

The Tragedy and Triumph of Moses

Parashat Devarim, Deuteronomy, Chapters 1-3 | August 4, 2022

Empire of Dreams is the title of a biography of Cecil B. DeMille, the director and creator of the epic film, *The Ten Commandments*. The book describes a meeting after the movie was released between DeMille and the greatest statesman of the twentieth century:

In October 1957, Cecil left for Europe and some final openings for *The Ten Commandments*. On October 31, he met with Winston Churchill at his London residence, 28 Hyde Park Gate. Churchill was receiving guests in bed that day, with his pet parrot in attendance. DeMille related some anecdotes about the location shooting in Egypt, and then told Churchill that he thought there were similarities between him and Moses.

The book tells us that DeMille said:

“I mean historically. No people could have been in a worse plight than when Moses stepped up and led them from Egypt—and the same with England when Sir Winston led them to victory.”

At this, Churchill’s eyes got shiny. When they shook hands to say goodbye, DeMille said he’d rather shake Churchill’s hand than any man in the twentieth century or before.

“Oh, well, then let’s shake hands again,” exclaimed Churchill.

It is a lovely tale. And yet, while it is true that Moses did lead Israel from a sorry plight in Egypt into freedom, it is not, first and foremost, for this achievement that Jews remember Moses. It is a reading of Deuteronomy, with a little help from Winston Churchill, that

can allow us to understand why this is so.

The fifth book of the Bible, which we begin reading this week, is known in English as “Deuteronomy,” but in Hebrew, it is referred to as “*Devarim*,” a seemingly prosaic word, which actually means “words.” The appellation is derived from the opening verse of the book: “*These are the words [devarim] which Moses spoke unto all Israel on the other side of the Jordan...*”

In the month before his death, Moses stands and orates before Israel for several weeks. He is not speaking to the Israelites whom he took out of Egypt as adults—they have already died in the desert. Rather, Moses addresses their children, who after 40 years of wandering have now taken their parents’ place and are about to enter the Land of Israel.

For much of the book, Moses will review and expand upon the laws that he has already taught Israel, and he will then conclude with a stirring song and blessing to his people. All of these are part of the words, the *devarim*, that he uttered, and as the *Midrash* notes, the fact that so many words are said by Moses seems to contradict his original protestation so many years before at the burning bush:

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since thou has spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.
(Exodus 4:10)

Moses originally says that he is not a man of words, of “*devarim*,” but, as the rabbis point out, he concludes his life by giving us the longest speech in the Bible. What has happened to this man? Why is he suddenly engaged in extraordinary oratory?

There are a number of ways of reconciling this, and they hinge on what precisely Moses meant when

he first said about himself that he was not a man of words. Some assume that Moses had an actual speech impediment, and yet, following Sinai, he was miraculously able to elocute. This may be so, but drawing on other commentators, there is an entirely different way to understand this: that when Moses said originally that he was not a man of words, what he meant was that he was not gifted at *political* engagement, or *political* speech.

Here we can suggest a contrast in leaders. Churchill's success was, in large part, due to his ability to speak to the political moment. But political eloquence, perhaps, was not Moses' gift.

In the movie *The Ten Commandments*, Charlton Heston has the best lines. Moses says the most memorable words. But in the Book of Exodus, almost all the best lines were rhetorically announced by Aaron, Moses' brother, who was made Moses' spokesman.

Strikingly, Winston Churchill, in an essay about Moses, understands Moses' self-described lack of eloquence in this way. Churchill writes how Moses, standing before God at the burning bush,

stipulated that he must have a spokesman. He was not himself eloquent; he could give the driving force, but he must have a competent orator, some man used to putting cases and dealing in high affairs, as his assistant. Otherwise how could he hold parlay with Pharaoh and all the Ministers of the only known civilization his world could show? God met all these requests. A competent politician and trained speaker in the shape of one Aaron would be provided.

So Churchill writes, and if this is the case, it means that Moses was chosen by God not because of his political gifts. He was chosen by God because of his love for his people, a love highlighted when an Egyptian taskmaster was brutally beating an Israelite, and Moses gave everything up to stand up for his brothers and sisters.

But if Moses' greatness is first made manifest in his love for his people, the sad fact is that the people of

Israel did not always return the love that he bestowed upon them. We can see this in several striking words at the end of Moses' summation of the past 38 years, which comes at the beginning of Deuteronomy. Moses describes what occurred following the conquest of the Eastern side of the Jordan:

And I pleaded with the Lord at that time...

Let me go over, I pray thee, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country, and Lebanon.

But the Lord refused me because of you, and would not hear me: and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter. (Deuteronomy 3:23-26)

Moses tells Israel that he pleaded with God to be allowed to enter the land, and God refused "because of you," in Hebrew, "lema'anchem." These verses were interpreted in a brilliant but heartbreaking way by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. The critical word here, Rabbi Soloveitchik reflected, is, "va'etchanan," "I pleaded," meaning Moses pleaded for himself, but Israel did not plead for him.

When he was told that he would not enter *Eretz Yisrael*, Moses pleaded for forgiveness. Had the people joined him in prayer, the Holy One would have been forced to respond. But they did not join. Thus, we read that with tears in his eyes Moses tells them, "Va'eschanan," I prayed alone. It was not *vanischanan*, we prayed.

It is a powerful point. After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses beseeched God on Israel's behalf. He was only one man, and he saved, through his own prayers, an entire nation. What might have happened had an entire nation beseeched God for one man? Moses' self-sacrificing love for his people was not fully returned by them, but Moses' concern for Israel remained, and his desire to prepare Israel for what lies ahead pours out in Deuteronomy in another sort of eloquence. Here, Moses is not slow of speech and not of few words:

Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses began to explain the Torah... (Deuteronomy 1:5)

The word “*Torah*” is often translated as “law.” While law is certainly central, the word “*Torah*” really means “teaching” and includes all that Moses says. Rules, narrative, song, all of this is teaching, and all of this is *Torah*. In Deuteronomy, Moses is fully revealed as he is remembered first and foremost by traditional Jews today: as the greatest teacher of *Torah* in our history.

In contrast to Cecil B. DeMille, who focused on Moses as a redeemer, we focus first on Moses as a teacher. Indeed, in the Haggadah, the liturgy of the Passover Seder, all credit for the Exodus is given to God. Rabbi Soloveitchik recounted that as a child, it bothered him that Moses is not really mentioned in the text. And indeed, as a young boy, he wept at how unfair it seemed to Moses—so much so that his father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik found an oblique reference to Moses in the Haggadah, and this:

calmed my mind somewhat, but I still felt that we were committing an injustice against Moses.

The truth, however, is that when we read Deuteronomy, we see that Moses himself does not really describe anything that he did in Egypt. He will review the Sinai revelation and recount the role that he played in the communication of the 10 Commandments; he will exhort Israel to forever remember that moment; he will expand and expound upon God’s many laws; he will describe the challenges that he, as a leader, faced after Sinai, and the failures of Israel that doomed them to desert wanderings. But Moses does not really speak about his own role in the redemption from slavery. As in the Haggadah, all of the events of the Exodus are entirely ascribed to God. Moses in Deuteronomy, at the end of his life, reflecting on the past and looking forward to Israel’s future, presents himself as the teacher of Israel. That is how he wishes to be remembered.

Politics is profoundly important, but a society is defined first and foremost by its heroes, and children learn from a society’s heroes what to truly value. If teaching and transmission are Israel’s central sources of continuity, then we do not mention Moses in the Haggadah because we want the Jewish people to revere Moses first and foremost for what he did *after* the Exodus: teaching the Torah to the people of Israel. As Rabbi Soloveitchik

notes, the traditional term for Moses is “*Moshe Rabbeinu*,” “Moses, our teacher,” never “*Moshe Goaleinu*,” “Moses, our redeemer.”

Moses is first chosen as the political leader because of his ardent love for his people, but that love is unfortunately not always returned. Yet as Moses prepares to die, and he speaks to Israel and teaches Israel, Israel recognizes how he has always been the teacher par-excellence, and Moses becomes so beloved in the history of Israel that he remains forever, “Moses, our teacher.”

This, then, is the significance of the name of the book: “*Devarim*,” “Words.” The words spoken with love for our people embody how we remember Moses; and the fact that Jews still teach to their children the ideas that Moses taught is our truest testament to his legacy.

Churchill, in his essay on Moses, reflecting on whether God utilized natural phenomena in the plagues and wonders that came about in the Exodus concludes with this reflection:

At any rate there is no doubt about one miracle. This wandering tribe, in many respects indistinguishable from numberless nomadic communities, grasped and proclaimed an idea of which all the genius of Greece and all the power of Rome were incapable. There was to be only one God, a universal God, a God of nations, a just God, a God who would punish in another world a wicked man dying rich and prosperous; a God from whose service the good of the humble and of the weak and poor was inseparable.

Churchill is right. And Jews themselves, to this day, succinctly summarize Moses’ achievement as follows: “*Moshe emet v’torato emet*,” “Moses is true and his Torah is true.” It is Moses our teacher whom we remember. The Moses that fully emerges in Deuteronomy is the one we celebrate above all.

Discussion Questions:

1. Moses was not the only great leader in world history who had a profound political impact despite his lack of facility for political oratory. What other figures in history were similar?
2. In telling us of Moses' rhetorical limits, what might the Torah be teaching us about the nature of political leadership?

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