

Moshe Rabbeinu Unscripted (*Parshat Devarim*)

‘These are the Devarim (words) which Moshe spoke to the entire people of Israel’ (*Devarim* 1:1).

This is the opening line to *Sefer Devarim* where Moshe, over a period of just over five weeks, surveys the past forty years of journeying through the wilderness while highlighting the errors that were made, the lessons that should be learnt, and the laws that need to be reviewed before Bnei Yisrael crosses into the Land of Israel.

As should be evident, the very fact that this sefer is called *Devarim* and is exclusively filled with the words of Moshe is deeply significant. This is particularly due to the fact that, forty years previously, Moshe protested to God that: “I am not a man of words (*Devarim*)!” (*Shemot* 4:10).

Reflecting on these two verses, the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Devarim* 2) states: ‘Said the people of Israel [to Moshe]: “Yesterday you said, ‘I am not a man of words (*Devarim*)”, and now you are saying all this?!”’, to which the Midrash responds by informing us that Moshe’s prior inabilities and lack of confidence in public speaking were healed by the Torah that he learnt and taught. As the *Midrash Rabbah* (*Devarim* 1:1) further explains (while referencing *Mishlei* 15:4 which states how ‘a healing tongue is a tree of life’), ‘the language of the Torah makes the tongue fluent’.

Yet while *Sefer Devarim* represents a remarkable transformation of Moshe from the person of no words to Moshe the great wordsmith, two questions need to be addressed. Firstly, very soon after Moshe’s exchange with God at the burning bush, Moshe already begins to deliver speeches to Pharaoh and to Bnei Yisrael. Given this fact that the evolution from ‘not being a man of words’ to being an orator already started forty years previously, why do our Sages only draw our attention to this shift at this point? Additionally, the words of the *Midrash Tanchuma* also require elucidation, because it is claimed that Bnei Yisrael used the word ‘Yesterday’ about Moshe’s claim that he was not a man of words when, in actual fact, Moshe said these words forty years beforehand!

I would like to suggest an original approach to this question based on a re-reading of *Shemot* 4:10, and also based on the claim, made by the *Or HaChaim* (commentary to *Devarim* 1:1), that the contents of *Sefer Devarim* are the words of Moshe himself*.

Going back forty years to the burning bush, what does God say to Moshe when reassuring him? It is that: “I will be with you as you speak, and I will instruct you what to say” (*Shemot* 4:12). What this means is that while Moshe protested to God that: “I am not a man of words” (ibid. 4:10), God’s response was that he need not be a man of words because God will provide the words.

Over the ensuing 40 years, Moshe’s public oratory was almost entirely the channelling of the words of God. This means that Moshe continued to be “not a man of words” throughout this period. This is why our Sages only draw our attention to this shift at this point, and this is why, according to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, the people used the word ‘Yesterday’, because for forty years, up until the first of *Shvat* 2488, Moshe only said the words that God told him to say.

The question is then: what happened on the first of *Shvat* such that Moshe stopped speaking God’s words and started saying his own? What stimulated this metamorphosis? Naturally, we assume it is Moshe’s awareness that his end is near. But this itself doesn’t explain why this occurred at this specific moment.

Significantly, the Ralbag (see *Toelet 3* on *Parshat Chukat* & commentary to *Devarim* 1:3) asserts that Aharon died on the first of *Shvat*** . This means that Moshe was a mourner as he began speaking the words of *Sefer Devarim*.

As we know, visitors often don't know what to say to someone who is mourning. In fact, the halacha is that visitors to a house of mourning should not speak until the mourner themselves speak (see *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 376:1). Perhaps it was easier for Moshe when he and Aharon mourned the death of Miriam together. However, in this instance, Moshe was mourning on his own. So what was Moshe to do? He began to speak – but this time, not the words of God, but his own words.

As Moshe spoke, he did so with a different tone to all his previous speeches, and just as mourners often express regret about their past actions and choices, so too, Moshe does the same.

It seems clear from the *Midrash Tanchuma* that Bnei Yisrael had never heard Moshe speak this way – so freely, so poetically, and so personally. 'These were not just 'words' (*Devarim*). Instead, these were personal words where Moshe bared his soul to his people in the final five weeks of his life.

And why did Moshe speak these words - especially given the fact that a mourner is not meant to teach words of Torah?*** The answer is based on a further halacha (see *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 384:1) that if the masses need to be taught Torah, then even a mourner may teach them. This is why, according to Rabbi David Oppenheim, *Sefer Devarim* emphasizes that, 'these are the words which Moshe spoke to the entire people of Israel' – meaning that the reason why Moshe says what he does in *Sefer Devarim* is because it is for the benefit of the entire people.

Based on what I have explained, *Sefer Devarim* is unique because it is here where we encounter and hear the words of a different, unscripted, Moshe Rabbeinu. Yet there is also a further lesson that each of us can learn from *Sefer Devarim* – which is the value of speaking our words.

Oftentimes we say what others want us to say, or what we think others would like to hear. But what we learn from *Sefer Devarim* is that to truly be a person of words is not to be a speaker of someone else's script. Instead, it is to speak freely, independently and personally, and to have the confidence to speak our truth, to say what needs to be said, and to bare our soul.

Shabbat Shalom!

* nb. I recognize that this is a complex topic deserving a discussion unto itself. For a good discussion, see Y. Nachshoni's *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: Devarim* pp. 1188-1190

** I am aware that this conflicts with the Gemara's dating of Aharon's death. Still, the Ralbag offers a variety of proofs to support his view.

*** This question is raised by R' David Oppenheim as referenced in *Sefer Shnot Yeboshua* on *Devarim* 1:1