



Parashat Devarim

History, Memory and the Making of Community

by Dr. David Shneer on Friday July 28, 2006

4 Av, 5766

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22, Shabbat Hazon, 5766

“Ale ha-devarim asher diber moshe el col yisrael be-ever hayarden...” (These are the words that Moshe said to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan).

In this week’s Torah portion the Israelites and the now very elderly Moses have reached the Jordan River, the physical and metaphorical boundary between before and after, between wandering in the desert and being a Jewish nation, between a generation marked by the scars of slavery, to one that only knows slavery as memory told through the stories of the community’s elders-what some people in the context of the Holocaust would call the “2nd generation.” “*Devarim*” or “words,” the portion that opens Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, has Moses recounting a history of the Jews’ experiences over the past 40 years, a history of miracles, no doubt, but also a history of struggle, failure, and disappointment.

Why dwell on such a depressing history? Moses tells “all of Israel” the story of their Exodus from Egypt, the gaining of the commandments and the many struggles of their sojourn in the desert. It is not a glorious history, but it is, nonetheless, the history of this people. In some ways this is Moses’ *tsavuah*, or “ethical will,” to his community. As the elder, he has the responsibility to tell the Israelites their own story.

The ability to recount a history shows that a community has reached maturity. It shows that a community has, in fact, become a community. It is the birth of a collective memory, often retold by elders as oral history, and these collective memories include the painful recollections of struggle and loss. But delineating the hardships of a nascent community is one of the key ways of *defining* a community. These words are spoken to “all of Israel” suggesting that as much as it might be a series of acts, rituals, places, and people that define the community, it is also a series of words, stories, and memories that unite the Jewish people. The word “*devarim*” also means “things” in modern Hebrew, reminding us that words can become tangible. In some ways, words can mark and define our world more concretely than inanimate objects.



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Moses' retelling of the relatively grim history of 40 years of wandering (get a GPS, Moses) is a way of showing that the Israelites have literally and metaphorically arrived. In his speech, Moses spends quite a bit of time on the geographic details of where "all of Israel" finds itself at the moment of telling and also where they have been. The portion opens, "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, concerning the Wilderness, concerning the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazerot, and Di-zahab; eleven days from Horeb, by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea." It's a pretty long list of obscure places and landmarks of the history of this community. *They have a history*, a history of struggle, failure and disappointment, but nonetheless a 40-year history rooted in time and place.

National and communal histories almost always have mythic origins and battles to be overcome, and they are peppered with important names, dates and places that create time and space for the community. Moses, the elder, is not just passing on Israelite history. He is, like elders in other communities, *creating* that history. This opening portion of Deuteronomy shows the importance of both historical text (the first four books of the Torah) and oral history (the fifth book) to communal identity. Text alone is not enough.

This desire to have communal histories, defined by both a key set of texts and stories, in other words, by both history and memory, has reshaped the way history is taught in the United States today. Since the 1960s, new kinds of histories, particular histories, have been added to the curricula at universities, and sometimes in high schools, junior highs and even elementary schools. We now have African American history, women's history, queer history, and others. At my university, I teach a class called "Queer in America, Now and Then," a history and sociology course that takes Moses' challenge seriously and blends history and memory to create a narrative of a particular community.

Each of these histories needs both the texts and the memories of their respective communities to carve out particular communal identities. Some historians have criticized this trend in history, calling it the splintering of history, the destruction of a history common to all Americans. Some of my colleagues claim that "queer history" is too much about identity and not enough about history. "Do you have to be queer to take your class, David?" I have been asked on more than one occasion. Such questions force us to reflect on the purpose of telling history. Some historians might say it is simply "to know the facts," but as we've seen, it can also be about creating community.

So then we can go back to Moses and ask why Moses was telling "all of Israel" the story of the desert. He suggests that the primary purpose of history and memory is the making of community, and that one needs both history and memory, both text and voice, to create collective memories of events, places and people.



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In lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, there are too few elders recounting our stories, too few elders creating those collective memories that help define a queer community. Perhaps it is because many of our elders are too quiet or too afraid to speak; more likely it is because “*kol qvirim*,” or “all of queerdom,” is not interested in hearing. Lucky for Moses that God didn’t give the Israelites a choice. They weren’t asked if they wanted to hear their own history or not. And so Deuteronomy, which comes from the Greek for “second telling” or “retelling,” reminds us that communities need oral history and memory *before* they can pass over the Jordan, even if those who pass on that history do not cross along with them.



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