

# **Speak in Haste, Repent at Leisure**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat D'varim* (Deut. 1:1 – 3:32)**

**By Linda Cowley**

*“Eileh had'varim asher diber Moshe el-kol-Yisrael....”*

*“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel....”*

*Parashat D'varim* is the record of Moses' farewell speeches to the Israelites, given just prior to their entering Canaan, the land promised to them by God, after thirty-eight years of wandering in the wilderness. The previous generation (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb) had rejected God's orders to enter Canaan, from fear of the reports of giants there, although some later went ahead, with disastrous results. Moses reviews the history of the people's wandering, with a focus on their lack of fidelity and gratitude. Curiously, he blames God's refusal to allow him to enter the Promised Land on the Israelites' behavior, not his own earlier behavior at the Waters of Meribah, where, in apparent disregard for God's instruction, he struck the rock twice and called the people “rebels.”<sup>1</sup>

Moses goes on to describe the battle with the troops of the Ammonite King, Sihon of Heshbon, who would not let the people pass through his land, followed by the battle with King Og of Bashan, who “took to the field” against the Israelites. An interesting note, and germane to our discussion, is that Moses warned the people not to harass or provoke war with the Moabites, who occupied a land previously inhabited by the “Emim,” “a people great and numerous as the Anakites” and who, like the Anakites, were counted as Rephaim.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, he warns them against harassing or fighting the Ammonites, who were also counted as Rephaim. The Rephaim were understood to be the ancient inhabitants of Canaan, a race of giants.<sup>3</sup>

The recurrent theme of “giants” actually has its beginning in Exodus 6:4, with the Nephilim, who were reported as being on the earth “then, and later too” (prior to and after the flood). The twelve spies sent by Moses to bring a report of the land also reported sighting the Nephilim.<sup>4</sup> The Anakites, children of their father, Anak (which is both a proper name and a generic term for “long-necked” or tall people), were also giants<sup>5</sup> Although God became angry at them for their lack of faith, and condemned them to wander without entering the Promised Land, there is significant biblical evidence that the Israelites' fear of giants was well founded.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 20: 8-13.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 2:11.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Francis, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000, p. 952.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 13:33.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 778.

Why did the Israelites actually have to wander in the wilderness for thirty-eight years after receiving the report of giants from the twelve spies? Why was Moses really forbidden to enter the Promised Land with his people?

The fear of giants so infected the community that they were afraid to go in and conquer the land promised to them by God. An entire generation had to pass away before the next generation was emotionally and psychologically ready to face the challenge before them. Fear itself does not necessarily paralyze a person; rather it is the perceived consequence (whether it might be real or not) that does so. Fear among the people was spread not by all the individuals actually seeing the giants, but by the words that were spread by the spies. As the leader of the people, Moses was expected to train and equip them emotionally and psychologically to enter the land; whatever real or perceived giants were present. It was impossible, however, to overcome the consequence of the paralyzing fear that was spread among the previous generation until that group of people was gone.

The Hebrew דבר (d'var) can mean either “word” or “thing.” There is a Midrash that notes the similarity between “words/things” and “bees,” which states that Moses’ criticisms of the people were like bee stings, and as such hurt them.<sup>6</sup> The Midrash adds that when the bee stings, it actually causes its own death. Moses’ criticisms, according to that Midrash, actually caused his own death prior to entering the land. However, it is more widely accepted that it was God who prohibited Moses from entering the land: “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”<sup>7</sup> God reiterates this consequence as Moses stands on Mount Nebo gazing at Canaan, “...for you both broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people...”<sup>8</sup>

In essence, words are things, because, once they are extended, consequences follow accordingly. The spies’ “words” created “things” (giants) in the minds of the people, thus preventing an entire generation of Israelites from entering the Promised Land. Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, and added to his disobedience by “striking” the people with harsh “words” of criticism. He might instead have obeyed, upholding God’s sanctity by speaking to the rock (and to the people) the very words that would have set the appropriate example of faith in God. As a consequence of his disobedience, Moses also forfeited his right to enter the Land.

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<sup>6</sup> Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:1.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 20:12.

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 32:51.