

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
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### Whose Words?

Last week the New York Times reported on a scandal that is being called “sermongate.” The newly elected president of the Southern Baptist convention was caught delivering a sermon that had been delivered just a short time before by another Baptist preacher, the same man who happened to be his predecessor as president of the Southern Baptist conference. The sermons are both on YouTube - I’m not sure why he thought he would get away with that.

There is a lot about the controversy that is specific to the dynamics among Southern Baptists in America in 2021 and the splits within the movement, but I still found the article to be absolutely fascinating insight into the art of sermon-writing among some of our neighbors. In the words of the Times:

“a great sermon is also laborious to produce. It can include deep analysis of biblical texts, historical research, compelling anecdotes, a dose of humor and a stirring call to action. Now imagine producing at least one such message every week, year after year, all based on the same collection of texts and delivered to the same audience.”

Now imagine indeed...Some of the preachers interviewed by the reporter shared that their sermons were written by eight-person teams of researchers and took 30 hours of study, writing, and editing. That I cannot imagine.

But the article also raised a question about the meaning of authorship and the place for literary creativity within the realm of conveying a religious message. There are rigorous standards for citation in academia but much more contested rules for citation among Baptist preachers, and I think the standards for rabbis are also somewhat vague.

Footnotes and meticulous citation of sources are crucial for science because the premise of all scientific research is that one should be able to recreate all of scientific knowledge from nothing based by recreating the experiments and discovering everything anew from the motion of planets to subatomic particles. And footnotes should enable the same thing for the study of literature and history and sociology. But a sermon is also an artistic creation and it is also a performance made from a stage.

The vagueness about authorship of a creative text hearkens back to Sefer Devarim, the fifth and final book of the Torah that we started this morning.

Sefer Devarim presents itself as being the words of Moshe in a way that is true of the rest of the Torah, and in a way that is somehow different from the rest of the Torah:

אלה קדובים אשר דבר משה אל כל-ישראל

“These are the words” the book begins, “that Moshe spoke to all Israel.”

How is this book the product of Moshe’s words differently than any other book in the Torah? We see that right away, just a few verses later as Moshe begins to recount the story of his career guiding B’nai Yisrael. He tells the story of being overwhelmed by the multitude of the Jewish people’s concerns and delegating power - a story we know from Parashat Yitro. He tells the story of the spies and their disastrous mission that we know from Parashat Shelach. He tells the story of the conquest of the Eastern Bank of the Jordan, stories we just heard in the final chapters of Sefer Bamidbar. And the details are different. Moshe’s roles are described differently. The description of motives are different. Details that are lacking in the earlier books of the Torah are included in Sefer Devarim and details that are included in the earlier books of the Torah are omitted in Sefer Devarim.

This historical retrospective in Sefer Devarim is the recapitulation of the Torah from the perspective of Moshe’s own subjective experience. This is his narrative, his lived truth, the way the events were perceived

and understood by Moshe himself. Reading Sefer Devarim in harmony with the earlier books of the Torah yields a symphony of perspectives that present a fuller version of the truth.

All of this should come naturally to us as post-moderns. We know that everyone has their own personal truth. We know that every side of any conflict has their narrative that explains and justifies their perspective. We should not be surprised that the Torah includes two or more accounts of the same stories - what story does not have at least two perspectives with contradicting details.

Think of the conflicting narratives about the events of recent history when I say the year 1967 or 1948 or 1776 or 1619. If there are conflicting perspectives about the meaning of 1776 of course there will be conflicting perspectives on the disastrous mission of the spies and who was responsible.

But there are two things that should surprise us. The first is Moshe's initiative in speaking to the Israelites at such length and with such passion and with such beauty in the final days of his life. Moshe started his career saying he was "not a man of words" and he ended his career with an entire book of his words. Moshe could not complete his mission as "Moshe Rabbenu" as our teacher Moshe without sharing something of himself. Transmitting the Torah required Moshe to step out of his role as a stenographer for God, and tell us something about his inner life.

And then, the truly surprising thing, is that the Torah included Moshe's remarks into the Humash, all five books stamped with the authority of Divine revelation. The personal contributions of Moshe are codified as part of the Torah. In general, this process is called Torah sh'b'al Peh.

Alongside the written Torah that was given to Moshe, we received the mandate to interpret the Torah, to argue about it, to develop it, and to discover its meanings. And this process, and the ensuing traditions, are called the Torah she'b'al Peh - the Oral Torah. Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin wrote in the 19th century that Moshe yearned to enter Eretz Yisrael in order to experience the oral Torah alongside the written Torah. He wanted to see how the Torah would be developed and interpreted in the context of the full life of the people in Eretz Yisrael. That request was denied, but Sefer Devarim was included in the Torah as a sort of bridge between the written Torah, which is objective and unchanging, and the Oral Torah which comes from within the people who shape it and share it.

So it is with us. The written Torah that we read in shul is the very same letters that have been passed down to us for generations and if we do our jobs correctly our children's children and their grandchildren will read the exact same words until the end of time. But alongside that unchanging written Torah, we have the opportunity, the privilege, and the mandate to develop the Oral Torah. To make the Torah personal and to contribute something unique of ourselves to the ongoing conversation and debate and discovery of the Torah as it is applied to ever changing circumstances.