

David Goldston  
D'rash on Eikev  
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Often, when I read Moses' farewell address, I'm reminded of King Lear – Moses seems to be wandering the desert, lashing out at the people, maddened by his inability to control the future. But reading the parsha this week, a different image came to mind – partly because of the parsha and partly because of the events of the past week: Moses' farewell sounded to me akin to a campaign speech.

What that led me to think about was the ways in which the attitudes and approaches in Moses' address do and don't align with what we've come to expect as Americans. And the question I want to leave us with is how each of us thinks about, and deals with the way Moses' themes and values both parallel and clash with those in contemporary American political rhetoric. What do we wrestle with, reconcile, discard or ignore? – because as practicing Jews and engaged Americans, I think that we carry both kinds of speeches in our minds, and souls.

As I mentioned, it's partly the text that led me down this road. This parsha has Moses addressing the people as "I" and speaking as a leader recounting his actions. It's a unique (I think) and extraordinary moment in the Torah to have Moses speaking as himself this way. (While that makes it closer to a contemporary speech, it's only a recitation of his actions, with little directly about his motivations or emotions, and of course nothing about how his upbringing led him to this point.)

But let's look at the attitudes and views in the speech. I will note in passing that in today's parsha, the speech starts with foreign policy and military matters. There's plenty there to discuss, but it's not what I want to talk about. What I do want to look at is what Moses says about the people and about the nature of history – what he thinks a leader needs to convey to have a moral, functioning society.

The first thing that struck me was the idea of history as a test. Moses says the 40 years of wandering were to test the people, to see if they were deserving of the Promised Land and ready to live there. (Interestingly, he does not describe the wandering as a punishment unlike when G\_d ordains it earlier in the Torah.)

It's not unusual for contemporary leaders to frame tough times or hard choices as tests, but the implication is usually that the test will be relatively brief and that we will come through it well. In the Torah, the outcome seems much more contingent – and of course much longer in coming. Also today, tests are often thought of as unfortunate twists of fate – albeit ones that may leave us stronger – while the Torah sees tests as necessary and indeed ordained. Tests may be difficult and painful, but they are not random and they are in some sense deserved. (Lincoln's Second Inaugural address is probably the American speech that comes closest to expressing the Biblical view of tests, but even there, that line of thinking is set off with an "if.")

Moreover, the Torah sees the testing as necessary because the people is flawed. This is an attitude almost entirely absent from American political rhetoric. Maybe there's a hint of it (intentional or not) in Jimmy Carter's idea of "a government as good as its people," but the main point there – as in most current American speeches – is that the American people are exemplary but are sometimes ill-served by leaders who are not as good as we are. (Trump may say that some people aren't good, but that's to indicate that "the real Americans" are.)

Moses, in contrast, focuses his attention on all the ways and times in which the people have failed to live up to expectations. He says the Israelites are being given the Promised Land not because they are so good, but because the current inhabitants are so evil. His retelling of history is a litany of the Israelites' weaknesses and failures, from the Golden Calf onward, not a recitation of triumphs or high points. And one message is that if the people continue in their wayward behavior, the result will be divine punishment. Perhaps some evangelicals traffic in this kind of language today, but it is conspicuously absent from mainstream political rhetoric. We are told that it's sunny campaigns that win elections, and we question whether criticism and discipline – individual or collective – are the ways to prompt moral behavior and a functioning society.

Moses' pessimistic, or at least skeptical view of the nature of the people, also colors the Torah's view of history. While Judaism generally posits a positive historical arc, it's not a straightforward path. Moses basically predicts that the people will become fat and happy in the land and will turn away from the principles and practices that have been laid down by G\_d, bringing down G\_d's wrath. While there's a strain of this in American rhetoric, the general idea has always been that prosperity equals growth equals a better life for everyone and a healthier society.

Finally, there's what the speech says about the role of a leader. This is a little complicated. Moses presents himself in the speech as a kind of savior – he tells us he's had to fast and pray repeatedly to save the people from destruction. If not for him, the Israelites literally would have been obliterated (and according to the Torah, this does appear to be the case). Of course, some leaders today speak somewhat in this vein, but it's seen by all but their supporters as a kind of pathology, and this kind of talk is about ego not societal organization. Moses, on the other hand, while railing as an individual, also does seem to be saying that a strong leader is needed to protect the people from its excesses.

The Torah, though, is more skeptical about this attitude, as are the Tanakh as a whole and the Jewish tradition. The Torah ends of course by shepherding Moses off stage and putting his kind of leadership in a box, saying no such leader ever will arise again. The rabbis try to wish away this side of Moses, emphasizing his supposed humility. The prophet Samuel advises the Israelites against anointing a king. Perhaps Moses' speech is given to us as much as a warning about leaders as it is as an oration on why they are needed. Perhaps it's designed in part to make us more willing to let Moses pass from the scene.

Whatever we think of Moses' farewell, we've just lived through a week that offered a feast of American political rhetoric, and we are ending it with a parsha that features the ultimate

example of Biblical political rhetoric. What do we do with that? How do we relate to each? Is each a part of our mindset?