

This morning, we started our journey into the fifth and last Book of Moses - Deuteronomy. In Hebrew, Devarim, following our custom of naming the Book after the first key word in the Book.

“Ayleh hadvarim asher diber Moshe el col yisrael” – “These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel...”.

“Devarim” means “words”. Since I was a child I have loved words. When I was at school, I used to carry this dictionary in my blazer pocket. This morning, I want to share a few words with **you**.

Let’s start with “sermon”. Using a larger dictionary, the Shorter Oxford, I found this definition: “A discourse usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture, for the purpose of religious instruction or exhortation”; an alternative definition is: “a long and tedious discourse or harangue”. I will leave you to decide which definition best describes what you hear from me today.

The word “Deuteronomy” also appears in the dictionary. Does anyone know what Deuteronomy means? Deuteronomy is from the Greek, meaning “second law”, but that, apparently, is a mistranslation of words that appear later in the book. The Book of Deuteronomy – or Devarim – is a repetition by Moses of the laws he has received from G-d. The mistranslation that led to the title “Deuteronomy” is of a later sentence in which Moses tells the Israelites that if they ever appoint a king, that king shall always have at his side a copy of G-d’s Teaching written for him on a scroll. In other words, instead of calling the Book “Deuteronomy”, meaning Second Law, the translators should have used a word meaning

“Duplication” or “Repetition”. Or they might have done us all a favour and named the book “Words”.

We have read today in the opening chapter of Devarim how, 40 years after having crossed the River Jordan, Moses undertook to expound G-d’s Teaching. He explained how the Israelites had increased in number and Moses could not manage the burden of leading so many without help, especially because, as the population increased, so did the bickering. He told each tribe to pick wise men whom Moses would appoint as their heads and as judges. He instructed them to give everyone a fair hearing, and not to be partial in judgment: “hear out low and high alike. Fear no man”. Those could be the guiding principles in any just society. I was about to say “democracy” but my next thought was that Israelite society was not a democracy. Moses was appointed by G-d to lead; and Moses announced the Laws that G-d had dictated to him.

On the other hand, the dictionary definition of “democracy” – from Greek origin, of course - is “Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people and is exercised either directly by them or by officers elected by them”. Was the Israelite society led by Moses democratic? We in the United Kingdom have a Head of State who inherited the throne and whose coronation 60 years ago was modelled on King Solomon’s coronation. Just as we elect Members of Parliament in each constituency, the tribes led by Moses were all allowed to choose the men Moses whom appointed as heads over them. So perhaps this was an early form of democracy thousands of years before the Greeks.

Talking of Greeks and words with Greek origin puts me in mind of another word. Just in case you are wondering, I'm not going to follow an Olympic theme. That's a different sermon. When I was at school, I played a game with friends. One of us would choose a word from this dictionary and read out the definition. The others would have to guess the word. The word I have in mind has been troubling me. It's a word we have all used widely. Rabbi Paul used it recently in an article in *Shofar*. The definition is "right in opinion; holding correct ie currently accepted opinions". Would anyone like to suggest what the word is?

It is a word we commonly use to describe the United Synagogue. We often use it to explain the difference between **their** practice of Judaism and our modern, progressive practice. The word is "orthodox". Using this word to distinguish what United Synagogue members do from what **we** do bothers me. Both as individuals and as members of different synagogues, we all have varying levels of religious observance. As a Reform community, some of us keep kosher homes. Some of us don't. Some of us come to Shul on every Shabbat and on every festival. Some of us don't. All of us in the congregation today have come in honour of G-d and of Shabbat. We all believe we are Jews who observe Jewish laws and customs.

We all know Jews who belong to the United Synagogue who observe the same things we do, and some do not observe the same things we do: Jews who seldom attend Shul, who do not keep kosher homes, who drive on Shabbat, just as we do. Why should we accept that their membership of the United Synagogue entitles them to the adjective "orthodox". Don't get me wrong, I am not attacking the United Synagogue or its members. Some of my best friends are members of

the United Synagogue, and many of them observe laws I don't, not driving or using electricity on Shabbat, going to Shul more often and so on. But if I use the word "orthodox" to describe **them**, I am admitting that **their** religious observance and everything the United Synagogue stands for is right, and **my** religious observance – and everything Reform Judaism stands for - is wrong.

Reform Judaism is **living** Judaism. It is a religious philosophy rooted in nearly four millennia of Jewish tradition, whilst actively engaged with modern life and thought. This means both an uncompromising assertion of eternal truths and values and an open, positive attitude to new insights and changing circumstances. It is a living, evolving faith that Jews of today and tomorrow can live by.

If we **genuinely** believe that the United Synagogue and its members are entitled to believe and observe Jewish practices in their way, and that so are we in **ours**, then we Reform Jews are just as entitled to describe **ourselves** as orthodox. We should not allow ourselves to concede or imply to others that our form of Judaism is inferior to that of anyone else. We should stop using the word "orthodox" to describe Jews who, just as authentically, follow a different form of religious observance to us.

Is there an alternative word we can use to describe the United Synagogue and its members? "Non-progressive" might be accurate but unflattering. "Traditional" would not be accurate, because Reform Jews follow the same traditions but sometimes in different ways. "Strict"?

Words are powerful. I

f we use the word “orthodox” to describe other Jews, it says more about us than about them. In the week we have begun to read from the Book of Devarim, “Words”, let us pray for wisdom in using them.

May this be G-d's will