

This week's parasha opens the book of D'varim, Deuteronomy, and like every parasha that opens a book of Torah, it shares a name with the book it opens. These are the *devarim* – the words, the things, that Moshe told the Israelites while they were still on the other side of the Jordan – the other side from the promised land of Canaan, now called Israel, that is. And so opens the book of *Devarim*.

With the exception of its first few verses setting up the time and location, and the last few paragraphs describing the death of Moshe, *Devarim*, is one long speech, delivered by Moshe, his final speech as he prepares to take his leave of the Israelites; they to enter the land and he to ascend Mount Nebo and die. The third verse of the parasha tells us that Moshe began to speak on the first day of the 11th month of the fortieth year of the Israelite's wanderings, and according to Masechet Megilla, Moshe died on the 7th of Adar, the 12th month.

So this speech can be considered Moshe's an ethical will; his last hopes and reminders for the people whom he has led. But it is also, in many ways, the first dvar Torah, even though Deuteronomy itself is a book of Torah. Because Moshe does not just recap exactly the events that are described previously in Torah: he selects what is most meaningful, and he interprets it. As Rabbi Avital Hochstein writes, "The last book of the Torah is also in fact the founding stone of the Jewish interpretive tradition."

So how does Moshe launch this project? Verses 5 -7 describe the beginning of Moshe's speech:

"On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this Torah. He said:

Hashem our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain.

Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the river Euphrates.”

Now, in case that was too many place names, I will repeat the first clause of Moshe’s speech: “Hashem our God spoke to us at Horeb.”

Horeb is another name for Sinai. And the Israelites were encamped at the base of Mount Sinai for the entirety of the revelation of Torah, which lasts from Parashat Yitro, when they receive the 10 commandments, to the end of the book of Leviticus. Hence the Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is Bamidbar, in the wilderness, because it is only when the book of Numbers begins that the Israelites move into the wilderness from their encampment at Mt. Sinai.

So note how Moshe begins his remarks; not with, “Remember your ancestors, Avraham and Sarah, and the covenant they had with hashem.” Not, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and Hashem freed you with signs and wonders.” Not even, “Remember that you gathered at Horeb and heard the thunder of God’s revelation.”

As Rabbi Ariana Captauber wrote this week, “Rather than spend time on these paltry details, Moses jumps right to the one that weighs heaviest on his heart: Israel’s endless, burdensome complaining. He tells the story in fits and starts, mostly focused on the great difficulty he had leading the Israelites through the desert.”

Hence beginning after the miracles, with: “Hashem our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain.” And then going onto describe the arduous journey through the wilderness, the complaints, the rebellions, the punishments, the continued reluctance of this people to fulfill the destiny that they had embraced at the mountain.

It is only in next week’s parashah, Va’Etchanan, that Moshe will in fact get around to reminding the people of the revelation that they heard and accepted at Mount Sinai. Perhaps Rabbi Captauber is correct, and this is a venting session. Certainly, many of the medieval commentators believe that Moshe meant this entire speech to be primarily a long rebuke, or a warning to the Israelite people to remember and not repeat the mistakes of the previous generation, who had so aggravated heaven and forfeited their own opportunity to arrive in the promised land.

And it is all of these things. But there is an additional conclusion to be drawn from the opening of the speech, and its focus not on ancient promises or miracles but on the kvetching and the circuitous journey: that perhaps as we seek to remember and learn from our past, it is the kvetching, the mistakes, the circuitous journey that matter more than the miracles and the revelations. Not every generation will be liberated from enslavement, although the Haggadah reminds us to see ourselves as if we had been. Not every generation will experience collective revelation. But every generation had inherited a revelation, a task, a journey. So as he seeks to give us his final counsel, Moshe is perhaps reminding us, as my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Shulamit Izen, once said to me, “Open hearts always feel. It is what we *do* after experiencing pit or mountain that matters.”

And if Torah is the story of a relationship between ourselves and the Divine, Moshe may in this moment be shifting the perspective of this relationship. We cried out from slavery, and we accepted Torah, but in Exodus, Hashem is the primary actor and protagonist of liberation and revelation. In choosing not begin with the story of liberation or revelation, Moshe chooses not to make his final and most significant dvar Torah to the Jewish people about Hashem, but fundamentally about us, about how we have used our own free will; and the thrill and peril of being protagonists in our own history.

So Moshe's final speech not only charges us with interpreting Torah, but with doing so, with telling our story, in a way that is human centered – not so focused on the specific revelation given by God, but by how we responded to it, and will continue to respond. This is very Reconstructionist.

It is also very appropriate for Shabbat Hazon, the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, our most mournful day in the Jewish calendar. Tisha B'Av begins tomorrow evening, commemorating terrible disasters that have befallen the Jewish people. And our sages, in understanding those disasters, always understood them to be about us: the choices we made or failed to make, the idols we worshiped, the hatred we sowed. The words we spoke, and the times we stayed silent.

*Devarim* – words – matter. The petty complaints. The endearments. The rebukes. The encouragements. Moshe reminds us that these are what make up a life. We have great power in how we tell the story of what has happened to us and the choices we made. Ultimately, it will not be the revelations that we receive that matter, but what do in response to those revelations; the stories we tell.

Shabbat shalom.