

TIMELESS TORAH

DEVARIM - Pathways of Rebuke, Reflection & Renewal

The Uniqueness of Sefer Devarim

Sefer Devarim is unique among the five Books of the Torah in that it contains almost no narrative but is actually a continuous monologue of Moshe Rabbeinu, who, before his death, leaves his final instructions to the Jewish people to prepare them to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Ramban, in his short introduction to the Sefer, describes the two themes of the entire Sefer Devarim. Focusing on the Sages' reference to this Book as *Mishneh Torah*, the repetition of the Torah, he writes that Moshe repeated in this final discourse to the nation many of the mitzvot that had already been taught, either in order to add some explanation or to warn of their particular severity. Occasionally, he also detailed some mitzvot, such as the laws of divorce and levirate marriage (*yibum*), which, although taught at Sinai, had not yet been recorded. These are mentioned only now, the Ramban suggests, because they may have only actually been observed after the Jewish people entered the Land. This fits with the overarching theme of the mitzvot in this Book, which are designed to help prepare the people for their new life in the Land of Israel.

The first theme of Sefer Devarim, then, is a final revision of the fundamental principles that the people would need in order to begin the new stage of their journey. The second theme, however, which occupies most of the first parshah, Parshat Devarim, is that of rebuke. The purpose of this rebuke, the Ramban explains, was also a preparation for their new role as inhabitants of a civilised land. By reminding the Jewish people of the shortcomings of the nation throughout their sojourn in the Wilderness, Moshe Rabbeinu was actually encouraging them not to be overwhelmed by the myriad

of mitzvot that they were expected to keep. This generation was born in the desert and had never witnessed more than a potential promise of complete redemption, so they may have become disheartened, disbelieving that they would ever get to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe's message was that by reflecting on the events of the past forty years, they would see that even when the nation did not live up to expectation, Hashem demonstrated His mercifulness and did not destroy them. This generation, too, should never see themselves as too deficient to inherit the land.

Looking at another comment of the Ramban, we find this perspective on rebuke emphasised further. The opening words of the parshah are *eleh hadevarim*, 'these are the words'. The commentaries debate exactly which words are being referenced here, but the Ramban's opinion is that this is an introduction to the mitzvot that will be discussed throughout this Book. When we consider, however, that the Torah immediately digresses to retell at great length the history of the Jews in the Wilderness, this interpretation is difficult to substantiate. In light of the above discussion about the purpose of this rebuke, though, the Ramban's meaning is clear. Moshe was telling the people that while he intends to instruct them as to how to conduct themselves in their new existence in Eretz Yisrael, he must first remind them of how they got to this stage.

An Essential Part of Our Destiny

Rashi's interpretation of the words *eleh hadevarim* takes a more direct perspective on the theme of rebuke. According to Rashi, the words refer directly to the words of admonishment that comprise the next few chapters of the Torah. Here, we see the



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significance of being able to get up and stop ourselves and others from doing the wrong thing. As painful as it might be to do this and as careful as we must be about how we do it, it is sometimes essential.

The well-known story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (Gittin 55b/56a) vividly illustrates how failing to speak out against wrongdoings can lead to terrible consequences. The Gemara relates that when Bar Kamtza was publicly humiliated by his enemy, the rabbis and sages of Yerushalayim were all present, but none of them protested against what was going on. This tragic story eventually led to the destruction of Yerushalayim, but had the Rabbis who were there objected to his behaviour, there might have been a very different ending.

In this context, the Malbim (d.1879, Kyiv), in a sublime observation, notes a subtle discrepancy between the way the Jewish people are referred to throughout the Torah and the way they are titled in Sefer Devarim. Normally, when the Torah addresses or speaks about the Jewish people, they are called Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel. In Devarim, however, they are predominantly known simply as Yisrael. The Malbim explains that whereas when teaching the mitzvot, the Torah normally addresses the people as individuals, Moshe's rebuke in Devarim was focused on the nation as a whole: not the individual Children of Israel but the Nation of Israel in a collective sense. In berating the nation for their previous wrongdoings, Moshe was sensitive to the nuances of his speech. He did not mean to criticise one particular person or another, but was teaching the people that the key to their survival and renewal is association with the nation of Israel and appreciation of their shared history and destiny.

part of the tribe of Menashe were also given Moshe begins his rebuke of the nation by recalling their argumentative and confrontational nature. '*Eichah esa levadi* - How can I carry on my own', exclaimed Moshe, the burden of this nation. The Sages connect this word *eichah* to the same word that forms the refrain of Megillat Eichah: 'Had you merited,' says the Midrash, "you would have read, '*Eichah esa levadi*'. Now, however, you must read, '*Eichah yashvah badad* - Alas! How she sits alone.'

Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin (Jerusalem, d. 1978) explains the message behind this cryptic Midrash. A wise person, he writes, is able to perceive that their actions and the actions of those around them affect not only their immediate lives and surroundings but also have consequences on the distant future. As the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot teaches (4:1), a wise man is one who foresees the consequences of his actions. Thus, the Midrash subtly points out the result of our failure to heed Moshe's rebuke. If only we had understood the depth of strife among us - the attitude that brought Moshe to cry out, 'I cannot carry you alone!' - we might not have had reason to read, '*Eichah yashvah badad*'. The key for us is to search, in hindsight, for the divisions that threatened to tear us apart in the first place, and from there, build a way back.

The weekly Timeless Torah Parsha Shiur resumes after the summer break on 3rd September.