

D'varim 5778

This past week, I visited the Beth Israel kids at Camps Ramah and Interlaken. In a *d'var Torah* I gave to the oldest group of female campers at Ramah, I asked the teens which is easier, speaking up or listening. Most said it is easier for them to listen than to summon the courage to speak up, for any number of reasons. But one of them said, "actually, it's not that hard to say things. We say things all the time without really thinking about them. But it can be really hard to hear things that I don't want to hear but I know I should." How true that is for so many of us.

Over ice cream sundaes, the Beth Israel kids shared some of their hopes with me. Their words were earnest and sweet and they had a lot to do with the kind of discourse we're going to have. A few said that they hoped I will treat them as the intelligent people they are and that I will be fun and not boring. As a show of faith, I invited them into my thinking on this week's *parashah* and posed the question: how do we decide when to speak up and when to remain silent? They responded with an audible "sigh," "oh, yeah, mmmm." It seemed to me that the question is alive for our kids, and I later found out that it is a major theme in some of the age groups. Eliza Mednick shared that when writing a *d'var Torah* on Parashat Vayera for her bat mitzvah, her father encouraged her to draw a personal connection to Avraham's verbal bargaining with God, when Avraham pleads save the people of S'dom and 'Amorah for the sake of the righteous people among them. Eliza thought about how she might advocate for a friend at camp who wanted to sleep in the cabin with her peers but had to sleep in the infirmary due to health needs that might have been managed in a more inclusive way. Eliza began to draft a letter to the camp director on behalf of her friend. I asked Eliza what made that issue something about which she felt she should speak out, and she said she thought that when a wrongful policy hurts people, others should speak out on their behalf. I was impressed by the fact that she had drafted a letter to the camp director so that this summer would be different.

The Book of *D'varim*, which we began reading this week, spans Moshe's final 36 days on earth and becomes his last will and testament and final charge to the nation he has tended for 40 years. He is acutely aware of his need to prepare the nation to live a life of *Torah* without constant reminders of God's care for them. The Israelites will need to create holiness in the real

lives they will build in the Land of Israel. For his part, Moshe seems determined not to “slip into the night.” He takes it upon himself to make his final words count.

Moshe will have some rules to deliver, but that is not what he does in today’s *parashah*. Instead, he begins to recount the wilderness experience, from a distinctly personal perspective. In contrast to most of his utterances up to now, his choice to speak in this way is not commanded by God, but freely made. I find myself wondering what motivates Moshe and why the Israelites choose to listen and not reject his words. And more broadly, how do we choose to speak, and how do we determine how and when to listen? Are speaking and listening practices we can hone?

Recall what Moshe says when God first commissions him at the Burning Bush. He tells God, “I am not a man of words!” But alas, at the end of his life, Moshe holds forth with discourses of his own design, that pour out of him largely uncommanded and unrestrained. Some are majestic, poetic words of encouragement, but in today’s *parashah* his words are harsh, and our sages see them largely as a rebuke to the people before whom he stands.

In recounting the ill-fated Incident of the Spies, Moshe tells the nation that they, not God, were the source of the request to scout out the land. Rashi comments that their request to send spies reveals its foregone conclusion—no matter what the spies would have reported, the nation would have rejected its mission. Assenting to their request puts the onus on them, essentially giving them a rope with which to hang themselves. In today’s telling, Moshe adds: “You refused to go up, you sulked in your tents, you accused God of hating you, and on your account the Lord was angry at me as well.” Moshe then goes on to a new topic, as if expecting his critique to be absorbed without protest.
And that is exactly what happens.

Consider his boldness. Remember, none of those people to whom Moshe speaks took part in the rebellion for which he excoriates them. Yet they do not speak back. One is struck by the contrast between this generation of listeners and the last generation. The former generation, despite having witnessed God’s signs and wonders in Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds, having stood at Sinai and received Torah, having been fed Man that fell

from the skies, nonetheless voices its faithlessness and discontent throughout the Book of B'midbar. When they should be silent, they wail. By contrast, when Moshe rebukes the new generation for the sins of their parents, making It sound as if they, themselves, are guilty, they hold their peace.

In *Midrash Rabbah* (1:8), the author imagines Moshe as unwilling to rebuke the nation for their parents' failures, yet feeling that the new generation needs to hear it. Moshe says to God, "the last time I rebuked them, when I called them "rebels" as I struck the rock to give them water at *Mei-Merivah*, You punished me severely. I don't want to go down that road again. And God says to Moshe, "Don't be uneasy. Go for it." Apparently, the Israelites need this rebuke. Why might that be?

In his book *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew suggests that the new generation of Israelites needs to hear the rebuke so that they can check themselves and make sure they are not making the same mistakes that their parents did. In fact, he argues, they are already falling into the same patterns. Owning their history makes them aware of how easy it is to succumb to fear and lose faith in one's mission. Moreover, when they experience trials in the future, they need to understand that it will not help to turn their fears and failures on others. They must be accountable for their own state of mind and their own courage. Perhaps they grasp that Moshe's message about their need for spiritual fortitude and accountability is even more relevant for them than it was for their parents. It is a good message for us as well on the *Shabbat* preceding Tisha B'av, especially with the news of Israel's new "nation-state" law and the detaining of a Conservative rabbi there for the crime of performing a Jewish wedding.

Moshe's rebuke of the nation and the midrashic response raises our awareness of the importance of mindful communication. Moshe says what needs to be said, and the nation hears what they need to hear-- at least in our sages' imagination. On the surface, it is hard to tell.

The older I get, the more I am struck by the nuances of human communication. We make so many choices when we produce words and when we encounter words. This past week, an article about private ordination was published in which I was a focus of attention. The author's

tactics and the various choices individuals and organizations made to speak or not to speak all gave me pause. Reading about myself in the role of a listener, I attempted to learn from what others were saying about the issue and, by implication, about me. Fortunately there were no surprises and the article does not disparage me, my ordination, or us, regardless of the author's dubious intentions.

In today's *haftarah*, the prophet Yeshayahu cries out, "Learn to do good, devote yourselves to justice, aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow. Note that he exhorts us not to DO good, but to LEARN to do good. I understand him to mean that doing good is a practice, not a random act. Applied to speaking and listening, the prophet would have us orient our practice toward the ultimate goals of creating a just society in which the disenfranchised are brought into the fold and protected. When we make speaking and listening a practice, and not just a series of random acts, we can be intentional in how we choose our words and intentional about how we attend to what we hear, and we can then reflect on the new reality created by what was uttered and what was heard. When dialogue becomes a practice, we can work at it and get better at it. I like to think of speaking and listening as practices, because each day offers numerous opportunities to speak or to listen and with those opportunities, the chance to connect with people, ideas, and I daresay even with God. Speaking and listening can be key practices that help us grow and thrive if we use them that way.

Most of the Book of *D'varim* underscores the importance of making life holy by the way in which we live, in contrast to the earlier narrative of the Israelite nation, filled with holinesses "comin right atcha" and leaving little room for the Israelites to do anything at all without God's clear instruction. We live in a world of *D'varim*, a world in which we must search hard for what can elevate humanity and dig deep to find holiness. I can't help but add that we also live in a world of "*D'varim*" in the plain sense of the word, which means "words." We live in a world exploding with words. Today's *parashah* leaves clues about how we can live in a world like that by through the example of Moshe rebuking the nation for the sins of their parents, and through the nation's ability to hear his rebuke for their own good.

We must be alert for the moments when our voice is needed and we must be equally attuned to hear voices that irk us. But our ordinary

communication is also tremendously important because it offers constant opportunities to practice the arts of speaking and listening. On this *Shabbat Chazon*, I pray that we renew our attention to the words we use and the words we hear. Only through real dialogue can we hope to move beyond the brokenness that abounds in our world. Let us each resolve to take the small steps **that are ours to take** toward the goodness our way of life demands of us. so that every act of communication becomes an opportunity for us to learn, again and again, to do good.