

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Devarim

The opening words of this week's *sedra*, which announces the last *sefer* in *Chumash*, also referred to as *Sefer Mishneh Torah* (The Book of Review), are "*eileh hadevarim*." "These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan..." For once, there is no letter "vav" ('and') attached to the beginning of the first word, by contrast with the opening words of the previous three books of the Pentateuch. This indicates that *Devarim* "is not tied to the past, although the past nonetheless belongs to it." (See the *Kol HaTorah* of Rabbi Elie Munk.)

In a real sense, *Sefer Devarim*, while representing a recapitulation of earlier experiences with Moshe and B'nai Yisrael, charts new territory. It is Moshe speaking frankly to the people about what they saw and experienced in the past, and what they will need to do and become in order to successfully enter into and take possession of the Promised Land. Moreover, there is a sign of Moshe's mature leadership in that he can now speak freely and confidently to the people of their time together. The same Moshe who, when first approached by God to lead the people out of Egypt and who responded by saying, "*lo ish devarim anokhi*"; the same Moshe who stammered and was tongue-tied and slow to speak, now freely, lovingly, unabashedly and emphatically shares his ethical will with the people he has led for what was nearing forty years.

I can recall when I was studying for the rabbinate with practical courses such as homiletics, that my teacher complimented me on a *drasha* outline but noted the absence of any kind of personal story or anecdote to better illustrate my major sermon theme. He offered with this a general lament of the situation of a young would-be rabbi who, while ostensibly possessing good *yediot* and "*sefer* smarts," suffers from a lack of life experience and real interactions upon which to draw to make a point while teaching or preaching.

It would not be long before those anecdotes and stories would cascade into my life when I assumed my first pulpit. They were stories of real events in the field that made one laugh and cry, sometimes even at the same time. I say this not as a negative statement on those early years of rabbinic leadership but as an observation of a lesser-known or -appreciated phenomenon in communal leadership. Indeed, so many of the career self-help books focus on managing one's stakeholders and the requisite qualities of an effective leader, and glaringly ignore an emphasis on developing an awareness of the fast and many events that occur around and accrue to the leader.

These real life stories and experiences give color and quality to one's leadership. They introduce and sustain the human dynamic that of necessity stands at the center of religious

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leadership. I look back now, after twenty-five years in the rabbinate, to the various human events that have added texture to the texts and messages I have endeavored to share with those I am blessed to lead and teach. My message, like Moshe's in his twilight period, is all the more enhanced by the sights and sounds I have seen and heard along the way. We move from reluctant speakers to able communicators. It is a process for which we should not deny development or the test of time. Eventually the words will come to us and when it happens, it will have been worth the wait.

Shabbat Shalom!

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