

## Parshat Devarim: The Power of Goodbye Rabbanit Michal Kohane - Class of 2020

The opening scene in the classic movie “Hair”, although set back in Oklahoma, those last minutes between father and son in the quiet foggy early morning, awaiting for the rickety bus to appear around the corner, always remind me of Moses in the last of the Five Books.

- You got all your stuff?
- Oh yeh
- When you get there, be sure to give us a call so we know where you are
- Fine (silence, except the sound of their footsteps echoing as they walk to the nearby junction, the son flags the approaching bus to stop)
- Let me give you some money
- Oh, I’m ok
- Just take it, in case you run into amount of trouble, you never know what can happen
- Thank you
- Well boy (slap on shoulder) It’s just the smart people who got to worry; the Lord will take care of them idiots (a chuckle, a semi-very awkward hug) well, see you.

And off he goes to a world his parents know not.

The Book we’re beginning this week is unlike any other: according to tradition, what’s left in our hands is the actual farewell speech Moshe gave the People. It is *his* own way of organizing the Teachings for us, with some repetition, some adjustments and some new nuances.

Unlike Claude Hooper Bukowski’s dad, Moses has lots to say; so much so, that the book is called *Dvarim*, literally “things” or “words”. It is also known as “*Mishne Torah*”, “Second Torah”, and it might be tempting to see it as a repetitious lecture of a bitter, old man, rambling on and on, sorry for himself for not fulfilling his one and only dream: going with the People into The Land.

But, Moses is not a modern movie scene, and although he is 120 years old, until his very last moment, he maintains his strength and never stops being “Moshe Rabeinu”, using everything he has, including not only God’s words, but his own experiences, frustration, anger and shortcomings in order to teach us.

Take for example, the first chapter of this Book. If this is Moses’ reminiscing about the journey, shouldn’t he start early on, let’s say in Egypt, or maybe with the Golden Calf? But since the purpose is to teach, it is the Sin of the Spies that is most critical right now. As the People are about to enter the Land, what if they “chicken out” again? What if they ask to send another set of spies? Will they miss this opportunity, or will the promise be fulfilled this time?

It is now that we hear Moses’ version of what happened 40 years ago, and interestingly, it’s a different story from what we read when it occurred, in Numbers 13-14. Back then, when the spies came back, it was Caleb and Joshua who responded to the People, encouraging them to be strong and go for it (13:30; 14:6), while Moses and Ahron kept quiet. Here, Moses tells us that he did respond, and this is what he said (Deuteronomy 1:29-30):

*I said to you, “Have no dread or fear of them.*

*נאמר אֵלֵיכֶם לֹא־תַעֲרָצוּן וְלֹא־תִירָאוּן מֵהֶם:*

*None other than the LORD your God, who goes before you, will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your very eyes,*

*יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵהָלֵךְ לִפְנֵיכֶם הוּא יִלָּחֶם לָכֶם כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶתְכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵיכֶם:*

Moses' response stands not only in contrast to his earlier silence, but to Caleb and Joshua's response. His is not a "let's go, be strong, we can do it", but, a "don't worry, Hashem will fight for you", using part of an expression he used earlier, in Exodus (14:14), before crossing of the Sea: "Hashem will fight for you, while you keep quiet".

Moses continues here and shares a shocking insight explaining why he's not entering the Land (1:37):

*Because of you the LORD was incensed with me too, and He said: גַּם־בִּי הִתְאַנֶּף ה' בְּגַלְלַכֶּם לֵאמֹר גַּם־אַתָּה  
You shall not enter it either. לֹא־תֵבֵא שָׁם:*

Wait, what? Isn't Moses not entering the Land because of the famous incident of hitting the rock (Numbers 20:7-13)? Why is he saying this here? Was Moses not going to the Land anyway? Is there something about Moses that makes God not let him into the Land, no matter what?

Possibly.

Let's look for a moment at who are some of the future leaders: Joshua, from the tribe of Ephrayim, the house of Joseph; Caleb, from the tribe of Judah; Pinchas, the high priest, son of El'azar, grandson of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi and the house of Joseph (according to the midrash); and the Daughters of Tzlofchad, from the tribe of Menashe and the house of Joseph. All the way back to Genesis, Joseph and Judah are those who are concerned with the "group". They are the "national leaders", and now, their descendants share that same concern.

These people present a different kinds of leader, the kind needed in the new Land. They are active. They fight. They challenge. They take initiative. They have opinions. They argue. And question. And they don't wait for miracles, nor accept 'don't worry', and 'Hashem will fight for you' as an answer. To be sure, they love Hashem, Torah and the Land, but the partnership with Hashem that's now needed is the kind Moses doesn't know and can't emulate.

The tragedy of this book is that Moses knows it too. Therefore, next week, after begging Hashem to enter, he will say it again, with a slight nuance (3:26)

*But the LORD was wrathful with me for your sake, would not listen to וַיִּתְעַבֵּר יְהוָה בִּי לְמַעַןְכֶּם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלַי...  
me...*

"For your sake", for your benefit, to help you grow. Moses, who can see into the future, knows there will be great challenges and difficulties; ah, how he'd wish to prevent the stumbling and getting hurt, but can't. It can be so hard to watch one's child "trying things out" and not stopping them! But doing so, will mean stifling the next generation's growth into becoming who they will become. For their own sake, he accepts his plight to join those who stay behind. He'll go all the way to the bus stop at that lonely intersection, and then leave us with his version of an awkward hug and goodbye, unabashedly teaching us the pain of goodbyes, even if necessary. Especially in the week when we're mourning the destruction of the Temple, this too, is an invaluable teaching.



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