

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

DEVARIM

Lessons from Moshe's Rebuke

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel.¹

PART I: ANATOMY OF A REPROOF

The opening chapters of Chumash Devarim are devoted to Moshe's rebuke to the Jewish people for the various sins they committed over the forty years in the Wilderness. It is worthwhile contemplating whether there are any lessons we can glean from Moshe's rebuke to other situations, determining what will enable words of rebuke, where required, to be effective and well-received.

LESSON ONE: TIMING

The first element of Moshe's rebuke that is worth considering is actually unique to his setting and specifically not relevant to most situations that require rebuke, but may nevertheless yield a lesson regarding rebuke generally. Rashi in verse 3² states that Moshe delayed his words of rebuke until shortly before his passing, so that he would not need to rebuke the people repeatedly. In this matter, he derived his practice from our forefather Yaakov, who likewise saved his words of rebuke toward his sons until shortly before his death.

R' Yaakov of Lissa³ asks: Should this practice regarding timing be adopted by us when we need to give rebuke? Surely, the longer one delays, the more wrong the person will commit! Additionally, is it indeed the case that rebuke be timed so as to only having to be given once? The halachah states that one is required to rebuke as often as necessary!

Rather, the difference between us and Moshe lies in the fact that, in our experience, rebuke is typically required when we see someone *doing* something wrong, with the goal of getting them to desist. As such, one certainly will not wish to delay his rebuke, nor will one have it as a priority to rebuke only once. In

¹ Devarim 1:1.

² S.v. *vayehi*.

³ Commentary Nachalas Yaakov, Parshas Devarim.

Moshe's case, however, the sins he was discussing were ones that had *already been committed*. Indeed, in many cases, the sin in question was not even committed by them, but by the generation that preceded them! Rather, the goal of his rebuke was to address those sins in retrospect, as well as their underlying causes, with the goal of ensuring that they not be repeated. This was something which only needed to be said once, and moreover, Moshe judged that it would be better to delay the message until shortly before his passing.

However, even after having noted the difference between Moshe's case and ours, we can still learn the importance of timing when delivering rebuke, giving some thought to the time and setting where the rebuke will be most effective, namely when the person will be most receptive, and not necessarily when we are feeling our most righteous or morally indignant.

LESSON TWO: RESPECT

The opening verse in our Parsha is effectively a list of places. According to Rashi, these do not represent the places where Moshe administered his words of rebuke, but are rather the subject of the rebuke itself:

לפי שהן דברי תוכחות ומנה כאן כל המקומות שהכעיסו לפני המקום בהן, לפיכך סתם את
הדברים והזכירן ברמז מפני כבודם של ישראל.

Since these are words of rebuke, and [Moshe] listed all the places where they angered the Almighty, therefore, he phrased matters vaguely and mentioned them [only] in hinted form, out of respect for the People of Israel.

Let us consider: How effective was this verse in chastising the people? It is a universal rule that those who are most in need of rebuke are also the ones most adept in deflecting it. This would be infinitely more likely to happen if the words of rebuke themselves are not even explicit! Nevertheless, as far as Moshe is concerned, it is more important to convey a message of respect. This is not only for the general value of respecting others, but is also the only way that any rebuke can have a positive outcome. Rebuke is a confrontation; specifically, confronting the person with something they are doing wrong. This is not something that is easy to hear and if they feel they are the object of derision, they will not hear it at all. Additionally, addressing the person with respect means that not only are you telling them where they are going wrong, but no less importantly, that you firmly believe that they can get it right, and it is to this end that you are bringing the matter up.

Indeed, the commentators point out that in the ensuing verses and chapters, Moshe is very explicit in recounting the episodes over which he is rebuking the people, sparing no detail or comment! Has he changed approach from the circumspect one reflected in the opening verse? The Maharal⁴ explains that clearly, at a certain point, Moshe will need to get down to details, otherwise the people are in danger of actually not knowing what he is talking about or what he means to say. The point of Rashi is that you cannot start rebuke that way. The way you begin is what sets the tone for what follows, and beginning with respect will hopefully ensure that whatever you say subsequently – however explicit – will be received positively.

LESSON THREE: LOSS

Verse two informs us that Moshe's words to the people were said, "*Eleven days' [journey] from Chorev.*" What is significance of the verse telling us the time it *could have* taken from Chorev to reach the Plains of Moav, especially given that, in actuality, it had taken them a good deal longer? Presumably, it is for this

4 Gur Aryeh to Rashi loc. cit.

reason that Rashi explains that these words are not merely words of description on the part of the Torah, but are actually also included in Moshe's rebuke to the people:

אמר להם משה ראו מה שגרמתם... ובשביל שקלקלתם הסב אתכם סביבות הר שעיר
ארבעים שנה

Said Moshe to them, "See what you caused [for yourselves]... Since you corrupted your path, Hashem took you around Mount Se'ir over a period of forty years."

From these words we can learn that a person might not be moved to improve his ways based solely on being shown that he has done the wrong thing. He needs also to be shown how sin has caused him loss so that it might enlist his motivation in bettering his situation. The same is true for a person's own introspection. An important part of teshuvah is recognizing not only that we did the wrong thing, but that it did not bring us the happiness and fulfillment that it promised. Thus, we conclude the *vidui*, during which we list our sins, by saying "ולא שוה לנו – and it wasn't worth it for us." We need to recognize that the *yetzer hara* did not deliver the picture of success and happiness that he had painted for us, even though that did not stop him from charging for delivery.

LESSON FOUR: CARE

Verse four informs us that Moshe's words were said, "After he had smitten Sichon, king of the Ammorites... and Og, king of Bashan." Here too, Rashi explains that Moshe waited to time his rebuke after having performed a kindness for the Jewish people so that they would realize that his rebuke was intended for their benefit, and not merely to criticize them. Having recently led them in battle to initiate their entry into the land of Israel, the people had to know that Moshe had their best interests at heart and would be able to accept his words of rebuke accordingly.

PART II: ROOTS – FROM DEVARIM TO BEREISHIS

As we have mentioned, Rashi traces Moshe's decision to delay his rebuke back to Yaakov Avinu. With regards to the other aspects we have mentioned, I believe they can be traced back to the very first rebuke ever administered, namely, that of Hashem to Adam after the sin of the Etz Hada'as. We tend to synopsise the aftermath of the sin by simply saying that Adam was punished and sent away from the garden. However, when we consider the relevant verses, we see that Hashem's response to Adam contained numerous elements of which it is most worthwhile to take note:

Respect: Immediately following their eating from the Etz Hada'as, the verse relates, "וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עֵרְוָם" – *They realized that they were naked, and they sewed for themselves fig leaves and they made for themselves bindings.* Only after that did Hashem appear to rebuke them. We see that Hashem first gave them time to cover up their nakedness and preserve their dignity and only then confronted them. Had He confronted them in their state of full disgrace, there would be no trace of self-respect left for them to rebuild from, they simply would have been shattered and bewildered, without any wherewithal to recover from their sin.

Care: After rebuking Adam and Chava and informing them of their punishments, the verse states, "וַיַּעַשׂ ה' אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְחַוָּה אֲרוֹמֵי עוֹר וַיַּלְבָּשֵׁם" – *Hashem God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and He clothed them.* There is much discussion among the commentators as to the nature of these "garments of

skin.” However, it is fair to say that no less important is the concluding word “וּלְבָשָׁם – and He clothed them.” We might have expected that, with things having cooled considerably between them and Hashem, that He could simply have said, “Here are your new clothes, get dressed.” The additional element of Hashem Himself clothing them was nothing other than an act of love, indicating thereby that although he was punishing them, he had not given up on them nor lost His affection for them. That parting message surely gave them strength and resolve to do their best to rectify what they had done wrong.

Loss: After recording the banishment of Adam and Chava from Gan Eden, the verse relates, **“וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקְדָּם, לְגַן עֵדֶן אֶת הַכְּרֻבִים וְאֶת לֶהַט הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת לְשָׁמֵר אֶת דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים”** – [Hashem] stationed at the east of the Garden of Eden the Cherubim, and the flame of the constantly revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.” We must ask: Surely there are easier and equally effective ways to prevent Adam’s return to the garden, such as simply sealing up the entrance! Why did Hashem choose such an elaborate arrangement involving Cherubim and flames of revolving swords? The Radak, in his commentary to that verse, provides a stunning explanation of this matter. It is apparent from the verses that Adam’s initial response to being confronted over his sin was not to do teshuvah, but instead to defend himself. This attitude persisted even as he was banished from the garden.⁵ Clearly, he was not sufficiently aware of the impact of his sin and the loss it had caused him. What could bring about this awareness? The answer is, the sight of Cherubim with deadly flaming swords ready to cut him down if he should even attempt to return to where had lived just a few hours ago served to bring home the message of just how much he had forfeited from what he had once enjoyed. Indeed, says the Radak, it was at this point that Adam did teshuvah!

It is profoundly moving to see how the elements which Mosh employed in his words of rebuke and reproach are rooted in those of Hashem literally from the beginning. All of this should serve to provide a deeper appreciation of the opening section of Chumash Devarim, whereby Moshe Rabbeinu is our teacher not only in terms of the lessons he imparts, but also in terms of the way he imparts them.

This week’s Divrei Torah are dedicated le’ilui nishmas

Scott Leavitt

חיים יצחק בן יוטה לאה

and

Elise Savage

אסתר מרים בת ראובן אהרן

.ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

5 See Bereishis Rabbah 21:6.