

Parashat D'varim
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At least *once* during my teen-aged years, I was giving my beloved father a hard time.

“You always have to have the last word!” he scolded me.

“No I don’t,” I responded without thinking.

While I am not so proud of that exchange, it does remind me of how satisfying and even important having the last word can be. When I send my fourth graders off to fifth grade on the last day of school, I try to send them off with a message about what I hope they will take away from fourth grade. As teachers, we work hard all year, building understandings and ways to understand, trying hard all of the time to make sure that our students are being and becoming the best students and people that they can, trying to help them see new possibilities and envision the world in new and different ways.

Moses – *Moshe Rabeinu* – the ultimate teacher in our tradition, is doing just that as the book of *D'varim* opens. He wants to have the last word. He has been preparing his students, his people, for the past 40 years, and now he wants to be sure that they have learned the material that they have received from God, that they will be the best people that they can be, that he has done his job, and that he can send them on their way – to the other side of the Jordan. In fact, as it says in the first verse, “These are the words that Moses addressed to *all Israel on the other side of the Jordan.*” Moses, who will never cross the Jordan himself, speaks to his people as if they are already there. Even though he won’t be there with them, he is



trying to help them start to think of themselves as inhabitants of the land, and as such, he is trying to advance their mindset. Moses knows that just as their parents had to make the transition from slaves to free people, they will have to make a transition from wanderers to inhabitants, and he whole-heartedly wants to help them get there. He wants to be sure that they will take all that they have learned along with them, not only as they cross over into the Promised Land but as they live there.

At first glance, it looks as though Moses is doing what just about any good teacher knows to do: He is giving some context to what he is about to say. So Moses begins by talking about the **last** time that the people were about to enter the land – the time 40 years ago when it didn't work out so well for them. Why, we might wonder, would Moses at this time revisit one of the worst moments in the *Torah*, the time when God became so angry with the Jewish people that he decreed that all but two members of the redeemed generation would be forbidden to enter the Promised Land, that they would need to die off and that their children, but not them, would enter the land?

One answer might be that Moses is trying to use that experience, to help them learn from their mistakes. If this is true, Moses does so in a very interesting way.

When I looked more closely at our parsha, I saw that Moses wasn't retelling the story exactly the way it was first reported back in *Sh'lach L'cha*, in *B'midbar*, the previous book of the Torah. In that version of the story, the people are also poised to enter the land. God commands Moses to send out one man from each tribe, to scout out the land. Moses exhorts them, *“Go up there into the Negev and on into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it*

wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land.”
(*B’midbar* 13:17-20)

The *B’midbar* version goes on to say that these scouts check out the land and cut down one branch bearing an enormous cluster of grapes. When they return, after 40 days, they report directly not only to Moses and Aaron but also to the entire people as a whole – a full report to all, all at once. They begin by showing the fruit and attesting to the fact that the land “*does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.*” (*B’midbar* 13:27) But they immediately follow that good news with the statement that “*the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large.*” (*B’midbar* 13:28). When the people hear this misinformation, one of the scouts, Caleb, has to “*hush the people before Moses,*” and reassure them: “*Let us by all means go up,*” he says, “*and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.*” (*B’midbar* 13:30)

It is at this point, however, that **the other scouts**, with the exception of Joshua, contradict Caleb and say, “*We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we... The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size... [W]e looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.*” (*B’midbar* 13:31-33) And so in this earlier version, even though the people have perhaps begun to murmur against the idea of entering the land and need to be hushed, **it is the scouts – the ones in the leadership positions** -- who are the ones who “*spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted.*” (*B’midbar*, 13:32) In this first version, Moses is blaming the words of the scouts for the fact that the people lost faith and became too fearful to enter the land.

In this week’s parsha, however, when Moses is retelling the story to the next generation, he remembers it -- or **retells** it -- very differently.

In the *D'varim* version, Moses reports that he said, “*You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the Lord our God is giving to us. See, the Lord your God has placed it at your disposal.*” Here, Moses makes it look as though he was encouraging the people to look at the land for themselves – “See,” he reports that he said. He tells of how he wanted them to use their own eyes, to form their own opinions. He tells of how he encouraged them as he continued with, “*Go up, take possession as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed.*” (1:20-21) Even so, the people needed reassurance and asked to send out scouts: “*Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us...’*” (1:22) In this version, Moses says that the idea to send out the scouts originated with the people themselves and *not* with God, as in the earlier version. This suggests that Moses is implying that the people as a whole were responsible for what happened next.

And in this second version, when the **scouts** return, presenting their fruit as corroborative evidence, Moses quotes their report as saying, “*It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving to us.*”

Moses goes on to say, “*Yet you refused to go up and flouted the command of the Lord your God. You sulked in your tents and said, ‘It is because the Lord hates us that He brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to wipe us out. What kind of place are we going to? Our kinsmen have taken the heart out of us, saying, ‘We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even Anakites.’*” (1:26-28) In this version, Moses retells it in such a way as to make it seem that while the scouts reported back in a positive way (even though we’ve learned from the first version that only two of them did), that it was the rest of the people, the community at large, who spread a whole lot of fear and misinformation among themselves. It was the people who lost faith in God.

So why would Moses – or any teacher – tell the same story in two different ways?

There could be more than one reason. Maybe Moses just remembers it differently. He is older now. Maybe he has forgotten the exact details. Maybe he wants to remember it differently, maybe he wants to put a more positive spin on it. More likely, though, is that Moses, the ultimate teacher, wants to do a better job of teaching the material this time around. Moses already knows what happened that last time the Jewish people tried to enter the land. It is forty years later, and this time, he doesn't want anything to go wrong. He knows that he is speaking to the **children** of the people he spoke to the last time – that the audience gathered before him is a different group of people, a new generation. This is a second chance, and he doesn't want anything to go wrong. Moses is trying to present what happened to this new generation in such a way that they will not make the same mistakes. He **does**, however, want them to feel that they are connected to their parents' generation, so he still says, 'As I told **you**,' but by retelling the story in this different way, perhaps Moses is down-playing the role that the scouts and their negative report played in not entering the land. And maybe he is laying the responsibility for last time's failures squarely in the laps of each and every one of the people, not just the scouts. We are each responsible for our own actions, he is reminding us. While the mistakes and triumphs of a people are shared, each one of us, through our own thoughts and words and deeds, contributes toward those ends.

Cognizant of the fact that he is addressing the **children** of an enslaved generation, Moses reports how he told **their** parents that their children “*who do not yet know good from bad, they shall enter [the land]; to them will I give it and they shall possess it.*” (1:39) Moses knows that he is now speaking directly to those ‘little ones’ – the ones who 40 years earlier did not **yet** know right from wrong but who by now must be able to distinguish between right and wrong, for as he will

later tell them, they must choose to do right to be able to thrive in the land. Moses is telling them that they, these now grown children, **will** inherit the land – they will not only be given it, but “they shall possess it.” Moses is reassuring them that they are the ones to whom the land has really been promised. They, not their parents, will truly live in the land. So **now** is their chance for a whole new beginning, a time for optimism, a time for making commitments to make things better. As a teacher, Moses couldn’t be leaving his people with better last words or with a better message.

As we all know all too well, though, Moses’ last words weren’t THE last word on that particular piece of real estate in the Mideast. Or even the only word.

In our own time, Jews again began to think about returning to the Promised Land, to establish and build the modern state of Israel. Again, it was a chance for a whole new beginning, a time for optimism, a time to try to make things better for our people. In his recently published book, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, author Ari Shavit writes of this most recent chance for a new beginning. Shavit tries to tell Israel’s history over the last 100 years through a variety of perspectives and lenses – he tries to tell it through a variety of versions.

In the first chapter, his English great-grandfather, Herbert Bentwich, leads a group of prosperous Zionist pilgrims to Palestine. Bentwich’s mission is essentially to play one of the “scouts” opposite Theodore Herzl’s Moses. Herzl expects this particular group of 21 travelers to write “a comprehensive report about the Land. [He] is especially interested in the inhabitants of Palestine and the prospects for colonizing it.” (3) As Shavit writes, these pilgrims, “are amazed at the notion of turning Palestine into the Provence of the Orient.” (11)

“Looking out over the vacant territory of 1897,” writes Shavit, “Bentwich [saw] the quiet, the emptiness, the promise.” (12) But, continues Shavit, “Riding in the elegant carriage from Jaffa to Mikveh Yisrael, he did not see the Palestinian

village of Abu Kabir. Traveling from Mikveh Yisrael to Rishon LeZion, he did not see the Palestinian village of Yazur. On his way from Rishon LeZion to Ramleh, he did not see the Palestinian village of Sarafand. And in Ramleh he does not really see that Ramleh is a Palestinian town ...” (12) Shavit describes how his grandfather didn’t see these settlements -- which would have appeared primitive to him -- or the Arabs who tended to the travelers’ needs – both because the Palestinians, as subjects of an empire, were not yet a nationalistic people and because he, Herbert Bentwich, **chose** not to see them. (12-13) He chose instead to see what he wanted to see and to move ahead with Herzl and the Zionist dream. He tells his version of the story.

Shavit goes on to share how from the start, there were at least two peoples who think that the land has been promised to them. The subtitle of his book really says it all – “*The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel.*” The **triumph** is the modern state of Israel with its vast multitude of brilliant accomplishments. The **tragedy** is that the two peoples have not yet figured out a way to share the land, even though there were high hopes in some quarters at many points. [One people’s triumph is another people’s *Nakbar.*]

Both Biblical accounts of entering the land as well as Herbert Bentwich’s first views of the land show us that **how we see** and **how we interpret and share what we see** are choices that we make.

The news coming out of Israel and Gaza these past days and long weeks is so tragic and desperately sad. As Ari Shavit shows in *My Promised Land*, the whole situation in Israel is so incredibly complex and complicated that it is seemingly hopeless. Even with good intentions on both sides at various points in the story, there have been so many missteps and misunderstandings and mistakes along the way. Golda Meir’s “land without a people for a people without a land” was the narrative that I grew up with. But now another narrative has come to light

– a second and parallel version that retells the first story in a vastly different way. This time, it has not been constructed for educational purposes; it comes from a nearly completely separate experience – separate and with roots going back to the times of Ishmael and Esau. Unfortunately, at this time, we don't have a really great teacher or a really great leader – a Moses or a Gandhi -- to help lead us on our way. Maybe this time, we all need to rely even more upon ourselves and one another. As another Moshe – Moshe Dayan -- said, “You don't make peace with your friends. You make peace with your enemies.” Maybe an important first step would be for both sides to be able to look at and to really see both versions of the story, to really choose to see how the other side views the same places and events. How we choose to see, to remember, to retell, and to interpret can make an enormous difference.

Instead of needing to have the last word, as my father reminded me, sometimes it might be better to listen. – For it will only be after both sides **really** choose to see one another **and really** listen to one another that someone will be able to speak – and someone else will be able to heed – the first words that will open the door to a real peace, so that both sides can inhabit our own promised lands.

Shabbat Shalom.