

This week, we begin *parshat Devarim*, the first *parsha* in the last of the five books of the Torah, *sefer Devarim* (Deuteronomy). *Sefer Devarim* is also known as “*Mishneh Torah*,” a repetition (or review) of the Torah. According to tradition, the entire *sefer Devarim* represents the charge that *Moshe Rabbenu* gave to *Bnai Yisrael* during his last seven days on this earth.

I have to admit that *sefer Devarim* is my favorite of all the five books of the Torah. Imagine yourself at *Arvot Moav*, anticipating what *Moshe*, knowing that he is about die and not achieve his life aspiration to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, is about to say. Most people, presented with a similar last opportunity to speak, might complain, be bitter, or be upset, thereby wasting a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Not *Moshe*. *Moshe* decided what was important to him, chose his words carefully, and charged full speed ahead. In a tremendous act of *Kiddush Hashem*, *Moshe* engaged in some of the most eloquent oratory I have ever read and gave an awe-inspiring last charge to *Bnai Yisrael*.

Every time I re-read *sefer Devarim*, I can imagine myself sitting in the audience and listening to *Moshe Rabbenu*. The pathos inherent in the entire *sefer* gives me goosebumps and brings tears to my eyes, and enables me to relate to *sefer Devarim* in a way that I cannot yet relate to the other four *sefarim*.

This week, I used a lesson from *sefer Devarim* to help me understand an experience I have had lately. One of my few vices is that I like to surf the web. As of late, I have discovered a whole genre of Jewish blogs. I have spent many happy hours immersed in one of my favorite activities – watching (mostly) and participating in (sometimes) arguments about the true meaning of life from a Jewish perspective. I very much enjoy the multitude of voices and the numerous unique perspectives that people have to offer on any one of a number of issues. Truly, this is an example of *shivim panim laTorah* – that there are (at least) 70 facets to Torah.

One thing that I have a vague sense of unease about is the prevalence of anonymous blogging. Although I can't point to anything specific or put a finger on it, it seems to me that there are a number of people out there who need a cloak of anonymity in order to be able to openly discuss issues that otherwise might be too controversial and get them into “hot water.” I did not really analyze what the cause of my unease was until I was able to connect it to *Moshe's* final summation.

I strongly believe that one of the fundamental goals of Judaism is to help build relationships – interpersonal relationships, and relationships between ourselves and God. When we conduct our interpersonal relationships in a halachic manner, it informs our approach to building a relationship with God. The converse is also true. The way that we relate to God through the observance of ritual profoundly affects how we are able to relate to other human beings. Jewish

philosophy asserts that there is an inseparable bond between the interpersonal and the ritual, which lead us to creating a sense of community by closer relationships with those around us and with God.

One key element that is necessary in building good interpersonal relationships is being able to develop a good sense of what the other individual is really like. We get a sense of what the other individual is like by our direct observations about them, unfiltered through their pretensions. We learn about the good, bad, and ugly, and we accept that other individual for what they are. There is ample precedent for this approach throughout the Torah. Certainly, our models, the *Imahot* and *Avot*, *Moshe Rabbenu*, *Miriam*, *Aharon*, and others, are depicted as fully-developed individuals, warts and all. Unless we can see these models as multi-dimensional people, we will be unable to relate to them.

So too, *Hashem* is depicted in considerable more detail than is really necessary to fulfill the commandment “*anochi Hashem elokecha* – I am the Lord, your God.” These additional details, for example, “I am a jealous God,” etc., are found throughout the Torah in descriptions of *Hashem*’s thought processes and conversations with various personalities. These details help to “flesh out” *Hashem*, so to speak, and show *Hashem* to be a complex, multi-faceted entity, and make it easier for us to be able to relate to *Hashem*.

To sum up this point, in order to build strong relationships, people need to be approachable without any pretense. This is pithily summed up in the idea of “*tocho k’varo* – inner essence is the same as outside appearance” that the *Talmud* (*Yoma 72b*) suggests as a necessary attribute for one to be considered a *talmid chacham*.

To me, anonymous blogging allows people to put up a one-dimensional view of themselves. Reading an anonymous bloggers comments, how do I truly know that “*tocho k’varo*,” how do I know with whom I am truly conversing? I don’t. The lack of a multi-dimensional view of a blogger makes it very hard for me to build a relationship with them and to take what they have to say as seriously as I might.

(For those interested in further discussion, please comment on how the incident of *Tanur Achnai*, *Bava Metzia 59*, is related to this idea, at my “blog,” www.geretz.org/divrei_torah.htm.)

Back to *Moshe Rabbenu* and his summation. *Moshe* had a tremendous gift from *Hashem* in that he knew exactly when he was going to die. Knowing this, *Moshe* was able to drop any remaining pretense and focus in on what was most important to him. He was able to take a stand for something important in a truly breathtaking and incisive way, and in a way that he was able to “connect” with future generations. So much so, that it still brings tears to my eyes and matters to me today as much as it mattered to *Moshe* some 3300 years ago.

All of us are like *Moshe Rabbenu*. Each and every one of us has a unique contribution to make to *klal Yisrael*. *Hashem* has given all of us a gift in that we all know that we are mortal. We may approach it with a sense of disbelief, but we know that it will happen soon or later. This knowledge is a gift in the sense that it allows us to drop all pretense, and to stand up for what we truly believe in, and to do so in a way where we can have the maximum impact – by building strong relationships with others. Since we are unlike *Moshe* in that we don't know when we will die, we owe it to ourselves and to all of *klal Yisrael* to stand up – today – as who we truly are, and to make our voices heard.

Shabbat Shalom,

Danny Geretz

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| <i>Arvot Moav</i> | The Plains of Moab |
| <i>Bnai Yisrael</i> | The Children of Israel |
| <i>Eretz Yisrael</i> | The Land of Israel |
| <i>Imahot and Avot</i> | Matriarchs and Patriarchs |
| <i>Kiddush Hashem</i> | Sanctification of God's name |
| <i>klal Yisrael</i> | the community of Israel |
| <i>Moshe Rabbenu</i> | Moses our teacher |
| <i>parsha(t)</i> | Weekly Torah portion |
| <i>sefer(seforim)</i> | Book(s) (here, book(s) of the Torah) |
| <i>talmid chacham</i> | Literally, a wise student, commonly, an outstanding Torah scholar |