

Parshat Devarim – Rabbi David Mahler

It is remarkable to note that although *Sefer Bereishit* spans thousands of years, the whole of *Sefer Devarim* spans merely 37 days.

I find the first half of the book's opening *pasuk* to be one of the most inspirational *pesukim* in the entire *Torah*. At first glance, it seems like a rather innocuous and slightly boring verse - "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel.....". However, I believe that upon greater examination it is wonderfully inspirational and instructive.

Early on in *Sefer Shemot* we learn that Moshe, the greatest person to ever live, is imperfect. The *Torah* describes in 4 different ways that Moshe has some type of speech deficiency (*Shemot* 4:10, 6:12, 6:30). The commentaries address the exact nature of his difficulties debating whether each term signifies a different type of oratory disability or whether they all refer to the same condition.

Some offer the suggestion that he was not an eloquent speaker, literally not a man of words (*Ibn Kaspi*). Others intimate that Moshe had a defined speech and articulation impediment even listing some of the sounds and letters he was unable to pronounce (*Rabbeinu Chananel*). Some others suggest that he simply was not a good speaker in that he had trouble expressing himself through speech, often having a hard time finding the right words to express the idea he wishes to convey (*Ralbag*).

Moshe's lack of eloquence, reticence or difficulty with articulation is clearly important as the *Torah* highlight it.

Once we turn the page to *Sefer Devarim*, Moshe has transformed himself. He had described himself as "*Lo Ish Devarim Anochi*" (*Shemot* 4:10) – "I am not a man of words" – to the man of "*Eleh HaDevarim*" (*Devarim* 1:1) – "These are the words". *Sefer Devarim* comprises 3 different speeches that he gave to *Am Yisrael* during the final 5 ½ weeks of his life. The first 4 books of the *Torah* are written in the third person, yet *Devarim* is in the first person – from the vantage point of Moshe speaking to his people. Moshe is the narrator. He has transformed himself from a stutterer to an orator. It is ironic that of all people, it is Moshe who gives the greatest, and longest, monologue in human history.

It surely made former Senator Strom Thurmond's filibuster in 1957 seem like a brief talk.

Hashem doesn't put a glass ceiling on what we can accomplish. Unfortunately, we often do. No person has a default destiny. Greatness is not a birthright. We make ourselves great. This, I believe, is a critical meta-lesson of the *Torah*.

Over the past few months, I've found that there are overall two general categories of people I've interacted with. Many are in survival mode – simply seeking to get by. As the late great college basketball coach, Jim Valvano, once said, “survive and advance”. Others are in growth mode. They've taken the slower-paced lifestyle to embrace new challenges. They've picked up new hobbies, attempted to learn a new language or started chipping away at their reading lists.

In our relationship with *Hashem*, we can be minimalists or maximalists. Obviously, there are those for whom survival mode is currently maximalism. They need to take it one day at a time.

But for others, we shouldn't approach the summer as simply a time to rest and relaxation but rather use the extra space and margin to attack the summer and make it as productive as possible. Start listening to more shiurim, take a bit more time during *t'fillah* and open a new *sefer*.

Let's set small, attainable goals for what we want to achieve over the next week or month. Can I reinvigorate my davening in some way? What's the next Jewish book I will read?

There's always another floor the elevator can travel to. Don't cap out your own growth. It's never ending. Remember – when the *Torah* states that Moshe was not an “*Ish Devarim*”, he was 80 years old! Moshe never placed a ceiling to his potential growth. At 120, he began the most monumental soliloquy the world has ever known.

Shabbat Shalom!