

D'varim

Dahlia Schwartz

Many years ago, I was in a Ph.d. seminar on post-colonial literature. There were seven of us in the seminar—myself, a Palestinian woman, a Syrian man, and four...well...innocent bystanders who were more than a little perplexed by how heated our discussions of colonialism, occupied territories, terrorism and guerrilla warfare became.

It was immediately evident that my colleagues from Palestine and Syria told an entirely different story of the creation of the modern state of Israel than I did. I'd been raised hearing about the horrors of the Shoah, seeing pictures of hard-working chalutzim transforming desert into lush and green fields, listening to brave stories of running the British blockade into Israel—as my father did; the declaration of independence by Ben-Gurion, inviting Arabs and Jews to share the land in peace, the subsequent invasion by Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and others, and the triumph of the underdog Israelis in securing their country.

My colleagues from Palestine and Syria apparently hadn't heard that story. The one they heard involved foreign imperialists occupying and subsequently partitioning their land. It involved ancestral homes being bull-dozed, the creation of a refugee population ghettoized in occupied territories, the annexation of land and the killing of innocent civilians.

Not surprisingly, we never came to an agreement on a single narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But we did learn that not only are there two sides to every story, there are at least two stories for every event.

Which brings us to D'varim, or “words.” D'varim contains Moshe's last words. He stands upon the plains of Moav, knowing that the people he has led for 40 years are about to enter Canaan, knowing that his role in the story of his people, that his life, is coming to an end. So, like all good Jewish speakers, he tells the people a story. He tells them their story.

D'varim is also called the Mishneh Torah—the repetition of the Torah—because of this recap of the events that came before. In this sense, D'varim is not only about the telling of stories, but also about second chances—a second chance to create a new national narrative, a second chance to prove faithful to G-d, a second chance to enter the land that was denied the Israelites 40 years previous.

Moshe appears to be well aware of these second chances, as is evident by the alterations he makes and the emphases he places in the story he tells. He begins his final speech by situating the Israelites—both in time and in space. Rashi notes that all the places listed in the first few verses of the parsha are subtle reminders of how the Israelites came to be wandering in the desert: they are described as opposite the Reed Sea—where they begged to return to Egypt; they are between Hazaroth, the site of Korach's rebellion and di-zahav, the place of enough gold, a reminder of the golden calf.

Yet, the people standing on the plain of Moav are not the people who fled Egypt or built the golden calf. Why does Moshe choose to remind them, in this indirect way, of the sins of their parents?

His admonishment reminds me a bit of a stereotypical old Jewish couple—just before one spouse is about to do something wrong, the other says, “Nu? Remember that time in the Berkshires ...” The geographical allusion is less an admonishment than a reminder—just what the people about to enter the land and begin fulfilling the mitzvot need—a reminder that G-d is with them, watching them, expecting them to do the right thing.

Moshe then speaks of how, upon leaving Egypt, he couldn't bear the burden of dealing with all of the Israelite's problems, how he told the people to select men from each tribe to deal with issues that did not require Moshe's personal attention.

But this isn't the story we heard earlier. The first time we are told this story, it is Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, who notices that Moshe is overwhelmed and suggests that he needs to delegate some of his authority.

Why this difference? It isn't that Moshe is trying to take credit from Yitro, as Midrashim make it clear that Moshe was an incredibly humble person. Once again, Moshe is telling the story that the Israelites need to hear at this juncture. Emphasizing that the idea came from Yitro, a Midianite, a nation with whom the Israelites had just done battle, would have made it acceptable for the people to question the legal hierarchy that had been set up, might have undermined the authority of the system. Instead, Moshe focuses on the problem and the solution—that one man cannot hear every case from the whole nation and that a system has been established and needs to remain in place to resolve conflicts.

Next, Moshe speaks of the particular event that led to the years of wandering in the desert—the incident of the spies. But, again, the version we hear in d'varim is significantly different than the story told earlier in the Torah. Earlier, the Torah emphasizes G-d's approval of the idea of sending spies into Canaan. The focus then is on the bad report of all of the spies save Calev and Joshua, graphically describing why it would be impossible to take the land.

Moshe's version seems almost to describe a different event entirely. Moshe's version places the spotlight on the Israelite nation as a whole. He emphasizes that it was the people who suggested sending spies. In Moshe's version, we don't hear about the bad report of the majority of the spies. Instead, we hear only that the spies reported that: "The land the Lord, our God, is giving us is good." And, in Moshe's version, it is the Israelites as a whole who are afraid to go into the land, seemingly without reason.

Surely the people standing on the plains of Moav have heard about both reports of the spies. Those reports, after all, set into motion the events that led to the years of wandering in the desert. Yet, Moshe places all of the impetus in the story onto the shoulders of the collective community—It is “the Israelites” who demand that spies be sent, and it is “the Israelites” who refuse to go into the land. After years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites need to discover that it is they who will shape their future. They will be making the choices about how to live and how to fulfill their covenant with G-d. Moshe is transmitting to them not a vision of failure and faithlessness, but one of power and responsibility.

The idea that the act of telling a story can be transformative is quintessentially Jewish. Martin Buber tells of a rabbi who was lame. He writes that “Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. ...

[He] rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done...That's the way to tell a story."

Studying how Moshe molded his narrative to give the Israelites a vision of themselves that they could take into their new land recalled to me the seminar I had taken all those years ago. The stories with which my colleagues and I had grown up held truths, but they were not narratives that could possibly lead to peace. A couple of intifadahs and countless deaths later, if we were given a second chance to retell those stories, I wonder what we would change. Could we find narratives that would lead to dialogue rather than impasses.

Moshe's re-telling also reminded me of the conflicting narratives, the spin-jobs, coming from the middle east these days—diametrically opposed versions of what happened to the Gaza flotilla, Haredim decrying how disgraceful it is for the Women of the Wall to pray with tallit on and carry a Torah, Women of the Wall, and frankly myself, decrying how disgraceful it is for the Haredim to shout, spit and throw things at their fellow Jews on the site of the ancient temple. And so on.

It occurs to me that we tend to pay attention to the narratives that confirm us in our beliefs, whatever those may be—that Israel is blameless, that Israel should be held to a higher standard, that the Palestinians are terrorists or that the Palestinians are innocent. These narratives tend to be overly simplistic, without nuance, black and white. But what if, like Moshe, we choose to shape our narratives to meet our goals? What story of the modern state of Israel could we tell that might lead to peace and security? What story of halacha and its development might we tell to try restore ahavat Yisroel—love of one's fellow Jews—rather than fomenting the increasing divide between the Haredim and the rest of the Jewish world?

These questions seem especially compelling as we approach Tisha B'Av—commemorating the destruction of the Temples, but also, according to Midrash, the day on which the spies gave their evil report. The sages tell us that the Temple was destroyed, in part, because of *sinat chinam*—baseless hatred of one Jew for another. A teacher of mine believed that the law—let us say, the Torah—should act as a bridge from the world as it is to the world as it ideally should be. Moshe's example teaches us that the stories we accept and the stories we tell can hold us back or propel us forward. As the poet Wallace Stevens writes: "Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into."