

Peretz Wolf-Prusan

Devarim

The book of Devarim, which we begin this Shabbat, is very different from the other four books of the Torah. How so? Bereshith, Shemot, Vayikra, and Bemidbar describe a story *as it happens*. The characters of these books experience these events as they occur in “real time,” in the moment, one thing after the other.

Not so the book of Devarim.

This book begins in a completely different way. Moshe is retelling events from the past, recounting events for which his present audience has no personal memory. Except for Joshua and Caleb, this is an entirely new generation of Israelites. Not one person from the group that stands before Moshe had stood at Sinai, seen the mountain ablaze, and heard God speak out of the fire.

And there is a very “Greek” structure to Devarim. The modality of Devarim is: Prologue, narrative, poetry, epilogue, poetry, epilogue.

Which brings us to Lincoln at Gettysburg. We can dispatch the myth that Lincoln wrote it on the back of an envelope on the train. No, he worked on it for a long time, and adapted it to the moment.

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
November 19, 1863

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war.

A score is another way of saying 20, so Lincoln was referring to 1776, which was 87 years before 1863. This is a midrash. He does not direct the listeners to the Constitution, which enshrined slavery, but to a loftier document penned by a slave holder.

And that brings us to the opening of Pirke Avot, Mishna 1:1

Moshe received Torah from Sinai
And transferred it to Yehoshua
And Yehoshua to the Elders
And the Elders to the Prophets
And the Prophets transmitted it to the Members of the Great Assembly.

This is a counter story to history.

No Egyptians, Israelites, Cannanites, Moabites, or Amalakites.
No Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, or Romans
No Jerusalem, Temple, Kohanim or Levites.
No Land of Israel or Diaspora.

No weeping or wailing. Just Devarim, the words, passed along from then to now.

Words matter, as Alex Jones has discovered. But we, and Lincoln, knew that.

On this Erev Tisha B'Av, on Black Sabbath, we remember that Judaism empowered Jews to rebuild shattered worlds with words of high emotion and daring imagination. Like God at the dawn of creation, we bring order out of chaos through words, Devarim.