

TIMELESS TORAH

DEVARIM: FROM MEMORY TO MISSION - THE POWER OF CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

Three Messages, One Farewell

When people know their words will be their last, they choose them carefully. Whether it is a parent offering advice before a child leaves home, a coach addressing a team before a final, or a leader preparing to step aside, final speeches are different. Moshe Rabbeinu's final address to the Jewish people - an address that forms almost the entirety of Sefer Devarim - is no exception. Every part of his address was carefully chosen. His aim was not simply to review the nation's past, but to prepare them for the future by focusing their attention on the Torah's most fundamental principles.

An insightful commentary by the Ktav V'Hakabbalah (Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, Königsberg, d. 1865) demonstrates how this agenda is already hinted at in the opening verses of the book. At first glance, these verses present two difficulties. Firstly, the places listed in the opening verse do not appear to exist; indeed, Rashi, quoting Chazal, explains that they are not geographical locations at all, but veiled references to the nation's failings during their years in the Wilderness. Secondly, in just five verses we are told three separate times that Moshe 'spoke': 'These are the words that Moshe spoke', 'Moshe spoke... all that Hashem had commanded', and 'Moshe began to explain the Torah.' Why the repetition?

The Ktav V'Hakabbalah explains that these are not repetitive statements, but introductions to the three distinct sections of Sefer Devarim. The first is Moshe's rebuke, in which he reflects on the nation's mistakes and exposes the attitudes that lay behind them. The second echoes Sefer Vayikra, as Moshe revisits many of the Torah's mitzvot. The third resembles Sefer Bamidbar, demonstrating how Torah ideals are lived in practice, acknowledging both the challenges of faithful observance and the blessings that accompany it, alongside the consequences of abandoning that path. This mirrors the experiences

of the Jewish people throughout the episodes related in Sefer Bamidbar.

Interestingly, this threefold structure closely parallels the three fundamental principles of Jewish faith identified by Rabbi Yosef Albo (Spain, d. 1444) in his Sefer Halkkarim. In the introduction to that work, Rav Albo explains that authentic faith rests on three pillars: belief in Hashem, belief in the Divine origin of the Torah, and belief in reward and punishment. So too, Sefer Devarim begins by cultivating a relationship with Hashem through ethical reflection, continues with the Torah's commandments, and concludes by describing the consequences of the choices we make.

Rebuke of a Loving Leader

If the latter two sections of Sefer Devarim parallel Vayikra and Bamidbar, it follows that the opening section corresponds to Sefer Shemot. Shemot traces the Jewish people's transformation from an enslaved family into an independent nation, from the devastation of the Golden Calf to renewed closeness with Hashem through the building of the Mishkan. Moshe was not interested in criticising the people simply for the sake of rebuke. His aim was to help them rebuild themselves before entering Eretz Yisrael.

A striking example is Moshe's reference to the system of judges he established on the advice of his father-in-law, Yitro. In Parshat Yitro, this episode carries no apparent criticism. Here too, Moshe explains that he appointed judges because he could no longer shoulder the burden of adjudicating every financial dispute alone (1:9). Yet immediately afterwards he cries out, '*Eichah esah levadi* - How can I alone bear your troubles, your burdens and your quarrels?' (1:12).

The Seforno (d. 1550) explains that it was not the judicial system itself that distressed Moshe. Healthy societies need courts and



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judges. Rather, what pained him was the context. The Jewish people had just been promised entry into Eretz Yisrael; a land flowing with milk and honey, where their physical and spiritual aspirations could finally be realised. Yet instead of being inspired by that extraordinary future, they remained preoccupied with petty disputes and trivial claims. This is a challenge that feels surprisingly familiar in an age when so much energy is spent on online arguments and minor grievances that ultimately matter little.

Moshe's first rebuke, then, was not about litigation but about perspective. He cried out in pain over a nation that had momentarily lost sight of its own greatness. It is all too easy to become absorbed in the trivial while losing sight of what really matters. Moshe was urging them to lift their eyes and see the bigger picture. His choice of language is equally telling. The word *eichah* ('alas') can also evoke *ayeka* - 'Where are you?' (Bereshit 3:9) It is a timeless challenge to pause, take stock and ask whether we are living up to our potential.

Moshe's discussion of the episode of the Spies follows the same pattern. Rashi (1:22) notes that rather than dwelling on the disastrous report itself, Moshe focuses on the people's initial request to send spies. When they approached him, they did so as an unruly crowd, showing little respect for their elders. This stood in sharp contrast to the dignity and order they had displayed at Har Sinai.

The Netziv (d. 1893) explains that this detail is even more significant than the report that followed. Faced with frightening information, the people's panic was understandable. But long before the spies returned, there were already warning signs that something was wrong. Their lack of *derech eretz* revealed that the request itself was rooted in an unhealthy mindset. Moshe's critical message was that before judging the outcome, we must first examine ourselves.

Are our priorities correct? Are we conducting ourselves as we should? Only then can we expect to make wise decisions.

Finding the Inner Strength

Later in the parashah, the Kli Yakar (d. 1619) uncovers a powerful lesson within another historical episode. The Torah describes the Jewish people as having spent 'many days' circling Mount Seir, home of Eisav's descendants, until Hashem instructed them: 'Rav lachem sov et hahar hazeh; p'nu lachem tzafonah' - 'You have circled this mountain long enough; turn northward' (2:2-3).

The Kli Yakar highlights the additional symbolic meaning of this phrase. Too often, we spend 'many days' circling the values represented by Eisav and the wider world. It is easy to begin judging ourselves by the standards of the society around us - success, prestige and material achievement - rather than by the values of the Torah.

Real growth begins when we hear Hashem's instruction: p'nu lachem tzafonah. Homiletically, the Kli Yakar understands this as 'turn inward' (interpreting tzafon as 'hidden', rather than 'northwards'). Rediscover who you are, what you stand for and what Hashem expects of you. The moment we stop circling values that are not our own, and instead reconnect with our authentic mission as Jews, we break free from spiritual stagnation and begin to move forward once again.

Seen in this light, Moshe's opening words in Sefer Devarim are far more than a review of Jewish history. Before reminding the people of the mitzvot they would soon observe in Eretz Yisrael, he first reminded them who they were. Only a nation that appreciates its own mission can truly live by the Torah entrusted to it. That challenge - to recognise our own potential and remain true to our values - is no less relevant today than it was as the Jewish people stood on the banks of the Jordan River.

NEXT WEEK - VAETCHANAN: The Foundations of Jewish Faith