

Trapped? Yes/No: Thoughts for Parashat Devarim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Devarim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As Moses approached his death, he offered his guidance to the people of Israel and “took upon himself to expound the Torah” (Devarim 1:5). Rashi, drawing on ancient Midrash, indicates that Moses taught the Torah in seventy languages. Since the Israelites could not possibly have known seventy languages, what is the Midrash teaching?

Some explain: The Jews will find themselves scattered throughout the world—among the seventy nations—and the Torah will be relevant to them wherever they live.

Others explain: The Torah is relevant not only to the people of Israel but to all the people of the world. Indeed, the Torah has been translated into many languages and has impacted on much of humanity.

Yet others explain: The Torah text is multi-faceted and can be interpreted in many ways. “The Torah has seventy faces,” as the Talmud puts it.

There is wisdom in all these interpretations. But perhaps there is yet another way to understand the Midrash. Let us consider a phrase relating to the game of chess: *zugzwang* (pronounced tsoog-tsvahng).

Zugzwang refers to a situation where a player is obligated to make a move, but every available legal move will worsen the situation causing loss of pieces or the game itself. The player is trapped and has no good option. Ideally, a person should think ahead and avoid getting into a *zugzwang* trap. But once it's too late, one must try to make the least damaging move possible.

Perhaps the Midrash is teaching us that life is not a game of chess! When we come to a seemingly impossible situation where all options seem bad, we have the ability to “think out of the box.” The Torah has seventy entryways; we are not restricted to only one or two choices. When we step back from a difficult challenge, we can try to evaluate options from different angles. If the obvious choices are bad, perhaps we can overcome the situation by considering unconventional ideas. In life, we are not bound by the rules of chess. The Torah is available in seventy languages, seventy faces, seventy options of understanding.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, one of the great sages of the 19th century, used to say: when people come to a wall they can't go through, they stop. When Jews come to a wall they can't go through...they go through!

We often face dilemmas that seem to have no good way out. We feel trapped and endangered. The Midrash teaches us to think again, to think beyond, to imagine what now seems impossible.