

# Torah Table Talk

## Moses, The Great Communicator,

### And Critic

#### Parshat Devarim

#### Deuteronomy, Chapter 1:1 – 3:22

Though Moses began his career complaining that he was “slow of speech and tongue,” he concluded his tenure as Israel’s leader as a great communicator. It seems ironic that the book that most clearly contains the voice of most is called Sefer Devarim, “the Book of Words.” The book of Deuteronomy contains several discourses in which Moses tries to review and strengthen the lessons of a life as he takes leave of the children of Israel. Deuteronomy has been described as a book of reproof. Moses reviews Israel’s recent history (including their numerous rebellions), goes over the laws which God has given the people of Israel and discusses the consequences of obedience and rebellion against God. There is a tension throughout this book between positive encouragement vs. stern rebuke in the way Moses speaks to the children of Israel.

#### **Deuteronomy Chapter 1:1**

These are the words (Devarim) which Moses addressed to all the children of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, by the Aravah, by Suph, between Laban and Tofel, Hazerot and Dee-Zahav.

#### **Rashi Deuteronomy 1:1**

**These are the words:** Since these are words of reproof and he mentions the places where they provoked the Omnipresent, therefore he conceals the matter (in which they sinned) and mentions them by allusion (contained in the names of the places) out of respect for Israel. (Based on the Sifre, a Midrashic work on the book of Deuteronomy)

**Unto all Israel:** If he had rebuked part of them then those not present would have said, “You heard reproof from the son of Amram (Moses) and you did not answer anything at all. If we had been there we would have answered him.” Therefore he assembled all of them and said unto them: “Behold you are all here! Whosoever has an answer let him answer now!”

1. What is it about the opening verse of Deuteronomy that troubled Rashi? According to his interpretation, how does this verse reflect respect for people as well as the need for reproof?
2. Why was it necessary for all the people to be present when Moses rebuked and chastised the children of Israel? What was his fear?
3. How does the reading of the book of Deuteronomy prepare us for the upcoming High Holy Day Season? How can we communicate a sense of love as well as urgency to members of the Jewish community in the importance of Jewish living while criticizing them? What can we learn about reproof from Moses in the book of Deuteronomy?

4. Is it possible to criticize people without sounding judgmental?

**Leviticus 19: 17-18**

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall reprove your neighbor, and not bear sin on his account. You shall not avenge, nor bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.

1. According to Leviticus, we are commanded to reprove our neighbor when he acts in an inappropriate fashion. In today's world reproof is seen as rude and politically incorrect. One who reproves another is most likely to be greeted by the response, "Who are you to tell me what to do?" What does this verse say about reproof? How is withholding reproof from one's neighbor a sign of hate?
2. When and how should we reprove people today – should we reprove them at all?
3. Pretend you are a Rabbi addressing your community on the High Holidays. What would you speak to them about? What are the most important issues to raise with the community? Would you be critical or conciliatory in the way you spoke to the community?

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Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in The Book of Jewish Values offers the following advice to consider when offering others criticism. He suggests that we should ask ourselves the following questions:

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- Are my words necessary?
  - Am I being fair in my critique or might my criticism be exaggerated?
  - Will my words hurt the other person's feelings and if so is there a way to say them that will minimize the hurt?
  - Are my words likely to bring about a change in the other person's behavior?
  - How would I feel if someone criticized me in the same way that I am criticizing another?
  - How do I feel about offering criticism? Am I looking forward to doing so? (*Note - If so maybe I should remain silent.*)
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***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***