

HARSH HUGS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The book of Dvarim that we begin reading this Shabat is the most "human" of all of the five books of the Torah. The words of Moshe that came from him are his assessment of the Jewish people that he loves and has led for forty years. Many of the words that he will utter are hard words, even harsh words. The Hebrew word dvarim indicates strong and tough words. Moshe here is employing what in our current society is called "tough love." At the very time that he complains of the contentiousness and stubbornness of the people, he blesses them and wishes that they increase one thousand fold. I think that it is this attitude that marks all great Jewish leaders who have emulated Moshe throughout Jewish history. How to love a people and yet be objective in assessing its faults and shortcomings, without that assessment in any way diminishing one's love for that people is a formidable emotional task. Yet Moshe showed the way in this regard and it is the path followed by all later prophets and true leaders of Israel. Moshe's concern and love for Israel is so apparent that he need not seek to curry favor or popularity with the people. The people of Israel realize that Moshe is on their side and that he is not out to demonize them or aggrandize himself at their expense. Therefore he remains as the great teacher and leader of Israel through all of the ages.

Moshe's career as a leader of Israel was marked by his selflessness. The Torah characterizes him as the humblest of all human beings. Moshe has no personal agenda to advance. He is beyond the petty corruptions that destroy a people's confidence in its leaders. I would say that this is his strongest asset in his leadership qualities. The people therefore realize that his love for Israel is unconditional. It is from this base of personal integrity and emotional stability that Moshe's words of criticism and correction resonate within the society of Israel. The rabbis of the Talmud therefore stated: "Better the words criticism from someone who loves you (Moshe) than the compliments and blandishments from someone who is your enemy (Bilaam)" In a false and deceitful world, honesty and integrity mean much more than fine speeches and false commitments. It should be noted that the words of Moshe were not meant for his generation and listeners alone. If that were the case, then they would not be included in the eternal Torah. Moshe addresses eternal faults and problems that are inherent in the Jewish people and in fact in all human society. People are by nature nudniks, burdensome and quarrelsome. By making us aware of this ongoing human failing, Moshe intends to lead us out of the wilderness that such attitudes create. We would do well to hear his words, learn his lessons and attempt to profit greatly from his teachings and personal example. There arose none like Moshe again amongst the people of Israel.

Shabat shalom.

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