

In Our Own Words

On this Shabbat we begin reading the fifth and final Book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. The name Deuteronomy derives from the Greek *Deuteronomion*, meaning “second law,” or more colloquially, “the repetition of the law.” While the common Hebrew name of the fifth book is *D'varim*, (short for “*elleh ha-d'varim*, “these are the words”), the name Deuteronomy and its Greek antecedent come from the Hebrew name *Mishneh Torah*, “Repetition of the Torah.”

As we reviewed earlier in the week at our *Parashat haShavuah* (“Torah portion of the week”) class on Tuesday, the theme of repetition is not solely pedagogic. Yes, repeating the laws and rehashing some of the stories told in the earlier Books of the Torah certainly helps us review and remember important lessons. But there also is a subtler purpose for repetition, one that only becomes clear on close inspection. Namely, when we repeat a narrative or a message, changes in the second telling convey important nuances. The differences may be subtle or they may be stark and each one draws the reader in and invites interpretation.

Setting the stage for the differences in the various accounts is the fact that the messages of Deuteronomy are told from Moses's point of view. In the earlier Books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers) an anonymous narrator relates the message and quotes God directly with the ubiquitous phrase: "*God spoke to Moses, saying.*" But that phrase does not appear in Deuteronomy. Rather, we get in the opening words of the Book: *Eileh ha-d'varim asher dibeir Moshe el-kol-Yisrael*, "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel." As Moses retells the earlier stories and laws, we understand that he made changes in order to address the new generation. He made changes in recognition of the new circumstances and the new challenges they faced. The old generation that fled Egyptian slavery and wandered as refugees for forty years in the wilderness had passed. A new generation was preparing to enter the Promised Land and would face surprises and obstacles and tests that none before had experienced. So Moses adjusted the message accordingly.

Each of us has cherished stories, family lore and harrowing tales. Some are stories that we personally experienced and some were beloved memories that were passed down to us. As we retell those stories, details and emphasis shift. The audiences shift as well. And when we share the stories with our children and grandchildren, we try to keep in mind both the

“integrity” of the tale and the mindset, the patience (read, “attention span”), and the unique challenges that are germane to the younger generation. In effect, we put the stories into our own words.

As we begin the fifth Book of the Torah, the book that repeats much of what came before, we do so knowing that it isn’t repetitious at all. Rather, we are treated to a template of how Moses made adjustments to prepare the Children of Israel for their journey beyond his lifetime. Similarly, the Torah is repeated year after year but remains fresh as we are forever discovering surprising and inspiring lessons.

The Torah is the prized legacy of the Jewish people and each of you has a share in it. Claim your possession. Read it. Explore it. Discuss it. Teach it. And relate it to your loved ones...in your own words.

Shabbat Shalom,

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