

“Devarim: The importance of learning from history”

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The entire book of Devarim is essentially one long speech addressed by Moses to his people in the fortieth year of their desert wandering. Moses knew that, by divine command, he was not destined to enter the Promised Land, so he seized the rapidly closing window of opportunity to leave his people with a final message. In it, he surveys the past forty years of wandering and alludes to the setbacks they suffered and the punishments visited on them for their various demonstrations of faithlessness and rebellion, particularly in relation to their idolatry and immorality with neighbouring tribes. He also reflects on the tribulations that he experienced as he attempted to lead a stiff-necked people to their destiny.

He tells them about the temptations awaiting them in Canaan, and exhorts them to obey God's will if they are to retain their sovereignty and enjoy the fruits of the covenant that they made with God at Sinai. He also highlights some of the principal laws given at Sinai, and calls on Israel to be especially zealous with their observance. He ends his lengthy address by choosing his successor, Joshua, by composing a special song of praise, *Ha'azinu*, and by addressing a final blessing to each of the tribes as contained in the final sidrah, *V'zot ha-b'rachah*.

There are several significant aspects of this speech, notably its status, its orator, its oratory, and its length. By status, we refer to the fact that Moses' own words were elevated in sanctity to become an integral part of the Torah itself, although they were not delivered at Sinai. Moses was, after all, a mere mortal (for which reason the sages did not directly refer

to him in the Pesach Haggadah – *Ani v'lo ha-shali'ach* – ‘I, and not an agent [delivered them]’), one whose haste caused him to forfeit his lifetime’s dream of leading his people into the Promised Land. And yet, notwithstanding that serious flaw – at least from God’s perspective – he was granted that supreme privilege of being a co-collaborator with God in the Torah to be bestowed upon the world.

Its oratory is particularly significant, given that Moses reminds God that he was not a man of words (*lo ish devarim*), either in times past or now... ‘I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Ex. 4:10). The phrase he uses – *lo ish devarim* – is particularly Ironical, given that his book bears the description *eileh ha-devarim*, and was probably the longest, and assuredly the most eloquent, speech in the ancient Near Eastern, or any other, literature of its time! No wonder God described him as ‘the most humble of men; more than any other man on earth’ (Nu. 12:3).

So, God wrote the first four books; Moses, the fifth. And, together, they became the Torah. The popular name, *Devarim*, by which we refer to it – taken from the second word of the opening sidrah – was popularised much later, as the book is referred to in the Midrash by the name *Mishnei Torah*.¹ This phrase is derived from the context of the law that, when a new king is crowned, his first act is to write for himself – *et mishnei Torah ha-zot* (Deut. 17:18).

This phrase is problematic, however, when applied to Moses’ book since it is made clear a few verses later that the king was to write ‘the entirety of the Torah’ (see v.19)!²

Furthermore, the verb *sh-n-h*, in its primary sense of ‘to repeat,’ hardly describes a book that is no more than a digest of the Torah, in the same sense that Moses’ namesake, Moses Maimonides, used the phrase *Mishneh Torah* (somewhat controversially) as the title of his work on the laws of the Torah.

In his introduction, he states:

Since people read the Written Law first, and only then this book to familiarise themselves with the Oral Law, it follows that they have no need for any other [explanatory] work.³

It would seem then that, although Moses’ book possesses many stylistic and other differences as expected, thematically Moses kept to the events, laws, instructions, and teachings of the Torah as hitherto taught to the nation.

Hence the popularity of the title *Mishneihh Torah*, in the sense of ‘a digest of the Law,’ or ‘a model of the Law,’ though neither term provides a perfect description. Nevertheless, that was the title that was already in vogue among the Greek-speaking Jews of the third century BCE. Thus, the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Torah, titled the book, *Deuteronomion*, a contraction of the words, *deuteros nomos*, ‘second law,’⁴ from where the popular English title, ‘Deuteronomy,’ derives, with its misleading implication that it equals if not surpasses the previous books.

As regards Moses’ Devarim speech, there is a touch of irony in the fact that, Moses, who initially rejected God’s summons to become the leader of Israel on the grounds that, *lo ish*

devarim anokhi, “I am not a man of words” (Exodus 4:10), ends his mission by becoming, precisely, *ish Devarim*, ‘the man of *the Book of Devarim*.’ Similarly, of all the qualities and skills that Moses possessed, the very one that he felt was denied to him, that of oratory, is the one most finely honed and demonstrated in the majestic style and richness of language in the book he authored. For a man who began life with perceived seriously restricted powers of oratory, it was amazing that he was able later to hold the attention of an entire people with a speech the length of a book!

Moses has left a message in this for the many young people who, through lack of self-belief and worth, fail to exploit their latent talents and skills and to reach the heights of their potential. He shed his demons – his hesitancy, stammer, and self-doubts – and liberated himself from an obsession with his own ‘self’ and its shortcomings by focusing exclusively on his mission to lead and serve others. In so doing he discovered strengths, talents and an authority that he never dreamt he possessed.

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A question that calls for an answer, however, relates to the necessity for the book. After all, if it was primarily a re-statement of what was already chronicled in the rest of the Torah – a digest of the history of the past forty years of the nation’s wanderings – then, for whom was it required? Surely not for the generation that had already experienced it? After all, given that the older generation had been condemned to die in the desert because of its lack of faith and its belief in the false report of the spies, and that only those under twenty were destined to enter the Promised Land (see Nu. 14:29), what was to be gained by Moses’

insistence on reminding the former of their faithlessness and rebelliousness, and the latter of the waywardness of their parents.

Perhaps it was because Moses was acutely aware that the lessons of history must be taught and re-taught to each new generation, given that its mistakes and failures are so frequently repeated. In this context, I would suggest that almost identical comments by Winston Churchill and the Spanish philosopher, George Santayana, may provide answers to this question.

Churchill told his fellow parliamentarians, “Those that *fail to learn* from history are doomed to repeat it.” That may well have been what Moses had in mind when he insisted on reminding the older generation of their sins, weaknesses, and punishments. It was a final plea that, for the few precious years remaining to them, they should not lose the opportunity of enabling their children ‘to *learn* from history,’ by teaching them how to avoid the mistakes their parents had made, by spelling out how they had suffered because of their rebelliousness, and, most importantly, how to win God’s grace and blessing.

Santayana phrased it slightly, though significantly, differently: He said, “Those who *cannot remember* the past are condemned to repeat it.” This might well have been in Moses’ mind as he considered the younger generation preparing to enter the Promised Land. They, obviously, could not “remember” the tragic situations that their parents blundered into, but, if they listened and took to heart their parents’ advice and admonition, they might well avoid at least some of the pitfalls they had encountered and save themselves the painful repercussions they endured, and build for themselves a happy and constructive future in The Land of Israel.

Ironically, however cataclysmic were their parents' experiences, the following generations frequently display scant interest in them. In their eyes history had a surrealistic quality, making it remote from their own experience or sense of reality. It is perceived as '*his* story' – someone else's – rather than their own. They tend to develop, therefore, the certainty that modernity would be kind to them and cushion them from the horrors of their parents' generation.

Hence, Moses insisted on re-telling the youngsters the history of their parent's generation, because he knew full well that, notwithstanding his advice, the latter would have inclined to avoid describing its follies and sins, its alienation from God, and the punishment visited upon it. And that even in the case of those parents who were wise enough to be candid with their children, the odds were that the latter would barely take it to heart.

By writing it in God's Torah for posterity, Moses also teaches our generation never to forget that the lessons of history, like human nature, do not change, and that whoever does not study and learn from history's mistakes may, God forbid, be condemned to relive them.

NOTES

1. See *Sifre* sec. 160.
2. *ArtScroll* compounds the problem by translating *mishneihh ha-Torah* as ‘two copies of this book.’ This is based on Rashi’s comment that ‘the king was to keep one copy of the Torah in his treasury, and the other one with him at all times’ (commentary to Deut. 17:18).
3. In the eclectic work, *Klalei HaRamBam* (Guide to Maimonides’ Principles), printed together with his Code in many editions, the author was undoubtedly directing his warning at the quoted statement of Maimonides that no other explanatory work on the Oral Law was required, when he wrote, ‘Whoever decides the halachah based on RaMbaM’s work, while himself not being familiar with the Talmudic sources from which he had derived his laws, will erroneously declare permitted that which is forbidden and forbidden that which is permitted, wrongly assuming that they understood precisely what he had intended.’
4. Many regard the name *Deuteronomion* as a misnomer, however, given that the book contains no new legislation but was rather a repetition and amplification of laws already revealed at Sinai.’

Shabbat shalom,

Meaningful Fast,

ה' ישמור עלינו, על עמנו, ועל מדינתנו

Rabbi Jeffrey