

Parshat Devarim: On the Use, Disuse, and Misuse of Language

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This *shabbat* we mark the beginning of a new book of the Torah, *sefer Devarim*, and the beginning of the end of Moshe's life. The speeches that make up the book of Deuteronomy are an extended farewell offered by Moshe to the people whom he has led, loved, and sometimes loathed over the course of four decades. Though they contain some new directives, the speeches largely serve as a highlight reel of those complicated years, reminding the people of the long road travelled. *Parshat Devarim*, the opening of this exercise in memory, begins by subtly spotlighting the relationship that got this historical journey going, that between Moshe and the Jewish people, drawing attention to the ways that that relationship itself evolved through the journey.

The *parsha* begins:

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. (Deuteronomy 1:1)

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל-כל-ישראל
בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף בין-פארן
ובין-תפל ולבן וחצרת ודי זהב: (דברים א:א)

Moshe addresses all of the people in one specific place in the desert. Innocuous though this orienting verse may seem, the *midrash* hears in the opening phrase rich echoes of times past, harkening back to Moshe's earliest response to the call to lead the Jewish people. In a *parsha* of words (*devarim*), in the book of words, we must listen closely to each word. "אלה הדברים" ("these are the words") recalls Moshe's pronouncement of resistance back in Exodus, when he tried to evade relationship or responsibility, saying "לא איש דברים אנכי" ("I am not a man of words") (Ex. 4:10). I cannot speak and thus I cannot lead this people, he said to God. "כי כבד-פה וכבד-לשון אנכי" "for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (*ibid.*).

God responded:

11 But the Lord said to him, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes [one] dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 So now, go! I will be with your mouth, and I will instruct you what you shall speak." (Ex. 4:11-12)

יא ... למי שם פה לאדם או מי-ישום אלים או
חרש או פקח או עור הלא אנכי ה': יב ועתה
ך ואנכי אהיה עם-פיך והוריתך אשר תדבר:
(דברים ד:יא-יב)

So many years and so many *parshiot* later, with a linguistic mirror that brings the arc of Moshe's leadership into focus, God's promise is fulfilled and Moshe emerges as a man of words.

These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel (Deut. 1:1)

אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל-כל-ישראל (דברים א:א)

How did Moshe get from silence, or stuttering, to speech? *Devarim Rabbah* 1:1 states:

The Holy Blessed One said: See how the language of the Torah is so dear that it heals the tongue! From where do we know this? Since it is written, "A healing tongue is a tree of life," (Proverbs 15:4) and the "tree of life" only refers to the Torah, as it is said, "it is a tree of life to those who grasp onto her" (Pro. 3:18). The language of the Torah liberates

אמר הקב"ה ראה לשונה של תורה מה
חביבה שמרפא את הלשון מנין שכן כתיב
(משלי טו) מרפא לשון עץ חיים ואין עץ
חיים אלא תורה שנא' (שם משלי ג) עץ
חיים היא למחזיקים בה, ולשונה של תורה
מתיר את הלשון... ר"ל אמר מה לנו ללמוד

the tongue... Reish Lakish said, Why learn this from elsewhere [in the Torah] when we can learn it from our local verses? Regarding Moshe, until he merited Torah, it is said of him, "I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10). When he merited Torah, his tongue was healed and he began to speak. From where do we know this? From what we read: "These are the words which Moshe spoke" (Deut. 1:1).

ממקום אחר נלמוד ממקומו הרי משה עד שלא זכה לתורה כתיב בו (שם שמות ד) לא איש דברים אנכי, כיון שזכה לתורה נתרפא לשונו והתחיל לדבר דברים מנין ממה שקרינו בענין אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה.

The bridge to language lay in the Torah, for the right kind of words can actually set the tongue free. Moshe was not incapable of speech at the outset, according to this *midrash*. He was merely bereft of words worth speaking. With the introduction of Torah that changed and he could finally achieve fluency and fluidity.

Perhaps there is something uniquely magical in the Torah's letters that can radically alter our relationship to language. There are no shortage of mystics who testify to just this phenomenon. Or perhaps, as the *Sefat Emet* (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger) argues, it is the content of Torah that has the power to enliven and to unlock language.

The Torah gives life to all creations, for with it the Holy One created the world, so all vitality is from the Torah. For this reason, it liberates language... (*Sefat Emet*, Devarim 1871)

כי התורה נותנת חיים לכל הנבראים כי באורייתא ברא קוב"ה עלמא וחיות הכל מהתורה. ולכך מתיר את הלשון... (שפת אמת, דברים תרל"א)

We learn to speak--to boldly create and transform--from the book which contains worlds and creates worlds.

The *Sefat Emet* (in another essay) raises one challenge, though, regarding just how inept Moshe really was at the start of this story. Could it be that he truly did not understand his fitness to the task? In the face of God's direct call, did he really believe that his speech patterns disqualified him? The Gerrer Rebbe thinks not and offers an alternative understanding of Moshe's transformation.

Surely Moshe understood himself to be the elect of Israel. So, to the contrary, this is the meaning of [his statement that he cannot speak]: Moshe our teacher represented the collective wisdom of all of Israel. Therefore, so long as the Israelites were not ready [to receive God's words], Moshe was not "a man of words" because his speech included the speech of *bnei yisrael*...(Sefat Emet, Devarim 1877)

...הגם כי בוודאי ידע את עצמו כי הוא מובחר שבישראל. אך אדרבא הוא הדבר לאשר מרע"ה כלל הדעת של כל בני"ל לכן כ"ז שלא היו בני"ל מתוקנים לא היה איש דברים כי דיבורו כולל כללות הדיבור של בני"ל. (שפת אמת, דברים תרל"ז)

In other words, Moshe's initial impediment was not due to his own inability to speak but to his inability to be heard. He did not resist leading the people on account of a disability. It was the fact that he was *already* leading them, already bound up with them, that made him see how ineffective he would be without their full buy-in. Their unreadiness to listen made him unwilling to speak.

Moshe's journey toward words, then, was not a move from silence to speech, but from isolation to solidarity, from a ruptured relationship to a repaired one. When the people's openness to hearing met Moshe's openness to speaking, then *devarim*, words, spilled forth. Indeed, when that unity of leader and the led was reached, it unlocked both the power of the leader and the energy of his followers. A *be'er*, a wellspring of creativity and devotion, sprung forth.

On that side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses commenced [and] explained (*be'er*) this Law, saying: (Deut. 1:5)

בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה
בְּיָאֵר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת לְאֹמְרֵי: (דְּבָרִים
א:ה)

The *Sefat Emet* says on these words,

The [well] was the opening that Moshe our teacher z"l opened as a channel for all of Israel to find their way to the spring of Torah. (Sefat Emet, Devarim 1892)

והוא הפתח שפתח משה רבינו ע"ה להיות הכנה
שכל בני"י יוכלו למצוא מעין התורה. (שפת אמת,
דברים תרנ"ב)

But the *Degel Machane Ephraim* (R. Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov), reflecting on the same well and the same words, warns:

When there is an obstruction, God forbid, on the side of the receivers, when they cannot receive as they should, then the waters become desiccated and destroyed. (Degel Machane Ephraim on Deut. 1:5)

אבל כשיש חלילה מונע מצד המקבלים
שאינן מקבלים כראוי, אז גם הנהר יחרב
ויבש.
(דגל מחנה אפרים, דברים א:ה)

This is the promise and the warning that the final words of Moshe provide. Relationships can be redeemed. Words and waters can flow forth when both parties unlock themselves and open themselves fully to God and one another. But know that silence might return, and rivers might run dry, if channels of communication get compromised.

We always arrive at *parshat Devarim* on *Shabbat Chazon*, and this year on Tisha B'Av itself, and one cannot help but hear the cries of destruction (and the hopes for redemption) lurking in the background of this reading. In coming full circle and flowing with *devarim*, words, Moshe seems to be reminding us of the threat of wordlessness. When people cannot listen, leaders cannot talk, and so often it is not innocent silence that results, but chaotic noise--disbelief, disobedience, destruction. The early years of the relationship between Moshe and the Jewish people were characterized by such a din, and such dysfunction rears its head over and over in history, Jewish and otherwise.

The rabbis characterized the *churban* as the result of sinful behavior and *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. That is, relationships disrespected; language misused; social solidarity broken; inability to talk so that people will listen and listen so that people can be heard. The darkness of Tisha B'Av lays not only in the breakdown of communication between God and human beings, but importantly, in the rupture in communication between people.

Parshat Devarim asks us to consider again the centrality of words--the ability to speak; the willingness to hear; and the importance of keeping communication alive--if we are to rebuild. If we are to gush forth as a people once again.



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