

THE SPEECH THAT NEVER ENDS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

At the beginning of his career of leading the Jewish people, Moshe demurs and states that "I am not a man of words or speech." Yet, here at the conclusion of the Chumash and of his career and life, he delivers an impassioned six month long oration which comprises most of the Book of Dvarim. The rabbis of Israel studied this matter and advanced many different ideas to understand this apparent paradox. I always felt that the key to understanding this matter lies in the appreciation of Moshe's role as the leader of Israel. Moshe begins as very reluctant leader - the task is forced upon him by God over Moshe's doubts and objections. But after forty years of leadership, Moshe's will to lead has been annealed in the fire of experience and difficulties. He now knows that leadership of Israel requires holiness of vision and nerves of steel. His words in Chumash Dvarim are directed therefore not only to the people of Israel but perhaps more directly and specifically to his successor, Yehoshua. By reviewing all of the events and disappointments of the desert, of the backsliding of the people and yet of their essential faith and heroism, he equips Yehoshua with an understanding of what to expect during his leadership tenure. The experiences of Moshe in his leadership role, as recounted here in Devarim, will prove invaluable in guiding Yehoshua in his challenge of leadership. This is at least partially an explanation for what the rabbis meant when they said: "As long as Yehoshua lived and ruled, Moshe was also still alive to the people of Israel."

Throughout the investiture of Yehoshua as the leader of Israel and as Moshe's successor, Yehoshua is constantly challenged in the words of Moshe and even of God "to be strong and of good courage!" If Yehoshua feels weak and threatened by the behavior of Israel during his reign, he need only recall Moshe's description of the events of the desert. Much of Yehoshua's challenges will pale in comparison to the difficulties described by Moshe in this valedictory oration. Only by realizing how far we have come on our road of destiny, can we face the challenges of continuing on that journey. In this respect, Chumash Dvarim becomes the book not only of review and history of past events but rather the book of inspiration and guidance for future happenings. Moshe's lament in this week's parsha, "How can I bear the burden of leadership of this people alone?" is echoed by every Jewish spiritual and temporal leader throughout our long history. It is Moshe's response of faith and vision, in deeds and words, to this almost rhetorical question that provides the spark of confidence and enthusiasm so necessary for successful and meaningful leadership. So, speak on Moshe, we are all still listening to your wisdom and Torah guidance.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein