

Devarim: Words; from Britain's Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

- Chief Rabbi Dr. Sir Jonathan Sacks.

Analysis of the name of DEVARIM. He who said, 'I am not a man of words' becomes, at the end of his life the most eloquent spokesman of G-d in all of history. If conquest represents the politics of power, and organic development the politics of the elite, covenant is the politics of the word. Israel's existence as a nation is not based on power or a land, but on words - the words of God to Israel and the acceptance of those words by Israel.

DEVARIM: WORDS

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(You can subscribe to receive the Chief Rabbi's weekly thoughts by searching for the Chief Rabbi's web site or "Covenant and Conversation".)

I HAVE ARGUED BEFORE, in the case of Vayikra and Bamidbar, that the Hebrew names of the Mosaic books, even though they seem uninformative, in fact convey important insights into the nature of the book. The same is true about the book of Devarim.

The book of Devarim is known in English as Deuteronomy from the Greek deuterios nomos, or "second law" -- itself a translation of the early rabbinic name for the book, namely Mishneh Torah (a title later adopted by Maimonides for his great law code). The reason is obvious: the book represents the speeches of Moses in the last month of his life. He addresses the next generation, those who will -- as he will not -- be destined to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. He reviews the history of Israel after leaving Egypt and recapitulates the main contents of the Law. Early on (in next week's sedra) he repeats the Ten Commandments. Towards the end, he renews the covenant between the people and G-d. The book is a "repetition of the Law" -- hence Mishneh Torah in Hebrew, deuterios nomos in Greek.

By contrast, Devarim ["words"] seems to lack any specific connection with the book. It comes, like the traditional Jewish names for the other four books, from the first significant word in the book, in this case in the opening verse: "These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert, east of the Jordan . . ." The name "Words" seems bland and unspecific. Is not the whole of Torah "words"? Why this book in particular? What is the connection between the title and the contents? What insight does the name yield into the nature of this, the last of the five Mosaic books? I believe the insight is profound, and it points to three dimensions of this magnificent and world-changing work.

THE FIRST IS EVOCATIVE. The rabbis -- in interpretive principles such as of hekesh (analogy) and gezerah shaveh (verbal association) -- were the first to understand the phenomenon known today as intertextuality, the idea that texts are linked as commentaries on one another. A word or

phrase in one context evokes, reminds us of, a similar expression in another context, and this is not accidental. It is part of the richness of texts that they resonate in this way. Of this, the Torah is the supreme example. Indeed, to quote Maurice Blanchot in *The Gaze of Orpheus*:

The book begins with the Bible, in which the logos is inscribed as law. Here the book achieves its unsurpassable meaning, including what extends beyond it everywhere and cannot be surpassed. The Bible takes language back to its origin . . .

In the case of Devarim the intertextuality is stunning. The phrase “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel. . .” at the end of his career as leader of the Jewish people take us back to another instance of devarim at the very beginning:

Moses said to the LORD , "O Lord, I have never been a man of words [ish devarim], neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." (Shemot 4:10)

He who said “I am not a man of words” becomes, at the end of his life, the most eloquent spokesman of G-d in all of history. The speeches of Devarim are the most visionary ever delivered. They reach to the furthest horizons of the prophetic imagination. And they are Moses’ words. That is the point. In the other four books of the Pentateuch the narrative voice is anonymous -- “And it came to pass” – while the commanding voice is the voice of G-d – “And G-d spoke these words, saying . . .” What is unique about Devarim is that it is the reported speech of a human speaker. But how can the words of a human being be Divine?

Each time we pray the supreme prayer, the Amidah, we begin by saying silently a verse from the book of Psalms:

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise. (Tehilim 51:17)

At the highest point of the encounter with G-d, we do not speak: we are spoken. We open our mouths but the words we utter do not come from us, though they come through us. Prayer, like prophecy, is an extinction of the self (known in Jewish mysticism as *bittul ha-yesh*) in the presence of the One-who-is-All. For everyone else except Moses this is partial, never complete. Even the greatest of the other prophets retained something of themselves, which coloured and gave distinctive character to their prophecies. Of Moses alone – “more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” – could it be said that his words, devarim, were the words of G-d. It was precisely because he said “I am not a man of words” that he became the man of Devarim, the one whose words were not his own but those of the Divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, speaking through his lips (see the commentary of R. Yaakov Emden to Sanhedrin 99a).

THE SECOND SIGNIFICANCE OF DEVARIM is political. The last book of the Pentateuch is the supreme covenantal document in history. It is the foundational text of covenantal politics.

The late Daniel Elazar, the political scientist who more than any other pioneered the academic study of covenantal politics, explains that there are three fundamental types of political structure, differentiated from one another by the way they come into existence. The first is by conquest,

external or internal (such as by coup d'état). In his words: "Conquest tends to produce hierarchically organized regimes ruled in an authoritarian manner; power pyramids with the conqueror on top, his agents in the middle, and the people underneath the entire structure."

The second is by organic development. "Organic evolution involves the development of political life from families, tribes and villages into large polities in such a way that institutions, constitutional relationships, and power alignments emerge in response to the interaction between past precedent and changing circumstances with the minimum of deliberate constitutional choice." In such polities, "in the course of time elites emerge from among the population and political power gravitates into their hands." Such was the case, for example, in ancient Greece. The organic model, he writes, "is closely related to the concept of natural law in the political order" and "seems to reflect true aristocracy of the best and the brightest as the natural order of things."

The third, born in ancient Israel, is covenant. "Covenantal foundings emphasise the deliberate coming together of humans as equals to establish bodies politic in such a way that all reaffirm their fundamental equality and retain their basic rights." The great age of covenantal politics was the seventeenth century, during which the Swiss, the Dutch, the Scots, the English Puritans and the American Founding Fathers "not only conceived of civil society in covenantal terms, but actually wrote national covenants to which loyal members of the body politic subscribed." Covenant is central to the emergence of free societies in the West. It is no accident that it emerged in the 17th century, for it was then, under the twin influence of the Reformation and the spread of printing, that Europeans for the first time read the Hebrew Bible for themselves, in their homes and in their own language. Western freedom is biblical freedom.

If conquest represents the politics of power, and organic development the politics of the elite, covenant is the politics of the word. It involves a document, such as the American Declaration of Independence, to which all sides agree to be bound. In covenantal polities, writes Elazar, "the constitution comes first and foremost because it delineates the basis upon which institutions are organized and authority and power are shared and divided. Without the constitution there cannot legitimately be politics or administration."

The very existence of nations defined by covenant depends on *devarim*, words. Indeed it involves a highly specialized use of language to which the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin gave the name performative utterance. Normally, language is used to communicate, describe or express. Occasionally, however, it is used to create – and what it creates are moral relationships, obligations. When I say "I promise to . . ." I do not merely describe a promise, I make one. A covenant is a mutually binding promise.

The primary meaning of *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, "Torah from heaven," is political. It defines Israel as a nation uniquely brought into being by a mutually binding pledge between a people and G-d in which G-d adopts the people as His own, and the people in turn agree to be bound to His authority and word. This happened at Mount Sinai in the wilderness. But at the culmination of *Devarim* in chapters 29 and 30 Moses renews the covenant with the next generation so that they give their consent to the fact that it is on these terms that they are about to enter the land, gain possession of it, and construct their life as a nation:

“All of you are standing today in the presence of the LORD your G-d-your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, together with your children and your wives, and the aliens living in your camps who chop your wood and carry your water. You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your G-d, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your G-d as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our G-d but also with those who are not here today . . .” (Devarim 29:10-14)

The second significance of Devarim, “words,” is that it represents the supreme expression of the politics of the word – politics predicated on “the deliberate coming together of humans as equals to establish bodies politic in such a way that all reaffirm their fundamental equality and retain their basic rights.” Covenant is supremely a politics of equality, in which every citizen is accorded equal dignity as a partner to the constitution, and undertakes personal responsibility for its fulfillment.

THE THIRD IS IN SOME WAYS THE MOST MOVING. The history of Israel is unique. Other civilizations have come and gone. The people Israel has survived – under circumstances that rendered its survival improbable, seemingly impossible. No other nation has preserved its identity under conditions of exile and dispersion as a minority without power and often without rights. None has so consistently refused assimilation to the dominant culture or conversion to the dominant faith. How did it happen? That it happened because of Divine providence, I believe with perfect faith. But in Judaism, though we will never fully understand the ways of providence, we must none the less engage in the full exercise of understanding.

The answer lies in another instance of intertextuality, one of the key texts of Judaism, from the prophet Hosea:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your G-d.
Your sins have been your downfall!
Take words [devarim] with you
and return to the LORD . (Hosea 14:2)

The standard interpretation of these verses is that Hosea is speaking about repentance (confession, apology, resolution) as opposed to sacrifices. “Offer words, not animals.” That is, indeed, their primary meaning.

Beneath the surface, however, Hosea is saying something more fundamental. Your relationship with G-d is based on words – the Torah that constitutes the covenant, the marriage contract, between Israel and its sovereign Lord. A politics based on power comes to an end when a nation is defeated and loses power. A politics based on organic development, on the long experience of a people living together in the same land, is destroyed when the people are uprooted from the land and scattered over the face of the earth. Neither of these two forms of national existence can survive defeat and dispersion. Once lost, they are gone, never to return.

Israel's existence as a nation, however, is not based on power or a land (though it longs for and is promised both) but on words – the words of G-d to Israel and the acceptance of those words by Israel. So long as the word exists, Israel exists; and because G-d is eternal and never revokes His word, Israel will always exist. Because Israel's very being as a nation is constituted by devarim, the “words” of G-d, there is always the possibility and promise of return. Israel, alone among the nations of the world, survives defeat and dispersion – the loss of power and land – because there is something it will never lose: G-d's word given and received in love. “Take words—the words of the covenant – with you and return to the Lord.”

In the mouth of Hosea, the word devarim harks back to the great vision of Moses (in chapter 30) of exile and return:

When all these words [devarim, often – wrongly – translated as “things”], the blessings and curses I have set before you, come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your G-d disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your G-d and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your G-d will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your G-d will gather you and bring you back . . . For this command that I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Devarim 30:1-4,11-14)

Israel survived because it never lost devarim, “the words” which bound it to G-d and G-d to it. That was the basis of its survival in exile. Those “words” were never rescinded. Hence Israel never lost the promise of return.

THE DECISION TO CALL THE FIFTH AND FINAL BOOK of the Pentateuch Devarim was thus neither random nor insignificant. It brought together in a single word the three main themes of the book: the uniqueness of Moses as a prophet, the uniqueness of Israel as a nation, and the uniqueness of Jewish history as a narrative of exile and return. The book of Devarim, “Words,” is the supreme expression of the power of the word to link heaven and earth, G-d and a people, in an unbreakable bond of mutual loyalty. Today, more than three thousand years later, we are in a position to understand more deeply than any previous generation (not that we are greater, but that our time perspective is larger) that Words proved more powerful than power, more lasting than land. The Word lives and gives life to the people who dedicated their life to the word.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)