

Motivations for Storytelling

Rabbi Paula Mack Drill, Alumni (RS '04), Mekhinah Program Mentor,
Adjunct Lecturer, Rabbi in Residence, Congregation Agudath Israel (Caldwell, NJ)



When our family gathers for celebrations, one refrain consistently punctuates every conversation: “That’s not the way it happened!” One of my adult children will then retell the story of how my youngest’s wrist was broken or the first time one of the daughters-in-law came for Shabbat dinner. Everyone has a different motivation for shaping our iconic family stories according to their own remembrance – to make themselves the heroes (or at least less culpable) or to uplift a favorite way of recalling the incident.

Stranger still is the way I find myself telling old stories in a great variety of ways depending on my emotions or my audience in the moment. I might be the victim or the hero; sometimes in the telling, “I was shocked” or “I knew all along”! Memory is a tricky thing.

So it seems to be with Moshe here in Devarim, as he recalls what happened when the tribal leaders were sent to reconnoiter the land; an event we first learned about back in Parashat Shelah Lekha in the Book of Bemidbar. It is fair to assume that the all-knowing narrator in Bemidbar was sharing an account of what happened close in time to the event, and Moshe is now remembering it in Devarim at a later time, as an iconic story of his own. If we try to imagine Moshe’s motivation (conscious or unconscious) for telling the story in the way that he does, we can begin to understand why he says (and doesn’t say) the things he does.

In Shelah Lekha, when a band of twelve men are to be sent into the land ahead of the people, God is in charge of the plan. Moshe simply enacts God’s command: “God spoke to Moshe, saying, “Send (שְׁלַח־לְךָ) agents to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send someone from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them. (Num. 13:1-2)

In this account, the command to send scouts is ambiguous. A midrash (Bemidbar Rabbah 16:8) suggests that Shelah lekha can be read literally as “Send for yourself.” God would be saying: ‘If you don’t trust all that I have told you about how good this land is, if you don’t believe that I will be with you in the conquest, then go ahead and get human confirmation.’ God seems to be washing God’s hands of this plan.

Here in Devarim, however, Moshe is in charge, it is he and not God who gives the first word to go up to the land. The desire to scout the land then emerges from the people themselves: “See, Adonai your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as Adonai, the God of your ancestors, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed. Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send agents ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to.’ I approved of the plan, and so I selected twelve of you, one representative from each tribe. (Deut. 1:21-23)

The purpose of the mission itself is different in the two accounts of the scouts. In Bemidbar, the verb for the scouts’ task is וַיִּתְּרוּ and in Devarim, it is וַיַּחְפְּרוּ־לָהֶם. While both verbs generally mean to seek out and explore, commentaries understand that the purpose of the scouting in Bemidbar is to verify the goodness and abundance in the land they are about to enter; while in Devarim, the scouts are to gather military information regarding the best route to begin the conquest and to ascertain which cities are heavily fortified.

How do we account for Moshe’s telling the story so differently this week in Devarim? What might be his motivation for the form his narration takes? One very relatable explanation is that we are given an intimate perspective from which we watch Moshe as he takes an

honest look at his life's work. I think of this entire book as Moshe's completing a life review for the people he is leading. Here at the beginning of Devarim, he is describing the pivotal moment that led to a terrible loss: the unraveling that led to his inability to enter the promised land. Like many of us, Moshe struggles to reconstruct events and does not get it all correct.

Another possibility is that Moshe accepts responsibility for his punishment; his missteps are the real reason he is not leading the people into the land. What we see in this narrative is Moshe doing kapparah, seeking forgiveness, before his death. He tells the story as a confession, to proclaim his culpability. After all, Moshe approved a plan to send scouts into the land, a plan that ultimately imploded and showed the faithlessness of the people. God is rightfully incensed. Moshe accepts responsibility as the leader who did not understand his own people. Israel is hard-headed; but Moshe, their leader, lost control.

Yet another motivation for Moshe's telling this version of the story could be that Moshe is trying to build his damaged ego in the face of utter disappointment in the people and in himself as a leader. He tells this story to try to extricate himself from blame and place it on the people. After the report of the scouts, Moshe resists the nation's rebellion and harshly rebukes them. Moshe attributes his punishment not to any sin of his own, but rather to that of the people: "Because of you Adonai was incensed also with me, and God said: You shall not enter it [the land] either." (Deut. 1:37)

One final suggestion for this telling is that Moshe purposefully presents the story in a way that emphasizes the guilt of the nation as a whole rather than focusing on the sin of the individual scouts. With this lens, we see Moshe trying to educate the people so that they don't repeat the mistakes of their parents.

Thinking about how Moshe chooses to tell his story here in Parashat Devarim, and throughout the entire book, invites us to consider how we tell our own stories. Do we consider the impact of our narrative (our personal Devarim) on others? If we do the deep work of considering the lens at work in the way we tell our stories,

can we tell our stories in a redemptive fashion, and for the good of others?

I do try to pause and consider my often-hidden motivations when I tell a story. With what lens am I narrating? But still, I must tell you, I KNEW that the rough-housing was going to end with someone breaking a bone... and I KNEW that she would be my daughter-in-law from the very first time she sat at our Shabbat table!