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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Devarim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel…” (Devarim 1:1).

This simple introduction to the book of Devarim is not so simple to understand. How could Moses speak to “all Israel”—a group of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children? There were no microphones, loudspeakers, radio, internet, cell phones, or any other technical way of reaching such a vast assemblage.

Aside from the problem of getting his words to reach the people, Moses’s last remarks are quite extensive…the entire book of Devarim. How could Moses speak for so long; how could people be expected to listen attentively for such a protracted message?

Yet, in spite of these questions, the Torah reports that Moses did indeed communicate with all the people and the people apparently received his words.

Moses was very wise. He knew he had an important role to play before his death. He needed to prepare the people as they were about to enter the Promised Land. He wanted to remind them of God’s providence and promises; and he also wanted them to recall their various sins and feel penitent. He felt it was important to review many of the laws of the Torah and to highlight how vital it was for them to live according to God’s instructions in the future.

Moses knew that his intended audience was vast, with people of different intellects, interests, sensitivities. He knew that in order to communicate effectively he would need to choose his words carefully; he would need to be sure that his audience would receive his message.

How did he do this? Here is a suggestion.

He first spoke to a small group of devoted leaders. He then empowered them to bring his words to the entire people, one group at a time. To be sure that his words didn't get lost in this network of communication, Moses wrote his words: the book of Devarim. The written text must have been copied many times so that each communicator had the same material to present.

But Moses was far more successful than just reaching "all Israel" of his time. His words became part of the Torah which has reached "all Israel" for all generations. Indeed, his words also have reached billions of non-Jews through the Hebrew Bible.

Although we can't hope to achieve the Divinely inspired success of Moses, we can learn much from him about how to communicate. First, we need to formulate our message carefully. Then we need to find suitable channels through which to reach our audience. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is vital to write the text as a permanent record.

When communicators think carefully and plan intelligently, it is more likely that their words will reach their audiences.