

Dvar Torah - Parshat Devarim

Princeton, New Jersey

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With appreciation to Rabbi Merow for sharing the bima with me today, to the Religious Affairs committee for inviting me to present this dvar Torah, and to my fellow congregants, for your attention and engagement.

Today's parasha, Parshat Devarim, is the first portion of the Book of Deuteronomy and opens with Moses' farewell address. Let's set the stage. Moses and the Israelites have been wandering through the desert for forty years. Less than forty days after delivering these remarks, Moses will die. As he opens what might have been the longest *dvar Torah* of all time (Moses spoke for thirty-six days... please remember that if I go over the time Jane has allotted me) Moses shares memories of both the good times and the bad. He reflects with pride on his establishment of a judicial system and the Israelites' defeat of their enemies. But Moses also expresses deep disappointment as laments the sin of the spies, noting how the people's fear and lack of faith condemned an entire generation to death in the wilderness.

This dvar torah will focus exclusively on the first *pasuk* or verse of the parasha:

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן
בְּמִדְבַּר בְּעֶרְבָה מִזֶּדֶךְ יַם סוּף בֵּין-פָּאָרָן וּבֵין-תֹּפֶל וְלָבָן וְחִצְרֹת וְדִי-זָהָב

"These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan: Through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab."

Notice how the Torah opens Deuteronomy. In our first verse, Moses speaks directly to "all Israel." Until now, we have grown used to hearing the most repeated phrase in the Torah: *Vayidaber Hashem el Moshe leimor*, "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying." Instead, the standard sequence of communication in the Torah — God speaks to Moses and Moses serves as God's vessel to communicate the divine word to the people—has changed. God has stepped aside.

Why is this portion, and ultimately the entirety of the Book of Deuteronomy devoted to one man's speech? Why does God seem to relinquish His place on center stage and hand Moses the microphone to speak his very human words? Were we not taught that the entirety of the Torah is the direct, unmediated word of God? And isn't the Torah supposed to be exquisitely

economical with its choice of words? So why do we need to hear about the experiences in the wilderness a second time?

One way to address these questions, is to hold that the traditional view of the Torah's authorship was all wrong. God never spoke directly to Moses in the Torah and the words attributed to Moses were written by someone else many years later.

In 1670, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza used the Book of Deuteronomy as his primary historical-critical laboratory. Drawing on the subtle, guarded hints of the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra, Spinoza argued against the traditional view of biblical authorship.

Spinoza didn't just look at the obvious stylistic anomalies; he built a systematic case. As an example, he pointed out that Deuteronomy describes Moses' own death east of the Jordan River and uses geographic terms that only someone already living west of the Jordan River could write.

Deuteronomy, in Spinoza's view, was not the work of God or even written by Moses but a much later historical reconstruction compiled by Ezra the Scribe.

For this early attempt at biblical criticism, Spinoza's contemporary Jewish community in Amsterdam did what any loving synagogue community would do: they excommunicated him. Modern "cancel culture" has nothing on 17th-century Dutch Jews.

But with all due respect to Spinoza's brilliant skepticism, let us challenge his conclusion. What if Deuteronomy's shift in tone is not evidence of a different, later author, and is not even a challenge to divine authorship of the bible, but is instead a deliberate *literary and theological masterstroke*? What if God is teaching us something profound by stepping back, giving Moses the spotlight, and letting him express his insights directly to the people?

The extraordinary trajectory of Moses' life is highly instructive. Rabbi Efreim Goldberg of Boca Raton notes a stunning connection between the first verse of Deuteronomy and Exodus, Chapter 4, verse 10. When Moses first encounters God at the burning bush, he is terrified. He begs to be released from his mission, pleading: *Lo ish devarim anochi*—"I am not a man of words."

The linguistic link to our parasha is too obvious to ignore. The Moses of Exodus *is not a man of words*; forty years later, the final book of the Torah begins with the explicit declaration: *Eileh ha'davarim*—"These are the words of Moses." Moses understood early on that command of the spoken word is a

critical criterion for leadership. After forty years of trial, failure, and heavy responsibility, Moses' greatest weakness becomes his ultimate strength. The Moses of Deuteronomy has grown; he speaks his words—not just God's words—with confidence, agency, and fervor.

And we learn from our opening verse that the people of Israel have evolved, too. Moses directs his words in Deuteronomy to *kol Yisrael*—all the people of Israel. He speaks not just to the tribal leaders or the priests, but directly to every single man, woman, and child. The people are no longer just *Bnei Yisrael*, "the children of Israel," or a fractured group of twelve distinct, bickering tribes. They are now one nation: a collective, that is unified and ready to absorb and accept Moses' wisdom directly and completely. Moses has prepared these formerly scared and scattered tribes to meet the challenges of the future with confidence. The people—rebellious, fearful, and contemptuous of their leader in the wilderness—now stand unified and respectful, listening to Moses without remarks or rebukes, ready to enter the Promised Land.

Perhaps Spinoza indeed had it wrong. Deuteronomy might look like a distinct book with a different style, but in fact, its new, human voice is reflective of the stark evolution of a leader and his people.

Let us be clear. Even with Moses' evolution as a leader—and even with his unparalleled greatness—Moses remains very human. He is a man, not an angel, and he expresses human feelings of bitterness and betrayal alongside his selfless love for his people.

In contrast to the utopian perfection that the ancients would associate with their leaders, there is a profound brokenness to Moses. The sin of the golden calf caused Moses to respond in fury, shattering the tablets that reflected the divine word to the people. God made clear that Moses acted on his own initiative, but He gave him a pass. In fact, God gave Moses more than a pass: those broken tablets were to be venerated and placed at the very center of Israelite worship inside the Ark of the Covenant. In God's reckoning, brokenness is a feature of a leader, not a bug. As my friend, the writer and entrepreneur, Mark Gerson, beautifully frames it: "*God loves the broken... come with the broken parts, that is what it means to be a Jew.*"

Precisely because Moses is in such deep touch with his own flaws, he avoids hitting his people too hard with unmitigated judgment. And the Israelites repay Moses's empathy with their loyalty.

We see Moses' care and advocacy for the Israelites most clearly in the geographic mystery of our opening verse. The text lists places like Paran, Tophel, Hazeroth, and a location called *Di-zahab*. Rashi immediately notices a problem: geographically, these places do not actually exist. Instead, they are Moses' coded way of rebuking the nation's past sins without shaming them publicly.

Take the name *Di-zahab*. Literally, it translates to "enough gold." The Talmud reveals that Di-zahab isn't a GPS coordinate; it's a legal defense plea. Moses stands before God and says, "Cut them some slack. Why did they make the Golden Calf? Because of *Di-zahab*—because You showered them with an overwhelming, dizzying amount of gold when they left Egypt! You gave them too much allowance, God. What did You expect?"

In this single placename, we witness the psychological genius of Moses' leadership. Even when he must administer tough, necessary rebukes, he embeds an excuse for his people within the very name of the crime. Moses' self-awareness of his own humanity, and his understanding of human weakness, enable him to keep the door of the community open to everyone. Indeed, there is no Israelite without sin or imperfection, and all are broken in their own way. Israel's perfection, we learn, comes from accepting everyone on their own terms into a collective that, when unified, is capable of historic accomplishments.

By viewing Deuteronomy not as a fragmented historical composite, but as the deliberate culmination of a human life, we discover a profound truth. Moses' evolution from a stuttering fugitive to a master orator mirrors the journey of the people he led. They, too, transformed from a fractured band of traumatized slaves into a single, unified collective—ready to step into history. But this unity did not demand flawless perfection. The broken tablets resting inside the Ark alongside the whole ones remind us that our communities, our leaders, and indeed our very selves are sanctified not despite our fractures, but because of how we carry them. In the end, Deuteronomy teaches us that God's greatest revelation is not a booming voice from a burning bush, but the quiet, hard-won miracle of a human being who has finally found his words.

Shabbat Shalom