



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Words, Mere Words

I have kept my time-worn copy of Roget's Thesaurus in my personal library since I was in the seventh grade. It was given to me by my teacher, a Mr. Zeller, who introduced me to the beauty of language and who first stimulated my fascination with words. He taught me to use this thesaurus in order to use language effectively and with precision.

There are those who scoff at words, deeming them to be much weaker than concrete objects. These are the people who distinguish between the "real world" and the world of "mere" verbal expression. Life has taught me, however, that these individuals are very wrong. Words are important not just in the social world, but have influence and impact upon the physical world as well.

With this week's Torah portion, *Devarim* (*Deuteronomy* 1:1-3:22), we begin an entirely

new book: *Deuteronomy*, the fifth book of the *Pentateuch*. This book differs from the previous four in many ways. In the first four books of the Bible, events take place, activities are performed, and stories happen. Not so in *Deuteronomy*. It is fundamentally one long speech; an exquisitely eloquent address, delivered over a period of forty days.

Events are described in *Deuteronomy*, but no event actually takes place in the entire book. That is, until the concluding eight verses which describe the death of Moses.

There is no storyline in this book. It consists of words of review, words of rebuke, words of instruction, and words of inspiration. Words, mere words. It is no wonder, then, that in Hebrew, the book is called *Devarim*, "Words."

Perhaps it is because of my lifelong obsession with words that this particular book is so personally significant to me. For many years, beginning with the week after I was bar mitzvah, I was the Torah reader for my synagogue, the *ba'al koreh*. I remember how thrilled I was as I chanted the words of *Chumash Devarim*. I recall savoring the very sounds of the words and absorbing the simple meaning of what I was chanting.

What is most astounding about this book-length address is that it is given by Moses, who, by his own admission, was not a man of words. You certainly will recall that it was in the Torah portion of *Shemos* which we read many months ago that Moses at first declined God's mission. He refused to be the one to deliver the Jewish people from Egypt. He said, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words...I am slow

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of speech and slow of tongue." (*Exodus 4:10*)

Our Torah portion begins, "These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel..." Our Sages in the Midrash find this phenomenon remarkable. Say the rabbis in the Midrash, "Yesterday he said 'I am not a man of words,' and today he says 'These are the words?!' ...Rabbi Elazar put it this way: Yesterday he was a *pasilus* [*pasilus* is a Greek word meaning a person with a severe speech defect], and now he proclaims 'These are the words!'" "

A contemporary rabbi, Yehuda Shaviv, whose work *MiSinai Ba I* so admire, makes the same point using different words: "This talent of Moses is a wondrous one. He, who began his leadership career so convinced that he was inarticulate that he depended upon his brother Aaron to be the spokesman able to convey his ideas to his audience, has now become, as his days are waning, a facile and persuasive speaker."

How are we to understand this transformation? I maintain that one cannot fully comprehend the unique nature of the book of *Deuteronomy* and its message unless he can answer the question which must trouble the alert reader and which so troubled the aforementioned rabbis: Why did Moses change?

Rabbi Shaviv offers a most suggestive approach to solving this dilemma. He begins by pointing out that Moses led his people for forty years but spoke to them more in the last forty days of his life than he did for the entire duration of his leadership.

He argues that we must postulate that Moses only now began to sense that the ears of the Israelites were at last receptive and attentive. They were finally ready to hear his words and to assimilate his message. Their hearts were now ready to open up and to understand both his words of faith and his words of rebuke.



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They were now ready to hear the hymn of *mitzvot*, statutes, and laws.

There is a very important lesson here. Language requires a relationship in order to be effective. Much depends upon the speaker, but the speaker must have a listener. Monologues do not communicate. Dialogs do. A speaker's eloquence depends upon his conviction that someone is listening.

Rabbi Shaviv proceeds to impart yet another creative teaching in his masterful little essay on this week's Torah portion. Moses becomes able to deliver his impressive address not only because he finally senses that he had a receptive audience. Rather, he can do so also because he has finally overcome his mistrust of "mere words."

Remember the tragedy of Moses' life, and remember the sin for which he was punished. The Almighty instructed him, when the people

complained of thirst, to speak to the rock from which water would then flow. God instructed him to use "mere words."

But instead, Moses struck the rock with his staff. He only trusted a concrete object, a "real thing." He mistrusted "mere words." In a sense he was guilty of the same error of those to whom I referred at the beginning of this essay, to those who scoff at words.

So serious was his choice of things over words that God considered it an unforgivable flaw. God deemed it a sin deserving tragic punishment. He, therefore, deprived Moses of achieving his most precious dream: entering the Promised Land.

The entire book of *Deuteronomy* is evidence that Moses learned his lesson well. He may have failed to use words to draw water from the rock, but he succeeded gloriously in using words to inspire his people, words which continue to reverberate eternally for all of us.

"Mere words," you say? I hope I have convinced you of their supreme importance by sharing with you my own conviction of the importance of words, a conviction which began for me in the seventh grade.

Thank you, Mr. Zeller, wherever you are. And thank you, Rabbi Shaviv, for your insights into this week's *parsha*. I hope that I have conveyed them as satisfactorily to my audience as you did to yours. ■

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