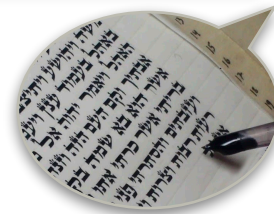




# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Devarim

Av 5783 / July 2023

## May I Have a Word With You?

By Jeff Kapelus

When I was asked to write this *dvar Torah* (only three night's ago!) I was excited. Why? Because not only is *Devarim* ripe with commentary and interpretations, it opens the fifth book of *Chumash Chumshei Torah*.

The appropriately named *Sefer Devarim* is a collection of the farewell speeches Moshe delivered to Bnai Yisrael as they prepared to enter the Land of Israel. It is an oratorical masterpiece. Indeed, some sages have commented that *Moshe's* speech shines just as his face shined at *Har Sinai*.

This fifth book of the Torah is *Moshe's* discourse, reiterating *Hashem's* teachings and exhorting the People of Israel to follow His commands. Some refer to it as *Mishneh Torah*, the repetition of the Torah, or the second law.

*Moshe* begins by recounting the events and the laws given during *B'nai Yisrael's* forty-year journey from Egypt to Sinai to the Promised Land — a land they will enter after his death, with Joshua at the helm.

As I read thru the *parsha*, I didn't have to go too far to discover the subject of this *vort*. The *parsha's* name, *Dvarim*, words, and the first few *psukim* are fertile ground for commentary, interpretations, and life lessons. Here are two of the lessons we can learn from *Moshe's* words.

**Lesson 1:** The art—or skill—of giving constructive criticism (aka rebuke, reproof, admonition, *tochahcha*).

The *pasha* begins, *These are the words which Moshe spoke unto all the Israelites when they were on the far side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the plains, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel, Lavan, Chatzeirot and di Zahav* (Deuteronomy 1:1).

Why did *Moshe* enumerate these many locations? Is it TMI? And what were these "words" he decided to share? Or, as one *Midrash* asks, "Are these the only words which *Moshe* spoke?" (*Yalkut, Devarim* 788)

The *Midrash* answers its question, "These words are in a special category. These were words of admonition." *Moshe* was admonishing *B'nai Yisrael* for the many national shortcomings and sins that had occurred since their Exodus from Egypt. But why the list of locations?

*Rashi* explains that listing the locations was a form of subtle rebuke. *Moshe* was intentionally vague with his words; he only hinted at *B'nai Yisrael's* sins. But by alluding to the places where the sins occurred, not the sins themselves, he effectively conjured up their memory and consequences.

The value of constructive criticism turns on how it's given and how it is received. In the words of King Solomon, "Don't criticize a fool, for he will hate you. Criticize a wise man, and he will love you."

The lesson: is that we should work at being effective givers and receptive takers of constructive criticism.

*Moshe's* final speech to the Israelites is a model of effective rebuke.

*Moshe* knew the importance of bringing up the past sins to the Children of Israel but he did it in a way that did not embarrass his listeners. Merely alluding to the places where the sins were committed was enough for the Children of Israel to understand his point. His words of reproof were concise, fulfilled their purpose, and maintained respect for his audience, *B'nai Yisrael*.

*Moshe's* choice of words transmitted a powerful message, and the veiled reference attests to how well *Moshe* knew and understood his audience. Rather than deliver a lengthy rant, he maximized his impact by minimizing his words.

We can emulate *Moshe* by choosing our words wisely, by knowing our audience, and by thinking long and hard before dispensing criticism. Giving constructive criticism is an art, and it requires practice, just like any other skill.

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**Lesson 2:** It's never too late.

It is ironic that a book of the Torah showcases *Moshe* as an inspiring speaker and orator. This irony is underscored by the opening words of *Parshat Devarim* that we just discussed. The eloquence, passion, and cadence of *Moshe's* discourses are breathtaking. One can only wonder: is this the same man who, almost 40 years earlier, at the burning bush, responded to *Hashem's* command that he lead the Jewish people out of Egypt by saying, *I am not a man of words*. (Exodus 4:10). The *Moshe* of *Sefer Devarim* is a master of words, speaking eloquently, mastering nuance, inspiration, and meaning.

*Moshe's transformation from a self-proclaimed not a man of Devarim, words, to an erudite orator is astonishing, and Sefer Devarim is a master class in public oratory. The lesson: It is never too late. We are all capable of reinventing ourselves and learning new skills. The will to do so is more powerful than age, circumstances and other opposing forces.*

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This is **Jeff's** fifth Collective Conversation dvar Torah — Thanks! Yasher Koach!

By now, his bio is as well-known as his famous last words: **We are STILL waiting for a local Kosher sports bar**. Is there an investor who will fulfill his wish?

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