

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Devarim 5783

D. Mordechai Schlachter

Moshe begins his last exhortation to Bnei Yisroel.

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעַבְרָתוֹ בְּמִדְבַּר בְּעֶרְבָה מִזֶּה סוּף
בֵּין-פָּאָרָן וּבֵין-תּוֹפֵל וְלָוָן וְחַצְרֹת וְדִי זָהָב:

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Bnei Yisroel on the Transjordan, in the wilderness, near the Suf desert, between Paran and between Tofel, and Lavan, Chatziros, and Di Zahav.” (Devarim 1:1).

What were the words that Moshe said? Why was it so specific in saying where he said them? Also, is there significance to Moshe not commencing with a vav?

There are five books in the Torah, known as the chumash. Only the first, Bereishis, and last, Devarim, start with a completely new sentence. Shmos, Vayikra, and Bamidbar all start with the connecting “vav” letter, meaning “and.” Shmos connects back to Bereishis, Vayikra connects back to an episode in Shmos, and Bamidbar connects back to the end of Vayikra. Bereishis, obviously, is totally new because it’s the beginning. Devarim is totally new, too. Why does Devarim not connect back, especially since Moshe is saying where he said the words, and the nation only got to that location in sefer Bamidbar?

Devarim is a stand-alone sefer, in a way. The “story” portion is done. This sefer is only Moshe teaching Torah to Bnei Yisroel. Any mention of episodes is for didactic purposes. That is why the location is so specific. Devarim can be read by itself, without connecting back to sefer Bamidbar. In fact, what follows “these words” is not a recap of Bnei Yisroel’s journey in the wilderness. They are the highlights and lessons. Every episode Moshe recounts, from the complaining to the need for judges and helpers, to the scouts and the treason, all have a new perspective. At first impression, it appears there are new facts. However, careful reading indicates that really, the facts are the same, it is the perspective that changes. Moshe adds new light to the episodes.

Given the seeming recap of the episodes, it appears that there should be a vav “and” connection. However, the “words” or “matters” that Moshe is talking about is not really about the episodes. It really refers to commands and teachings. It is about his final instructions. Therefore, even the recaps of the events are teaching moments, chizuk and possible mussar. They are not just a repeat of what took place.

There is one more similarity that Devarim has with Bereishis. That is, neither commence with a date. Bereishis does not commence with a date, “year one” because that is not how Creation worked. Here, Moshe does not give the exact date that he commenced talking to Bnei Yisroel. His teaching stands without time. They are in a vacuum, just meant to be always heard and absorbed.

Some of the locations that Moshe mention are in the Torah, others not. “Suf” refers to the Yam Suf or the desert near the Yam Suf, north of the Gulf of Aqaba. Paran is the land given to Yishmael. These are geographical locations, indicating where Moshe talked to Bnei Yisroel. The Torah always speaks in an Eretz Yisroel centric manner, so “Transjordan” means the eastern bank of the Yarden, not in Eretz Yisroel proper. These are territories that Reuven, Gad, and part of Menashe took for themselves as an inheritance.

The remaining locations in the pasuk, Tofel, Lavan, Chatzeiros, and Di Zahav, are not mentioned elsewhere in the Torah, explicitly. They are, however, in the Torah as a reference to events. The word Tofel is not mentioned outright elsewhere in the Torah. However, the Torah does say, *וְאֵת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־אַתֶּם בָּאִים אֶל־הָאָרֶץ כְּנָעַן זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּבוֹאוּ אֵלֶיהָ לְקַח לָכֶם בְּנַחֲלָה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְגִבְלַתְיָהּ: “Command Bnei Yisroel and say to them, because you are coming to the Land of Canaan, this is the Land that shall fall to you for an inheritance. Land of Canaan and its borderlands.” (Bamidbar 34:2). Tipel and Tofel are the same letters, just different vowels. Tipel means “fall” as in, end up, or come upon something actively. Lavan is also not a place that is mentioned. Lavan is Yaakov’s uncle and the ancestor of Balaam.*

Chatzeiros is a place mentioned in the wilderness. However, it is more than just a location. *“And from Mikboros Hatava the nation traveled by way of Chatziros, and they were next to Chatzeiros.” (Bamidbar 11:35). They traveled from there to Paran (ibid 12:16) but then returned to Chatzeiros (ibid 33:18). Chatziros indicates a return, a turning back or a step back from their goal.*

Di Zahav is not a place. However, it means parts of fine gold. (Daniel 2:32). In Daniel it is mentioned several times when Daniel is describing an image in a dream of a statue or idol. It may refer to the Molten Calf – where gold was the issue – or it can refer to the creation of the Mishkan from pure gold. The issue of money also crept up when they asked for meat and wanted to return to Mitzrayim for their farms and fish. Bnei Yisroel did do wonders with gold, in the Mishkan. However, part of what they did with their gold was the Molten Calf and used it for division. The gold parted them.

Thus, the pasuk can be interpreted like this. These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Bnei Yisroel, on the Transjordan. It took place in the wilderness, in the desert near Yam Suf between Paran; and between where Bnei Yisroel fell, by the episodes of Balaam’s attack on them with the Baal Peor and the women of Midyan, and Chatzieror – where they returned because they did not go straight from Kadesh into the Land of Canaan due to the sins of the scouts and the treason of Korach – and pure gold – the sin of the Molten Calf and the entitlement that led to Bnei Yisroel asking for meat and to return to Egypt.

Moshe is about to recap what occurred to Bnei Yisroel. However, their journey is now being taught with forty years of perspective. It is not a simple recap but life lessons. Even this first pasuk gives a broad overview of Moshe’s approach. They stand on the precipice of taking the Land of Canaan. However, they are marred by their past iniquities. They must take strength and courage and fortify themselves to do what is correct. That is the only way to take the Land securely.