing can also reveal. The part of ourselves we reveal depends on the clothes we wear; we will wear different clothes for different occasions or different moods. With every garment we put on we give a distinct expression of who we are.

The same is true for the Torah. When the Torah is translated into other languages, its meaning can be expanded, more fully actualized, more fully revealed. To again quote the Sefat Emet:

שכפי התרחבות הארת התורה במלבושים החיצונים יותר
שמתקרב הכל להפנימיות

“For to the degree that the light of the Torah has spread into other external garments, the more everything gets closer to the inner essence.”

Retelling the Torah is critical to reaching people, and it is critical to the Torah’s fullest realization. In fact, it is sections from the retelling, sections from the Book of Devarim, which form the essence of our daily religious lives. The two paragraphs of Shema – *shema* and *v’haya im shamo* – are both in Devarim (6:4-9, 11:13-21). These verses make up the Shema prayer, are the verses written in the *mezuzah* scroll, and are two of the four chapters that constitute the *tefillin* scrolls. These are some of the most central components of our life of religious observance. Our daily affirmation of faith in our words, on our homes, and on our bodies are all done in Moshe’s words, in Moshe’s retelling. It was this translation that revealed a part of the Torah’s essence. It was this translation that was a distillation of the Torah to its essence. And it is this translation that enters into our homes and into our hearts.

Israel is now in the middle of an ongoing war. It is not just a war against Hamas but also a war in the media and in public opinion. It is not the events of the war themselves which will shape the minds, hearts, and actions of people. It is how

these events are told over, how they are interpreted. Do people hear and believe a narrative of Israel waging an unjust war with disregard for innocent lives, or do they hear and believe one of Israel justly defending itself and its citizens with ultimate concern for the loss of innocent human life? As we are painfully aware, we cannot trust that the facts will be looked at objectively, in proper context, and speak for themselves. We have to speak for them. We have to find a way to translate them into a language that people can hear and understand. We have to spread this Torah so that it becomes the dominant discourse. This is what it means to partner with God, to make the Torah that is written into a Torah that is spoken, into a Torah that is heard.

GUEST DVAR TORAH

On Parashat Devarim

By Rabbi Max Davis (YCT '08)

These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazereth and Di Zahav. – Devarim 1:1



Thirty-six days before his passing, Moshe delivered several of the most renowned speeches of all time, speeches which constitute much of Devarim. Consider the audiences for Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and Lou Gehrig’s “Farewell to Baseball.” Multiply those multitudes by millions of people over 3,800 years and one begins to approach the readership of Moshe’s oration.

Yet the opening lessons of his magnum opus are so subtly tucked into a preamble as to be barely perceptible. This is by design. Rashi, citing Midrash Sifrei, explains that the geographic locations mentioned in the first verse allude to various sins committed by *B’nai Yisrael* during their forty year desert trek.

“*These are the words... in the desert*” refers to complaints in the desert (Shemot 16:3). “*In the plain*” refers to sins of idolatry committed on the plains of Moav (Bamidbar 25:1-9).

“*Opposite the Red Sea*” refers to sins of rebelliousness committed on the shores of the Red Sea (Shemot 14:11). Rather than rehashing these old crimes at length, the Torah references them indirectly “for the sake of the honor of

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Israel.” Rashi understands the Torah to be quietly modeling best practices for offering words of rebuke. We are enjoined to use discretion and to say only what must be said to make the point.

This explanation, however, seems challenged by the entire second half of the first chapter of Devarim, as Moshe describes in great detail the *cheit hameraglim* (sin of the spies) thirty-eight years prior (Devarim 1: 22-45). Similarly, Moshe subsequently delivers a lengthy description and rebuke of the nation for the sin of the golden calf. Why is Moshe so discreet in his allusions to some sins and so verbose with regard to others? What happened to *k’vodan shel Yisroel* – the honor of Israel?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein begins his commentary on Devarim with this issue. He notes that the sins of the spies and the golden calf were of such magnitude – as were the punishments *and* the atonement processes – that it was necessary to describe them at length. Moshe calculated that these incidents contained lessons of faith and loyalty crucial for the next generation of *B’nai Yisrael* to understand in depth, especially as they were perched on the threshold *Eretz Yisrael*. The other sins, however, were referenced more subtly as a deterrent to those who might consider themselves above repeating the sins of their forbearers (*Drash Moshe, Devarim 1:1*). As such, Moshe’s opening remarks are meticulously crafted to convey a blend of rebuke appropriate to the needs of the new generation. Some topics required elaboration, others simply a passing reference. The sum total was a carefully constructed, divinely inspired, nuanced message of love and concern. The opening lesson of the book of Devarim is therefore *not* the particulars of Moshe’s rebuke. Rather, it is the nuanced and varied manner in which he communicates difficult subject matter. *The capacity to discuss difficult topics with nuance and understanding, rebuke and compassion – this is a daunting challenge.*

Moshe was arguably the first to discuss the sins of Israel, but sadly, he was not the last. Nor has his nuanced and varied method been well practiced. One need only glance at social media to unearth the most egregiously polemical statements about the “sins of Israel” and the sins of the Palestinians. Emotionally wrought, questionably conceived sentiments crowd the internet, media, *and Kiddush* tables. Ironically, like Moshe, those who utter such statements are often perched outside the land of Israel. However, unlike Moshe, their information is distilled through the lenses of other

people’s cameras, blogs, and angry bird tweets rather than through firsthand knowledge. The result is often a potent soup of *devarim* (words) conveying anguish and anger but little else.

Granted, we are at war, and war presents precious little room for nuanced conversation. Looking toward the future – God willing a future in which the dust settles over a peaceful landscape – may we find the capacity and strength to sustain conversations – *at least* within our Jewish communities – that reflect the skills modeled by our people’s greatest and often embattled leader, Moshe.

Dedicated to the memory of Ann Kaplan, z”l, with deepest respect for Susan Snyder, Rabbi Yaacov Love, and Family.

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