



The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Devarim • Shabbat Hazon

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Leadership & History

By Eric Smith

Moshe begins his State of the Union, or Farewell Address, in this week's *parsha*. He speaks as *Bnai Yisrael* is completing their long journey to the Land of *Canaan*, a land that *Moshe* will view from afar but never enter.

So much has happened in the 40 years between the exodus from Egypt and arrival to the doorstep of the promised land — laws were given, wars were fought, and *Bnei Yisrael* encountered starvation and death. They also experienced the magic associated with miracles and the doom brought on by the *apikorism* in their midst.

All of these experiences helped the Jewish people learn and grow and be ready for this monumental moment — none of the events were unessential or superfluous.

The entire adventure provides the fodder for *Moshe's* final speech, and the *parsha* begins -- *these are the words that Moses spoke* (דָּבַר) *to all Israel*. We see from his choice of words that this address is both subtle and profound. Subtle because, as the *Midrash* teaches, the verb דָּבַר is typically associated with a message of rebuke; the verb אָמַר is usually used when conveying praise. Profound because *Moshe* directs this apparent rebuke to both his immediate audience, *Bnei Israel*, and to generations of Jews to come by using the pronoun 'you' more than 100 times in his talk.

There's another well-known disparaging use of the pronoun 'you'. (Hint: think Hagaddah). *The wicked child asks: 'What is this service to you?' And because this child excludes themselves from the community, you should chastise them, saying: 'Because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt.' 'For me' and not 'for them,' for had they been there, they would not have been redeemed.* (Shemot 12:26) At my seder, this passage

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engenders lots of discussion, and we find it difficult to comprehend. We all know a 'wayward' kid (or were one ourselves). Are we really meant to push them away? Do we mean to imply that they don't even deserve a seat at the table? It is fascinating to reveal that the source for this admonition was not even related to a particular 'wicked son' it was intended to teach and reinforce the tradition and history of the Jewish people.

Let's go one step further and consider the psychological term countertransference. Countertransference occurs when someone projects his or her unresolved conflicts onto others. By utilizing the 'you' pronoun, *Moshe* conveys his fears and worries about the future of the Jewish people. It is natural for someone near the end of life to reflect and contemplate their legacy. In fact, research suggests that a rebuke is taken to heart more when it comes from someone on their deathbed. *Moshe* reflects on all the events, good and bad, that transpired since leaving Egypt like a parent concerned for his children. He uses his last moments as a leader to mold *Bnei Yisrael's* experience into a lesson in order to make sure the people remember and learn from their history. What's more, *Moshe* himself is part of the story, and his actions weigh along with those of *Bnei Yisrael*. I imagine a part of him regrets certain behaviors that prevented his entering the Holy Land; he taught us that none of us is perfect.

This is a moment of extraordinary leadership: *Moshe* uses a common set of experiences to both praise and rebuke without alienating or pushing people away. There is a *Midrash Rabbah* that imagines God's response to *Moshe* after his speech: *Moshe, you have rebuked the people. They have accepted the rebuke meekly; now bless them. (Devarim Rabbah 1:9)* We learn from *Moshe's* masterful example and the *Midrash Rabbah's* gloss that it's important to temper rebuke with praise.

Moshe goes one step further: speaking about the battles that *Bnei Yisrael* fought, *Moshe* switches pronouns from 'I' and 'you' to 'we.' In that way, he tempers the rebuke with moments of collaboration and camaraderie.

We could have downplayed the importance of this *parsha* by focusing on unkind words and veiled threats. Instead, we study this State of the Union / Farewell Address every year to recall our history and recognize the potential slippery slope associated with not heeding warnings.

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Eric, along with his brother Michael, grew up in Scarsdale. He celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at YIS and is a graduate of WDS and WHHS. And it is with great anticipation that he looks forward to celebrating his wedding to Donna Graham in a few short weeks. Eric works in the film world, producing content for wonderful organizations like Amudim, Witness Project, and Yad Vashem.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

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