



The Gift of Our Story: Moses' Legacy to the Jewish People Torah Reflection on *Parashat Devarim*

Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22
6 Av, 5774 August 2, 2014

With this week's Torah portion, we begin Deuteronomy, the last of the five books that comprise the Torah. The Israelites are now all assembled on the banks of the Jordan River, readying to step across into the Promised Land. It is here that Moses must say good-bye to the Israelites who have journeyed throughout the wilderness for forty years under his leadership. This, like most partings of significance, is not a simple farewell. Moses knows that he will no longer be the leader of this people, that he will never see the Promised Land from the other side of the river, and he knows that his life is close to its end.

How does one begin to say such good-byes? Moses appears to begin this process of saying good-bye through the telling of his story. Deuteronomy 1:1 reads, "These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel, on the banks of the Jordan." The rest of the book of Deuteronomy is Moses' voice, addressing the Israelites, preparing them for their future without him on the other side of the river. Moses then begins to recount the years in the wilderness, the battles fought against enemies, the challenges of setting up social structures within their wandering community, the complaints and betrayals that arose amongst them during those years.

The book of Deuteronomy is a re-telling of the Israelite experience. The first four books of the Torah are written in the voice of an unnamed narrator that chronicles the experiences and laws of our people. In the last Book of Deuteronomy, Moses retells the story himself. Moses devotes his final days with the Israelites to reviewing and telling the story of their journey together, at the same time imparting God's blessings and vision for their future. This is his final gift to us as a Jewish people: teaching us the importance of telling stories.

Stories are an integral part of the human experience. They serve many functions, such as helping to evoke memories and re-visit one's past. When visit residents of nursing homes, I find that asking someone to share with me a memory of their past often relaxes the individual, and brings a smile to his or her face. He or she may share with me stories about their parents and siblings, or tell me about the first time meeting his or her spouse. I believe that these stories are sacred. They weave a beautiful fabric that has the ability to comfort and reassure. Just as they are able to tell me about the lives of their loved ones, so too will they be remembered when they are no longer living.

Telling stories is therapeutic, as doing so helps us work through difficult situations and arrive at new ways of understanding our past. Individuals who have experienced trauma may have the need to repeat over and over again the story of what had happened. The more one gains the ability to express one's experience through words, the more one is able to gain control over a situation and to understand how to move

forward into life with new perspective. Many times, it is in the telling of stories that we find healing.

Stories are also a way of building community. When a group of people have a common experience, this is often solidified through the re-telling of the experience. Rachel Naomi Remen in her book Kitchen Table Wisdom writes, “Most parents know the importance of telling children their own story over and over again, so that they come to know in the tellings who they are and to whom they belong.” As the Israelites are gathered to hear Moses’ words, we gain greater insight as to who we are as a people. This common story binds us together.

Stories help us find closure in that they may impart our desires and hopes for the future. By telling our stories to others, others will be able to move forward with our blessings, advice, and wisdom. Stories help us create a vision for the future, as we understand the past. This is what Moses achieves as he addresses the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan River.

Through this example, may we all be able to find the stories that rest deep within our souls and find the words to share with others the gifts of our own experiences. May we have the ability to listen clearly to the stories of others with open hearts. And may we be able to hear God’s presence reflected in the stories we all have to tell.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Sara O’Donnell Adler, who is a Chaplain at University of Michigan Health System. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

