

Parshat Devarim 5777

From the Mouth of Moshe, and the Hand of Moshe

The centrepieces of Sefer Devarim are Moshe's closing addresses, delivered to the Jewish People in the final five weeks of his life. As they prepare to enter the Land of Israel, and he prepares himself to take his leave of them, he imparts the messages he wants them to carry with them after his passing. Some Rishonim held that these speeches are different to the rest of the Torah. Everyone agrees that Bereshit to Bamidbar comprise verbatim the words transmitted by G-d to Moshe. For these first four books, Moshe was merely an amanuensis, without a creative contribution of his own. However, there is a widely held view that Devarim is at least partly Moshe's own composition, and that he formulated the speeches. For example, the Ramban commented that Moshe delivered the speeches entirely on his own initiative, and although he was later commanded to write them down, the words are his.

R. Yitschak Caro, uncle of R. Yosef Caro, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, made the observation that this must be true of all Moshe's reported speech recorded in the Chumash. Moshe chose the words he used, and was later commanded to write them down. They are in a different category to the words spoken by the generations before Moshe which we read in the Chumash. In those cases, Moshe was not present and G-d gave him the exact account and dialogue he was to write down. The Abarbanel took a slightly different approach. He thought that Moshe was given a general instruction by G-d to set out the blessings and curses that will come to the People depending on their behaviour, but Moshe determined the details of his speeches himself. We know the Abarbanel was troubled by this issue, because he wrote to some of the leading rabbis of his generation to seek their views. His conclusion seems to be his attempt to balance two statements in the Gemara. In Megillah 31b we are told that the blessings and curses in Vayikra were dictated directly by G-d, and therefore when they are part of krias haTorah they must be read uninterrupted. However, the blessings and curses in Devarim were composed by Moshe himself (*mipi atzmo*), and that is why they can be split up in leining. On the other hand, in Sanhedrin 99a we learn that anyone who says that Moshe spoke anything that appears in the Torah *mipi atzmo* has no place in the World to Come. The Abarbanel's solution reconciles these two statements. Moshe did not speak *mipi atzmo* in the sense that he was commanded to make a speech and was subsequently commanded to write it down. However, Moshe did speak *mipi atzmo* in that he chose the particular words he used.

Moshe's Approach to Reproach

There is therefore room for us to examine Moshe's words and try to understand what he wanted to convey, as our greatest teacher and leader. A major theme of the speeches is reproach. He listed all the places where the People sinned. Rashi commented that Moshe

only gave the names of the locations where sins took place and not the details of the events, in order not to embarrass the People. However, as Rav Moshe Feinstein pointed out, Rashi seems to ignore that Moshe described the sins connected to the Golden Calf and the Spies at length. Rav Moshe explained Rashi by making a distinction between the actions of the individuals Moshe was addressing and the behaviour of the generation that left Egypt and had already died in the desert. When Moshe discussed the sins of the dead, he was clear and direct because they were not there to be offended. However, when it came to the misdemeanours of the living he took a more subtle approach out of consideration for their feelings. Rav Moshe learnt from Moshe's method of reproach that if one has to reprove someone, the best way is to begin through oblique references. Only if they do not get the hint, or if they persist in defending their behaviour, should one become more direct and explicit.

The Importance of Reproach

Underlying Rav Moshe's guidance is the fundamental importance of reproving each other when necessary, even if the correct technique varies. Vayikra 19:17 tells us 'hoche'ach tochi'ach' – you will surely give reproof, and the Gemara (Arachin 16b) derives our halakhic obligation from there. We have to carry out our obligation even if the person tells us to mind our own business, curses us or even hits us. Yet, there are few (normal) people who find it easy to reproach others. We feel uncomfortable, ill at ease and exposed if we query other people's behaviour. This reflects a laudable humility and desire to get along, but sometimes it can go too far. There are many details of Shabbat or Kashrut observance, and many people who are committed to halacha are not familiar with them all. Occasionally we see halachic mistakes, yet we remain quiet. We would not even be seeking to give reproach, but simply to assist with a helpful clarification, done subtly, privately and without causing embarrassment. It is immensely difficult to deal with this situation in a sensitive way, but maybe we need to try harder. We can ask ourselves two questions. First, 'would the person want to know they are making a mistake, so they do not do so again in the future?' If the answer is yes, then why are we not telling them? Why do we not love them enough to put them right when they are going wrong? Secondly 'what does my silence say about my commitment to halacha?' If we felt real pain when we saw halacha being broken, would we not speak up? Perhaps the problem lies in our inability to take criticism. We know how we would feel, and possibly react, if we were corrected. In the Sifrei, R. Elazar ben Azaria exclaims 'no one can take reproach!' In this time when we are conscious of the need to turn sinat chinam into ahavat chinam, we have to learn how to accept correction in the right spirit, which will make it possible to give correction in the right spirit, and the result will be not just an increase in shemirat hamitzvot, but in the love within Klal Yisrael.