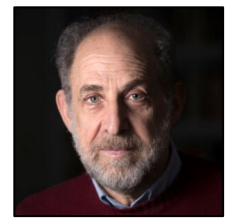


Moses's Retirement Speech

Dr. Raymond Scheindlin, Professor Emeritus of Medieval Hebrew Literature, JTS



Last week, we left Moses and the Israelites on the plains of Jericho in Moab, in the fortieth year after the Exodus, ready to cross the Jordan and enter Canaan. Moses has settled some final regulations; his successor, Joshua, has been installed, ready to take command. But one thing remains for Moses to do in the land of Moab—something everyone knows about but no one wants to mention: Moses has to step away. As everyone knows, he is doomed to die in Moab.

But before stepping aside, Moses has some things to say.

Deuteronomy, which we begin reading this week, is devoted to Moses's farewell to his people. Deuteronomy is preeminently Moses's book; in it, Moses mostly speaks in his own voice, so that instead of the ever-recurring third-person opening line "And the Lord spoke to Moses . . .," we read "The Lord spoke to *me*" (Deut. 2:2). Deuteronomy contains not one but a series of farewell speeches and prophetic poems in which Moses recalls the forty years since the Exodus from Egypt and looks ahead to the future in the promised land.

Moses has grown as a public speaker. One of the first things he says about himself in the Torah is: "I am no man of words and have never been one . . . I have a heavy mouth and a heavy tongue" (Exod. 4:10). Yet in Deuteronomy, Moses delivers speeches of long-rolling, well-balanced sentences. He has become a masterful speaker, a worthy predecessor of the so-called literary prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Most people who retire after a lifetime in one position welcome the opportunity to reflect publicly on their career. When I retired from my forty-two years on the faculty of The Jewish Theological Seminary, I compelled my colleagues and friends to listen to a speech of self-indulgent

length. Of course, I had no intention of using the occasion to complain about bad moments in the past; it was an occasion for warm reminiscences. Most of us who have retired probably feel that way.

Not Moses. In his first remarks in Deuteronomy, when he recalls God's command forty years earlier to break camp at Mount Sinai and begin the journey to the Promised Land, before he has heard of a single complaint or act of disobedience, he recalls that he was already groaning about the burden of being the Israelite leader: "How can I bear your trouble, your burden, your quarrels all alone?" (Deut. 1:12). Throughout this week's parashah and later in Deuteronomy, we will be hearing Moses's complaints about the people and his fears that they will not be steadfast in the long run.

Moses in Deuteronomy is 120 years old (Deut. 31:2), and if he was already weary at the start of the forty-year march, he must now be past exhaustion. Of his contemporaries, only he and two others—Joshua and Caleb—are left; the others died during the years of wandering that began with the episode of the spies. In this first speech in Deuteronomy, Moses tells this new generation of Israelites that story and the act of disobedience through which their parents forfeited the promise of the land and doomed them to be born and grow up in the wilderness.

In Moses's telling, it was their parents who asked that spies be sent to reconnoiter the land (Deut. 1:22), not God, as the story was originally told (Num. 13:2), as if the people from the start did not completely trust the divine guarantee of their victory. In Moses's telling, the spies' report about the land was completely favorable, but the people, intimidated by rumors, simply refused to go forward (Deut. 1:25–28). In punishment, God doomed the entire generation of the

Exodus, including Moses, to die in the desert, for God was angry with the leader because of his flock (Deut. 1:37). Yet in the account of the desert years in Numbers, we were told that it was for striking the rock in Kadesh that Moses was blocked from entering the Land.

Perhaps as Moses brooded on his punishment, he came to blame the people for the guilt that the Torah explicitly attaches to him alone. It is easy to sympathize with Moses's mentally shifting the blame to the people, for it was the people's failure to trust God that brought about the confrontation at the rock and Moses's intemperate behavior, resulting in his downfall. In his mind, the episodes of the rock and the spies had a single cause: the people's failure to trust. And Moses, steadfast though he was, had been caught up in their weakness.

Yes, Moses is tired, angry, and willing to blame others. Yet he still loves his people. In the very passage in which he complains of the burden of leading such quarrelsome folk, he begs God to bless them and multiply them (Deut. 1:11), to make them even more burdensome! He sees promise in this new generation, for he contrasts the behavior of their parents in the episode of the spies with their own behavior when it was their turn to engage enemies: the formidable Sihon, king of the Amorites; and the even more formidable Og, king of Bashan. This younger generation trusts God and obeys his commands implicitly: they march straight through Edom and Moab, wage war against Sihon and Og as commanded, and conquer as promised. Bitter old man that he is, Moses does not praise the people for their good behavior—they are only doing their duty, after all—but we can sense a new and more satisfactory relationship with them in the way he tells the story of the conquests in the Transjordan in the second part of the parashah.

In telling the story of the older generation's failings, Moses used phraseology of distance: "I told you You refused . . . God heard your voice God was angry with me on your account." When he comes to tell the story of the younger generation and their conquests, he includes himself in the telling: "We moved on We crossed over Sihon took the field against us God delivered him to us

. . . . We made our way toward Bashan," etc. In the first part of Moses's speech, he distances himself from the people; in the second part, his identification with the people has been renewed. When, at the end of the parashah, Moses instructs the people to cross the Jordan under Joshua's leadership and conquer the people of Canaan, it is in a new and positive tone, evincing confidence in their future behavior.

Toward the end of the book, as Moses comes closer to death, his fears that the people will not remain steadfast resurge, and he makes dire predictions about what will befall them if they fail in faithfulness. In the first chapter of Isaiah, the *haftara* for this week), we get a full dose of prophetic rage over the misdeeds of a generation that lived some 500 years later. But in our parashah, the bitterness is over the past, and the future looks hopeful.