

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Devarim 20 “In His Own Words”

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. This week’s sermon podcast, and 2 virtual ice cream cakes, are sponsored by Ellen Geller, in celebration of her birthday and mine (thank you!). Happy Birthday to both of us!

I appreciate Ellen sponsoring kiddush every year in honor of our birthdays, and this year it’s kind of sad that we can’t share the traditional ice cream cakes in person. But since this week is Shabbat Chazon, which is a more subdued Shabbat, I suppose it makes sense that we aren’t celebrating with real ice cream cake this year, particularly in light of the current circumstances.

Perhaps it's surprising, then, that even though Parshat Devarim always coincides with Shabbat Chazon, the tone of Devarim at the outset is not at all negative. In fact, it avoids negativity. Devarim begins with a list of different places where the Jewish people traveled in their desert sojourns, but alludes to those locations only indirectly, with names unfamiliar to us. Rashi says Moshe disguised the actual name of each location so as not to evoke the dismal memories associated with those names.

For example, he lists a place called Di Zahav, which is not the actual name, but since part of the name means *gold*, we can take it as an allusion to the sin of the golden calf.

Many commentators ask, why does the Torah do this? After all, the Torah is typically not hesitant to mention negative events. In fact, my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yaakov Weinberg Zt"l, used to observe that the Torah rarely says anything good about the Jewish people. He brought this as evidence that the Torah was sourced directly from God, because the only other explanation is that it was written by an anti-Semite, which would strain credulity.

So why **does** the Torah express things euphemistically in these instances? My other Rosh Yeshiva, *Yibadel L'Chayim*, Rav Betzalel Rudinsky shlit"a, asked a similar question about the first words of Mesechet Pesachim, which famously begins with the words *Or l'arbaah asar, the light of the 14th*, referring to the evening of the 14th when we check for chametz. The Gemara there explains that the Mishna avoided the word *Leilei, evening* even though that would be more apt, because the word *ohr, light*, has a more positive connotation. Why then, does the Talmud plainly refer to the evening or the night just about everywhere else?

A similar question is asked about the story of Noah, where nonkosher animals are characterized as *behaima asher lo tehora, animals which are not pure*, instead of calling them *impure*. The Torah uses the word *impure* all the time, so why is this instance handled differently? Based on the Chidushei Haran, the common denominator of all these passages, Devarim, Pesachim and Noach, is that they are at or near the **beginning** of a book, when it's most important to present a more positive stance, so that we start off on the right foot.

However, that explanation raises another question. Why don't we see this approach in opening lines of the other 3 books of the Torah? What makes Beresheet and Devarim distinctive? Beresheet obviously occupies a distinctive position because it begins the entire Torah. But the truth is that Devarim is perhaps equally significant, because it marks the beginning of a book which is unique in the Torah. In the other 4 books of the Chumash, Moshe is a **mouthpiece** for God's words, so through Moshe, God is communicating directly with the Jewish people. But in the book of Devarim, as the gemarah teaches us in Mesechet Megilla 31b, Moshe speaks **his own** words. Accordingly, the opening line of Devarim tells us, *Eleh Hadevarim asher diber Moshe, these are the words that Moshe spoke*.

Sefer Devarim therefore illuminates a fundamental transition. The Jewish people move from the first 4 books of the chumash, which were communicated directly from God, to Sefer Devarim, which is a new phase, in which they connect with God through *Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher*. This is a momentous change, and that's why Sefer Devarim is so special. It reveals, as the Sifri elucidates, that Torah must be transmitted to us through life itself, and particularly, through relationships with human beings, through our teachers.

Some may find this troubling, because God is perfect, and Rabbis and teachers are fallible. (Believe me, I would know!) Indeed, while we should treat them with respect, we must never be hesitant to engage in challenging dialogue with them either. But that is the whole point: God demands that we acquire Torah within a human interaction, with all the imperfection that will entail. This is because the most important element of our learning is the *sincerity of the transmission of Torah in the context of a relationship*.

I think this is a fitting message as we approach Tisha B'av. There are many righteous Jews who have a strong desire to improve our national situation, especially during these trying times. Understandably, they want *geula v'yishua*, *salvation and redemption*, as soon as possible. As a result, some seek out a specific mechanism to bring Mashiach, using invented buzzwords like *ahavat chinam* and *lashon hatov*, as though our exile were an engineering problem.

I think that approach is unfortunate. Sefer Devarim, the book we must begin before Tisha B'av, teaches us that there is no such mechanism. This Shabbat, we must remember that God has never sought perfection from us. All He wants is **sincerity** within our relationships with Him, with our teachers, and with each other, and that is the recipe for ending our hardships and this difficult exile, once and for all. Shabbat shalom.