

Dvar Torah: Parashat Devarim

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What is the difference between history and memory? That's a question *parshat* Devarim tackles with profundity and insight. As a scholar myself of literature of the recent past, and particularly of the literature born of catastrophic social traumas, I have often puzzled over how best to communicate a distinction between history and memory, a distinction which I believe is key to understanding the social and psychological impact—and not just the factual details—of trauma. Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the great Jewish epic and legal text composed, according to biblical scholarship, more than 2500 years ago (initially in a separate historical process, scholars say, from the other four books), ought to be required reading for anyone seeking to explore how the workings of history and memory intersect.¹

Unlike the previous four books of the Torah, the narrative of Deuteronomy is conveyed in and through Moses's voice—which, in turn, is communicated to us by an anonymous narrator of the book—rather than from the loftier distance of the four earlier books, where Moses is treated as a third-person character. The first verse of chapter 1 states plainly that “אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל” [These are the words — *ha-devarim*, whence the Hebrew name of Deuteronomy: Devarim — that Moses spoke to all Israel]. Verse three reiterates this and explains that Moses gathered the Israelites together to speak to them in the penultimate month of their forty years of wandering in

¹ Thank you to Dr. Francis Landy, at the University of Alberta, for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

the Sinai desert. Underlining the significance of this new direct mode of address by Moses is the irony that Moses is the very man who, in Exodus chapter 4, protests that he is “not a man of words” because he is “slow of speech and tongue” “לא איש דְבָרִים” “אֲנֹכִי...כִּי כְבֵד-פִּי וְכְבֵד לְשׁוֹן, אֲנֹכִי”. Here, in Deuteronomy’s opening chapter, however, Moses’s new-found eloquence is given the ultimate biblical imprimatur of approval in verse five: “הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה, בָּאֵר אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת” [Moses took it upon himself to expound this law]. The word *be’er* in this passage may be etymologically related to the word for a water well (as in the name Be’er Sheva), suggesting that Moses digs down into the very bedrock of the Torah to clarify it with words that *explicate*—and do not merely repeat—the narrative and laws of the previous books.

What are Moses’s words? They are the biblical narrative of the Israelites’ halting progress through the Sinai, especially their desultory willingness to accept, and indeed their initial rejection of, any role as agents in carrying out the divine promise to inherit the land of Canaan. Moses recounts their successes when they heed G-d and, with greater detail than in previous books, their failures when they do not. The book of Deuteronomy, as the scholar Daniel Block notes,² is composed primarily of three major speeches Moses makes to the Israelites and two poems in his voice, known by scholars as “The Song of Moses” and “The Blessing of Moses,” as well as three additional minor speeches, all punctuated occasionally by the interjection of the narrator’s voice. Scholar and rabbi Zev Farber has identified some of the more egregious ways in which these

² Block, Daniel I. “Recovering the Voice of Moses: The Genesis of Deuteronomy.” *JETS* 44:3 (September 2001). 385–408.

speeches by Moses in Deuteronomy differ from the narrative in earlier books:³ for example, in ch. 1, v. 6, Moses has G-d telling the Israelites to leave Mt. Chorev; but this mountain is called Sinai in Exodus. In ch. 1, vv. 9-13, Moses attributes to himself the idea of the Israelite court system, but in Exodus, the idea came not from Moses but from his father-in-law, Jethro. In two major departures from the earlier narrative, Moses claims in ch. 1, v. 22 that the people asked for scouts to be sent into the land of Canaan to prepare for the invasion, even though in Numbers it was G-d who commanded this; and, even more startlingly, in ch. 1, vv. 25-26 the panic of the Israelites at the scouts' positive report about the land is the reverse of the account in Numbers, where the scouts return with mainly negative reports. Finally, Moses claims in ch. 1, v. 37 that the punishment against him meted out by G-d—that he will not be allowed to enter the land of Israel—is guilt by association, since he is a member of the generation who escaped Egypt; but, of course, in Numbers, Moses's punishment is a consequence of his having disobeyed G-d by striking the rock at Mei Meribah.

These are just a few examples of the departures in the Deuteronomic narrative from accounts given elsewhere in the Torah. Biblical scholars since the early nineteenth century have argued that these departures provide evidence of the differences of authorship and historical context with which Deuteronomy was composed. But even these secular scholarly perspectives must account for the knotty problem of why Moses is presented, in Deuteronomy, as a prophet and leader whose voice is much more singular and authoritative than would be suggested by the third-person role assigned to him in earlier books as a character in the Torah.

³ <http://thetorah.com/devarim-recounting-different/>

The rabbis through the ages have frequently hinted at the problem that Moses's direct address poses to traditional readings of the Torah as the literal word of G-d, insofar as Deuteronomy seems to indicate that Moses is speaking of his own accord. Thus Nahmanides (aka Ramban) in thirteenth century Spain, for example, notably commented on the difference in Deuteronomy's narrative mode of address, but Ramban still insisted, according to Rabbi Yaacov Charlap at Bar-Ilan University,⁴ that the change was not fundamental. Ramban writes:

The matter of Deuteronomy which is written in first-person narration is not a difficulty...for the book opens, 'These are the words which Moses addressed to all Israel' [i.e., in regular third-person narration] and the continuation of the book relates matters as if quoting Moses.... [Moses is like] a scribe copying from an ancient work...but it is true and clear...that from Genesis until 'displayed before all Israel' (Deut. 34:12, the last verse of the Torah) came from the mouth of the Holy One blessed be He to the ears of Moses (Nahmanides, from his introduction to the Torah).

Ramban here is simply amplifying and reiterating the Talmud's admonition, in Sanhedrin (99a), that whoever claims a particular verse of the Torah was spoken not by G-d, but rather by Moses on his own authority, is considered to have "spurned the word of the Lord." But, with all due respect to our great sage Ramban, must we, faithful readers of the present, be so literalist? I would submit that we do not need to be, and that, in fact, if

⁴ <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/devarim/charlap.html>

we do not notice and comment on Moses's newfound authority as a speaker with a voice of his own, then we are missing a crucial teaching of the Torah. So perhaps I would do better to ask not whether we need to be so literalist, but rather whether we would benefit by being more *literary*: that is, better readers of the *poetics* of the Torah rather than only its content — paying attention not just to *what* is being said but also *how*, using what rhetoric and which stylistics, and *by whom*, paying attention to characterization and voice.

For it is evident to me—I know I am not alone in coming to this conclusion—that what Moses is doing in speaking from the perspective of his subjective “I” is communicating to his immediate audience of Israelites—and thence to the generations who follow—the importance of making the past one's own, and thereby making also one's own the Torah itself as a sacred collective narrative of the past. Moses's new status as speaker is indicating to us that there is a vital distinction between history, a chronicle or interpretation of the past, and living memory, which involves experiencing past events as active elements of the present. Living an experience does not, in the case of memory, simply mean having “been there” at some specified moment in the past. It means instead that we make the past our own in a dynamic, mobile and self-conscious way. To live an experience is to bring it into one's emotional life in the present. Trauma, which as I say is a topic I have studied for many years, may be described as the problem a person or society has in dealing with a retained history which, for one reason or another, cannot be experienced in the present. Remembering, by contrast, is the process of bringing the past into the present in such a way that the

historical “then” can be lived in the “now,” so that history can be experienced not as a removed object but as an emotional presence.

Moses’s realization in Devarim is that the new generation of Israelites born in the forty years of wandering through the desert were not themselves present at Mt. Sinai (or Mt. Chorev) when the covenant with the Israelites was first made, and therefore that they have grown emotionally distant from it. Somehow, he must convey to this new generation the importance of making the experience of the covenant their own, just as, in parallel, he must propel the Israelites to create a representative leadership structure of judges in which each tribe will all be involved in the process of leading. As wise leaders know, Moses realizes that he cannot simply relinquish authority, as he must eventually do, without creating a community capable of leading itself. He thus uses a skill he once thought he didn’t possess—the ability to speak with eloquence and clarity—to show by example how G-d’s Torah can be transformed from a mere historical document into a living, changing mode of memory. With the new license Moses’s example suggest, we Jews as a community have developed a relatively flexible notion of religious authority that encourages individuals to create a personal relationship with G-d and to thus participate in, rather than merely witnessing at a remove, the creation of Israel as a collective nation.

Coda 1: Reading this section of Deuteronomy is, for me, a very uncomfortable experience. I cannot read about the conquest of the land of Israel, as depicted in Devarim, without feeling outraged and saddened by the extermination, at G-d’s and Moses’s command, of the people of Heshbon and Bashan by the Israelites. Killing

soldiers in self-defense is understandable, but how can we reckon with the wholesale slaughter of the civilian women, children and elderly by the Israelites in their conquest of the land? Yes, of course, this is likely in accordance with the general practices of warfare of the era, but reading this by today's moral standards is a shocking experience. Our putative birthright, as a Jewish nation, comes bathed in blood, according to the Torah. And, yet, this is precisely what Moses's first-person address in Deuteronomy allows us to reconsider and to form our own judgments about, according to our own personal moral ideals and the ethos of our present community. Were we not able to make moral judgments about our own past—remembering but not simply affirming the past as narrated in the Torah—we would not be the free moral agents that Moses's example suggests we must be in order to be authentic participants in the creation of our community.

Coda 2: Today is Tisha b'Av, although we commemorate it starting at sundown tonight, out of respect for Shabbat. Tisha b'Av is the day of mourning traditionally commemorated by Jews as the date of the destruction of the two Temples and numerous other catastrophes that befell us in our long history. For me, this is also a time of personal sadness, since it was around this time nine years ago that my father Ronald Shlensky, z"l, was hit and killed by a drunk driver. I know, as we all do, that memory is qualitatively different from history simply because it feels so much more personal. That feeling is not a mirage: when the past is seen as a closed set of events with a single, unchanging meaning, then we get what Sigmund Freud called "screen memories," which are canned images we may retain that block out the real impact of the

past, and screen us from feeling the full effects of an *experience* of the past in the present. I mourn with my community this Tisha b'Av, and as part of the community I seek to keep faith with the dead, including my beloved deceased father, by remembering and finding new meaning in the inheritance granted to us through the sacrifices and love of those from whose presence in our lives we have gained so much, even as we have lost them.