

OF PROPHETS AND TEACHERS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Talmud in Megillah 31b, describes the difference between the admonitions - Tochacha in the Book of Vayikra and the Tochacha in the Book of Devarim as follows. "The first was said by G-d Himself. The second was said by Moshe." This does not mean that in Devarim Moshe spoke his own thoughts rather than repeating the words of G-d exactly as he had heard them. This does not mean that Moshe received the admonitions from G-d in Devarim any differently than he received them in Vayikra.

The eighth Ani Maamin states, "I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moshe (by G-d)."

The Rambam in the third Perek of the Laws of Teshuva states, "There are three individuals who are in the category of 'those who deny Torah.' A) A person who says that the Torah does not come from G-d, even if he only says this with respect to one verse, or even one word. B) A person who claims that Moshe wrote the Torah on his own. C) One who denies that the Oral Law was also given to Moshe by G-d."

In Vayikra, G-d spoke the admonitions to Moshe while Moshe was in a conscious state rather than a trance. So too in Devarim, the admonitions were presented to Moshe in the same conscious state. Because Moshe was in a conscious state rather than a 'trance' G-d's prophecy / words did not require Moshe to decipher and interpret G-d's intentions. The prophecy was spoken to Moshe exactly as G-d fully intended Moshe to hear and repeat to the nation.

In Vayikra Moshe delivered the words of G-d to the people in the exact manner that he had received them. In Devarim Moshe also delivered the words of G-d to the nation in the exact manner that he had received them. However, the difference between Moshe's delivery in Vayikra and his delivery in Devarim was the timing.

The Maharal and the Vilna Gaon (See the ArtScroll introduction to Devarim) extend the difference between the admonitions in Vayikra and Devarim to explain the uniqueness of the entire Sefer Devarim in contrast to the other four Sefarim.

In the first four books G-d spoke directly to Moshe and Moshe repeated G-d's words to the Jews while he was still within the context of receiving G-d's prophecy. "It was as if G-d was speaking to the Jewish nation through the throat of Moshe." In the last book, G-d also spoke to Moshe; however, Moshe repeated G-d's words to the nation some time after receiving the directive from G-d. At the

time of Moshe's delivery G-d's presence had already withdrawn from Moshe and he was no longer within the context of receiving the prophecy.

In this regard, Devarim was heard by the nation in the same manner that all other subsequent prophecies were heard. The prophet would receive a vision. After awakening from the trance, the Prophet would decipher G-d's message and then sometime later deliver the "message" to the people.

Why was the last book of the Torah, G-d's final instructions to the Jews, said in this manner?

As we have noted many times before, the focus of Sefer Devarim was preparing the Bnai Yisroel for leaving the desert and entering the Promised Land. The transition from G-d's overt miraculous mastery in the desert to His subtle mastery as manifest within the workings of nature when they entered the Land demanded preparation and instruction. The most important aspect of the nation's successful transition into Eretz Yisroel was the relationship that they would have with their Torah leadership. To the degree that the nation would trust their Torah leadership as true spokesmen of G-d's intentions would be the degree that they would succeed in their mission as G-d's holy nation and kingdom of priests.

When G-d first appeared to Moshe at the Burning Bush, Moshe argued against the concept of intermediaries. Rather than appoint prophets as go-between between G-d and the nation, G-d should talk directly to the people. Moshe argued that any intermediary would dilute the power and veracity of G-d's words. Avoid the intermediary and avoid the dilution!

Moshe was certainly not wrong. Whether a Korach who proclaimed, "The entire assembly are holy and Hashem is among them! Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of G-d?" (Bamidbar 17:3) Or, Aharon and Miriam who asked, "Was it only to Moshe that G-d spoke? Did He not speak to us as well? (Bamidbar 12:2) The presence of an intermediary in delivering the word of G-d was a theological quagmire. The great and the small could easily stumble into the confusion of its clutches and be sucked down into a spiritual abyss. Nevertheless, G-d insisted on having intermediaries. G-d insisted on speaking through prophets and teachers.

It is interesting to note that Moshe is called Moshe Rabbeinu "our teacher, rather than Moshe Hanavi" the prophet. Although Moshe was the greatest of all the prophets who ever lived before and after him, his identification is as the teacher who delivered the word of G-d.

Why did G-d insist on prophets and teachers rather than the more guaranteed process of direct transmission without intermediaries?

The answer should be traced back to before the sin of Adam and Chava as well as before the sin of the Golden Calf. At both of those junctures in history the relationship between G-d and the world could have been established without intermediaries. However, that did not happen. In essence, humanity lost the right to be the recipients of G-d's direct instruction. Instead, G-d instituted

intermediaries in the form of teachers (parents) and prophets (mothers - just joking). However, I believe that there is a practical reason as well to G-d's institution of intermediaries.

Moshe delivered Sefer Devarim to the Bnai Yisroela month and one week before he would die. Within sight of the Promised Land, Moshe began his final discourse to prepare his children for the future that he would not share with them. Over the preceding 40 years in the desert, Moshe successfully weathered challenge and rebellion. For 40 years Moshe attempted to regain the absolute trust that had been granted him following Kriyas Yam Suf. "And they believed in G-d and in His servant Moshe." In his final moments as their teacher, Moshe understood that the entire future success of his ministry and the destiny of his nation rested upon those words, "and in His servant Moshe." Somehow, the importance of "the Teacher" had to be secured.

The rebellion of Korach, the incident with Baal Peor, and the final chapters of Bamidbar have the common theme of a nation struggling to find their place within G-d's world. Korach's rebellion was one man's ego clashing with G-d and Moshe. It was easier for Korach to take aim at Moshe and Aharon than at G-d. However, make no mistake, his rebellion was motivated by his desire to do as he wanted rather than subjugating himself to the word of G-d.

Years later, Baal Peor was the Jewish nation's first encounter with the surrounding nations. Knowing that Moshe would soon die they rationalized their own prurient desires under the guise of socializing with the surrounding nations for the sake of teaching them about G-d. However, instead of being honest with themselves and exposing their logic to the scrutiny of Moshe Rabbeinu, they brought disaster and death to themselves and their people. It occurred at the end of the 40 years and it showed the nation how ill prepared they were to engage their destiny on their own.

In the final days of his life Moshe knew that he had to emphasize the critical importance of the teacher and the Mesorah (transmission of Torah from generation to generation) in keeping the Torah and applying its truths and values to all future decisions. Teachers were the only method for guaranteeing the transmission of the Oral Torah because G-d decided that Torah would have to be taught, in word and by example, not just from a book. It assured that age and wisdom would be a constant in the transmission of Torah.

Teachers and prophets are a system of checks and balances that can test the true intent of individual and national decisions by exposing them to the scrutiny of scholarship and wisdom. However, age and wisdom are meaningless unless the elders and prophets are revered and trusted by those who follow them. Therefore, the final words of G-d's Torah carry the eternal focus and imprint of "Moshe the Teacher." True, the words were still the words of G-d. True, their meaning was still the truth as taught to Moshe on Mount Sinai. However, the final discourse to a nation in transition between a miraculous past and an immortal future began with the words, "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel." It is not our right to interpret the words of G-d. It is our obligation to study and apply the words of Moshe our Teacher.

Laws of Erev Tisha B-Av & Tisha B'Av

This year, Erev Tisha B-Av is Shabbos, July 28. Mincha should be early enough to give enough time to eat Shalosh Seudos before the beginning of the fast.

Eating and drinking must end at sundown, as well as all other restrictions except the prohibition against wearing leather shoes. Leather shoes should be removed after the beginning of Mariv. (Approx. 45 minutes after sundown)

Some Poskim forbid learning Torah after 1:00 PM (Chatzos) on Erev Tisha B'Av, except for those topics permitted on Tisha B-Av. However, many others permit it.

Tisha B'Av

Tisha B'Av, like Yom Kippur, is a 24+ hour fast, with additional restrictions. The following are prohibited: Eating, drinking, wearing leather shoes (referring to leather construction such as the soles or uppers, not leather strips or ornamentation), washing any part of the body, marital relations, and the use of creams, lotions, or oils. Anti-perspirant and medicinal ointments for rashes and irritations are allowed. Netilas Yadayim is performed by washing fingers till the knuckles. Women do not go to Mikvah on Tisha B'Av night.

On Tisha B'Av the following additional customs reflect our status as mourners

1. Until mid-day (approx. 1:00 p.m.), we sit on the floor or a low stool (not higher than 12").
2. Like anAvel, we should not greet each other all of Tisha B'Av. 3. It is forbidden to learn Torah all day except for those topics relating to the laws of mourning or the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash.
3. One should not go to work on Tisha B'Av; however, if you must, it is best do so after midday. Tisha B'Av is not to be used as a day to catch up on housework or repairs.
4. Tallis and Tefillin are first worn at Mincha, and Tzitzit should be put on in the morning without a Bracha.

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