

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Yisrael. (1:1)

Sefer Devarim is Moshe *Rabbeinu's* last will and testament, spoken by him during the last five weeks of his life. He began with an indirect rebuke, alluding to the nation's sins and, at times, mutinous behavior during the past forty years. His words were cloaked, clouded in allusion, in an effort not to embarrass and offend his listeners. While this is clearly the preferred approach to rebuke, one wonders why in the past he had not manifested such restraint. Indeed, the **Maor Va'Shemesh** focuses on the word *Eilah*, "These," a term which implies a specific designation which excludes previous "words." *Chazal* teach, *Kol makom she'neemar eilah, pasul es ha'rishonim*, "Whenever the Torah uses the word *eilah*, these, it rejects that which was stated previously." What is the Torah rejecting?

The *Maor Va'Shemesh* explains that Moshe was chastised for his earlier rebukes of the nation. *Shimu na ha'morim*, "Listen now, O' rebels" (*Bamidbar* 20:10); Moshe was angry with the commanders of the army (*Bamidbar* 31:14). When Moshe rebuked the nation in what was to become *Sefer Devarim*, the critique was veiled, and thus acceptable to Hashem. The Torah writes *eilah*, these, to teach that only these specific words constituted an accepted rebuke. Moshe benefited in two ways. First, he was rewarded for this rebuke, since he had administered it in a manner that was acceptable. Second, he repaired his earlier rebuke of the people, such that whatever Heavenly dissatisfaction had dominated earlier was cleared up. The *Meor Va'Shemesh* concludes with a strong reprimand against those who seek to lord it over people by administering rebuke, they should think twice, because "one does not know the innermost blemishes of the hearts of man and what they must repair." In other words, before one begins to rebuke others, he had better make sure that he knows: what really happened and why, what went through the mind of the perpetrator; and what provoked him to act inappropriately. Everybody has a story.

At times, the greatest favor one can do for another person is to attempt to understand his situation and what makes him tick. In his book, *Do Unto Others*, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski relates a beautiful story which I feel is illuminating. As a psychiatrist in a large state hospital with hundreds of patients who were mentally ill, he oversaw medical students who would visit the hospital periodically. He would guide and instruct, listen and explain, present various cases which were textbook related, but hardly ever seen outside of an institution.

As part of a tour of the chronic care facility, he pointed out a senior patient who had been hospitalized for fifty-two years, during which time he had never uttered a word. This fellow had a daily routine to which he had strictly adhered during the time that he had been institutionalized. He would eat his breakfast – in silence – and then go to a corner of the community room, assume a position in which he was bent over with his knees to the ground and his hands directed upward. He would remain in this position until the afternoon when he was called for lunch. Following lunch, he returned to his strange position until he was summoned for supper, after which he returned once again until bedtime. During his tenure in the hospital, neither had he altered his behavior, nor had he spoken a word. No form of treatment, medical or shock, had succeeded in creating even a dent

in his routine. Other than meals, it was impossible to get him to leave his position or to speak a single word.

When Rabbi Twerski concluded his presentation, one of the students asked if he could speak with the patient. “Certainly, he is all yours,” was the response. What could this man achieve which decades of therapy had failed to accomplish?

The student walked over and told the man that he must be tired from all of this crouching. “Why not sit down for a bit?” he asked the patient. The man looked blankly at him, just as he had looked at everyone for over fifty years. The student, however, then did something no one else before him had ever done. He assumed the strange position, which the man had maintained for all of these years. “Here, you go take a rest. I will take over for you,” the student said. Without a word, the patient got up and went over to the couch to rest – something that he had not done in fifty-two years!

Rabbi Twerski concludes that while it is difficult to ascertain what was going on in this patient’s mind all of these years, the medical student had definitely struck a chord which made a difference. Perhaps the man thought that he was holding up the world and that, if he let go, it would all come crashing down. The medical student had offered him a respite from his immense toil. Why did he leave to eat and sleep? – Good question, but there is no rationale to the behavior of a disturbed person.

Let us get back to the incredible discovery made by this student. Apparently, this man’s deranged mind had rationale to what he was doing. To him, his wretched life had great meaning. After all, he was saving the world! We were dismissing him as “crazy,” while, in fact, as far as he was concerned, he was totally normal. Imagine if someone would have attempted to understand this person, tried to get into his mind and make sense out of it. Today, he might have been living a productive life and be a contributing member to society.

Is it any different when we rebuke someone – or refuse to rebuke someone, because we think that he/she is too far gone? Understanding another member of the Jewish people – whether he was born into an observant family and regrettably went “off” or was a non-practicing Jew all his life. We refuse to make a connection between “us” and “them.” We eschew the possibility that they may have what they think are legitimate issues which prevent them from returning to observance. If one of us would stretch out his hand in a gesture of good faith more frequently, as a symbol of willingness to understand, we might begin the process of bringing back and saving a Jewish soul.

Stories have long been a motivational vehicle for reaching people. Storytelling is much more than an entertaining performance. Storytelling is a basis for communicating with others in a manner that opens otherwise closed doors. The *Maggidim* of old used stories as a natural pathway to a person’s heart and mind. A good story adds depth in place in which traditional learning and rebuke cannot penetrate. The allusions of *Sefer Devarim*, with names of cities which *Rashi* explains never existed, could very well be an attempt to reach the people through the non-conventional means of

a story.

There is a well-known “story” about the significance of a story. The *Chassidic* movement of mid-eighteenth century saved many Jews from spiritual extinction. For the most part, the Jews were too poor and too involved in the burden of eking out their meager living to make Torah learning a priority in their life. *Chassidic Rebbes* inspired and imbued these Jews with fire, passion, love, spiritual hope, employing stories rich in tradition as their means of preserving the Jewish soul. Like magical seeds nourishing the Jewish soul, these stories revived the stone-cold hearts, infusing them with hope.

The story goes that the founder of *Chassidus*, *Horav Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, zl*, once “saw” a grave misfortune looming over the Jewish People. He understood that a serious decree was about to be made against the nation. The *Baal Shem* went out into a certain part of the forest, lit a fire and recited a prayer. Miraculously, the prayer successfully interceded with Hashem, and the tragedy was averted.

Years later, when his *talmid*, disciple, the *Mezritcher Maggid, zl*, was needed to intercede before Hashem, he went to the same place in the forest and said, “Hashem, I do not know how to light the fire, but the special prayer that made the difference before, I can still recite.” Hashem listened, and once again misfortune was turned back.

Horav Moshe Leib, zl, m’Sassov, was called upon at a later time to intercede on behalf of the Jewish People. He went to the forest, but neither lit the fire, nor said the prayer. He said, “I do not know how to light the fire, nor am I proficient in the prayer. I do, however, know the place in the forest where this was all carried out. Will You please forgive the Nation?”

It then fell to *Horav Yisrael, zl, m’Rizhin*, to speak on behalf of the nation. It was no longer that simple. Times had changed; much had been forgotten. The *Rebbe* spoke to Hashem, “I cannot light the fire; I cannot even recite the prayer. In fact, I do not even know the exact place in the forest where the *Baal Shem* went. I can, however, tell over the story. And this must suffice.”

Throughout the years, in good times and in times that were not so good, we have relied on the “story” to convey our innermost feelings. It opens the door as it reveals the true sentiments of people. A story adds the depth that traditional learning and rebuke do not always inspire. Stories make the rebuke seem real and personal. Through the vehicle of the story, we have the opportunity to reach a person without locking horns with him concerning his errant behavior. This is more likely to catalyze a favorable reaction.