

PARSHAS DEVORIM - DAVID FOSKETT

וְהָיָה בְּאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּעֶשְׂתֵּי עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֹתוֹ אֲלֵהֶם :

"It was the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first of the month, when Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisroel, according to everything that Hashem commanded him to them." (Devarim 1:3)

Why is it that the Torah specifies the exact day that Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to the nation? Surely he had spoken to them before! What was significant about his words that the Posuk documents the actual date of their delivery?

Rashi tells us that 'these words', which Moshe spoke to the whole nation, were words of rebuke relating to the episodes in the forty years of sojourning where the nation had sinned. Moshe chose to speak now because he did not wish to deliver his rebuke to them until immediately before his death. The Maskil leDavid adds that since we learnt already that the nation had arrived in the Plains of Moav during the fortieth year, the apparent need to specify the date must be to stress the close proximity of the rebuke to the weeks prior to Moshe's passing. (Sefer Bamidbar 33:33-38; 36:13)

Yet why did Moshe wish to wait until now? Would it not have been better to reprimand the nation when they were in the process of committing the sin? The Yalkut Me'Am Lo'Ez records several reasons why Moshe delayed:

1) Moshe was concerned that his rebuke could cause embarrassment. If Moshe had reprimanded the nation each time it sinned it could have caused them much embarrassment of failing to meet expectations, something Moshe wished to avoid.

Yet if we were to follow Moshe's model, then it could be argued whether there is in fact place for rebuking someone who is currently committing a sin! However, as the Me'Am Lo'Ez illustrates, there are two different scenarios. On the one hand, someone who, after being reprimanded for committing a sin, continues to sin, needs to be rebuked at the time so as to deter a repeat performance. Yet on the other hand, a person who has been rebuked and sincerely accepts upon himself to repent, such a repeat of the rebuke here could cause unwarranted embarrassment.

2) Moshe was soon about to die. Thus following on from the above idea, if anyone were to be embarrassed so much as to not being able to look Moshe in the eye after the rebuke, then Moshe knew that by delaying his message until before his death, he would limit such an occurrence from happening.

3) Moshe did not want the nation to feel anger or resentment towards him as a consequence of his rebuke. Rather he wished that they would understand that he was reprimanding them merely out of love as their leader and teacher.

4) Moshe was concerned that he himself may at any given time sin. If he rebuked the nation earlier on and then committed a sin himself, then he could be criticised for having 'double-standards'.

Quoting Sifre, Rashi adds that Moshe wanted to pass on this trait of delaying rebuke to the nation. In fact, he had learnt this from Ya'akov Avinu. Ya'akov had waited until his deathbed to rebuke Reuven for moving his bed, for Ya'akov feared Reuven would be so embarrassed that he would join with Eisov (Sefer Bereishis 49:4). It is apparent in scripture that this lesson was successfully passed down – first to Yehoshua, who rebuked the nation only at the end of his lifespan (Yehoshua 24:29-30), and then on to Shmuel HaNavi (Shmuel Alef 12:3) and Dovid HaMelech (Melachim Alef 1 2:1-10).

Similarly, Moshe's delay can be explained from the next Posuk:

אַחֲרַי הִכְתּוּ אֶת סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶשְׁבוֹן וְאֶת עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּעֶשְׂתָּרֶת בְּאֲדָרְעִי :

"After he had smitten Sihon, King of the Amorite, who dwelt in Heshbon, and Og, King of Bashan, who dwelt in Ashtaroth, in Edrei." (Devarim 1:4)

Rabbeinu Bachya writes that had Moshe rebuked the nation before the defeat of Sihon and Og and the seizing of their lands, the people could conjure up fresh complaints towards Moshe that he was adding more suffering to their plight. Additionally, the Divrei Shlomo writes that Moshe's agenda was to teach the Torah to the nation at this time. In order to achieve this, he needed to ensure that their minds were not preoccupied with enemy forces confronting them at that time. Thus Moshe chose to make an example of the defeat of Sihon and Og to rally home to the nation that despite all of the troubles and complaints hitherto, which angered Hashem, He still acted towards them with mercy and compassion.

As the nation was on the verge of entering Eretz Yisroel, Moshe's rebuke included the warning that the people should not sin when they cross into the land as it is a land like no other. As the Me'Am Lo'Ez says quoting Ramban, all of the good things in the world grew there, and unlike other lands, this land lacked nothing. In Parashas Achrei Mos the Posuk clearly states that the nation was instructed to conduct itself in the land in an appropriate manner, for fear of being 'ejected' from it (Sefer Vayikra 18:28). Thus we see Moshe delayed his rebuke and waited until the nation was soon to enter into the land, so as to forewarn the nation to avoid sinning and consequently cause future exile.