**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha*:**

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

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לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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***Parashat Devarim***

**Words of Rebuke**

As we move on to the *parashiyot* in the Book of *Devarim*, we will continue our examination of the *Sifrei.* Thus, our study of the *Sifrei on Devarim* will, among other things, enrich our previous study of the *Sifrei* on *Bamidbar*.

“**These are the words which Moshe spoke”**

The *Sifrei* on *Devarim* opens with the issue of rebuke:

"These are the words which Moshe spoke" (*Devarim* 1:1).

Now did Moshe prophesy only these?

Did he not write the entire Torah, as it is stated: "And Moshe wrote this Torah" (*Devarim* 31:9)?

What, then, is the meaning of: "These are the words which Moshe spoke"?

This teaches that they were words of rebuke, as it is stated: "And Yeshurun waxed fat and kicked" (*Devarim* 32:15).

(*Sifrei, Devarim* 1, 1)[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Sifrei starts by examining the term which gives both this Torah portion and this book its name: *devarim*, words or matters or things: "These are the words (*eileh ha-devarim*) which Moshe spoke to all Yisrael."

On the face of it, this term requires no interpretation or explanation, as it would be expected in a verse that constitutes an introduction to the orations delivered by Moshe to the people of Yisrael during the five weeks before his death. Nevertheless, the *Sifrei* characterizes the term as denoting a certain type of speech — words of rebuke.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this way, the *Sifrei* gives the entire Book of *Devarim* a specific heading; the Book of *Devarim* is comprised not of words of summary, leave-taking, or direction for the future, but of "words of rebuke."

To what does the statement that "these are the words which Moshe spoke" are words of rebuke, refer?[[3]](#footnote-3) The verse that is cited as a proof, "And Yeshurun waxed fat and kicked" (*Devarim* 32:15), which is found in the song of *Ha'azinu* at the end of the book, indicates that the *Sifrei* means that the characterization of rebuke relates not only to the first part of the book, but to the book in its entirety.

The *Sifrei* goes on to point out four more instances in *Tanakh* where the term *divrei* or *devarim* means "words of rebuke":

Similarly: "The words of Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Yisrael in the days of King Uziyahu of Yehuda,

and in the days of King Yerovam son of Yoash of Yisrael, two years before the earthquake" (*Amos* 1:1).

Now did Amos prophesy only about (*al*) these?

Surely he prophesied more than all of his fellow [prophets].

What, then, is the meaning of "the words of Amos"?

This teaches that they were words of rebuke.

And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke?

As it is stated: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Shomeron,

That oppress the poor, that crush the needy, that say to their lords: Bring, that we may feast" (*Amos* 4:1).

These are their courts of law.

Similarly: "And these are the words that the Lord spoke concerning Yisrael and concerning Yehuda" (*Yirmeyahu* 30:4).

Now did Yirmeyahu prophesy only these?

Surely Yirmeyahu wrote two books,

as it is stated: "Thus far are the words of Yirmeyahu" (*Yirmeyahu* 51:64).

What, then, is the meaning of "And these are the words"?

This teaches that they were words of rebuke.

And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke?

As it is stated: "For thus says the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace.

Ask you now, and see whether a man does travail with child; wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?

Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is a time of trouble for Ya’akov, but out of it shall he be saved" (*Yirmeyahu* 30:5-7).

Similarly: "Now these are the last words of David" (II *Shemuel* 23:1).

Now did David prophesy only these?

Surely it is stated: "The spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was upon my tongue" (ibid. v. 2).

What, then, is the meaning of: "Now these are the last words of David"?

This teaches that they were words of rebuke.

And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke?

As it is stated: "But the ungodly, they are as thorns thrust away, all of them, for they cannot be taken with the hand" (ibid. v. 6).

Similarly: "The words of Kohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (*Kohelet* 1:1).

Now did Shelomo prophesy these alone?

Surely he wrote three books, and half of his wisdom are parables.

What, then, is the meaning of "The words of Kohelet"?

This teaches that they were words of rebuke.

And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke? As it is stated: "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down" (*Kohelet* 1:5).

"The wind goes toward the south, and turns about to the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuit" (v. 6).

This is east and west.

"All the rivers go to the sea" (v. 7).

He referred to the wicked by the terms sun, moon and sea — those who will not receive reward.

As in the opening *derasha*, so too regarding each of these four citations, the *Sifrei* points to a difficulty in the relationship between the verse containing the word *divrei*, "the words of," and the content of the book or the words of the character in question, and a verse from the body of the book is brought to prove that its content is words of rebuke.

In contrast to the *derasha* about "the words which Moshe spoke" in the Book of *Devarim*, the appearance of each of these verses is preceded by the question: "And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke?" The five-fold repetition of this phenomenon justifies identifying opening with *divrei* as indicating content of rebuke, establishing the truth of the *derasha*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The words of Amos**

The *Sifrei's* question regarding the verse that opens the prophecies of Amos ("The words of Amos… which he saw concerning Yisrael") — "Now did Amos prophesy only about these? Surely he prophesied more than all of his fellow [prophets]. What, then, is the meaning of 'The words of Amos'?" – is difficult to understand. The reading of the question as it appears here is the reading of MS Berlin, whereas in most manuscripts this sentence appears with the omission of the word *al*: "Now did Amos prophesy only these"?

Finkelstein, the editor of the scientific edition of the *Sifrei* on *Devarim,* explains according to the reading of MS Berlin that Amos prophesied about many nations, more than the other prophets who prophesied at that time, and not just about Yisrael, as it appears in the opening verse of the book.[[5]](#footnote-5) Because of the discrepancy between this verse and the totality of his prophecies, the word *divrei* is explained as relating to a particular genre of Amos's prophecies that were written and included in *Tanakh*, i.e. prophecies of rebuke. The verse regarding "the cows of Bashan that oppress the poor," which is understood in its simple sense as a reflection of the kingdom of Yisrael in the days of Yerovam son of Yoash as a corrupt society of abundance, is expounded in the *Sifrei* in the sharpest manner as a metaphor for the injustice and corruption prevailing in the justice system.

**The words of Yirmeyahu**

So too the question raised about Yirmeyahu: "Now did Yirmeyahu prophesy only these? Surely Yirmeyahu wrote two books, as it is stated: 'Thus far are the words of Yirmeyahu,'" requires explanation. In the wake of this verse, the identification of the two books written by Yirmeyahu is not at all clear.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Finkelstein offers two explanations for this:[[7]](#footnote-7) The first explanation is that of the commentary of Rabbeinu Hillel to the *Sifrei*, which survives in manuscript, that the first book is Yirmeyahu's prophecies about Yehuda, while the second book is his prophecy of doom concerning Babylon, which is found close to "thus far are the words of Yirmeyahu" (*Yirmeyahu* 51:64).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The second explanation is that of Rav David Pardo in his commentary to the *Sifrei*, identifying the two books as *Yirmeyahu* and *Melakhim*.

Finkelstein rejects both explanations, because they do not explain why the *Sifrei* cites the verse: "Thus speaks the Lord, the God of Yisrael, saying: Write you all the words that I have spoken to you in a book" (*Yirmeyahu* 30:2), and not the verse: "The words of Yirmeyahu son of Chilkiyahu, of the priests that were in Anatot in the land of Binyamin" (*Yirmeyahu* 1:1), which appears at the beginning of the book. We should accept Finkelstein's suggestion that the Sages point to the difficulty arising from the appearance of the command "Write you all the words that I have spoken to you in a book" in the middle of the book, and they resolve this difficulty by identifying the "words" as prophecies having the content of rebuke.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**The words of David**

The third source brought in the *derasha* is II *Shemuel* 23:1-7:

Now these are the last words of David:

The saying of David the son of Yishai, and the saying of the man raised on high, the anointed of the God of Ya’akov, and the sweet singer of Yisrael:

The spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was upon my tongue.

The God of Yisrael said, the Rock of Yisrael spoke to me: When one rules over people in righteousness, he rules in the fear of God.

And as the light of the morning, when the sun rises, a morning without clouds; when through clear shining after rain, the tender grass springs out of the earth.

For is not my house established with God? for an everlasting covenant He has made with me, ordered in all things, and sure; for all my salvation, and all my desire, will he not make it to grow?

But the ungodly, they are as thorns thrust away, all of them, for they cannot be taken with the hand.

But the man that touches them must be armed with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in their place.

In this source, which appears towards the end of the Book of *Shemuel*, David contrasts "his house" — the royal dynasty given to him by God as an everlasting kingdom — and the wicked ("the ungodly"). Rashi (ad loc.) explains the verses as follows:

And as the light of the morning, when the sun rises — And He promised me that my greatness would continually grow like the light of the morning which gets stronger and stronger.

A morning without clouds — Light that is not darkened.

When through clear shining after rain, the tender grass springs out of the earth — My morning is brighter than the clear shining that comes from rain, when the rain falls on ground that is filled with grass, and the sun shines on it and glistens. This is the meaning: More than the clear shining that comes from the rain on the grass growing from the ground.

For is not my house established with God? — That my morning should be with clouds.

An everlasting covenant He has made with me — The Torah that He gave me is set out and kept in my entire house.

For all my salvation, and all my desire — My needs are prepared before Him. This is an abridged verse.

Will he not make it to grow — Further after my reign.

But the ungodly, they are as thorns thrust away — When [a thorn] is small, it is soft and pliant, but in the end it becomes so hard that it cannot be taken with the hand.

But the man that touches them must be armed — He must wear iron on his flesh and fill his hand with weapons in order to cut it.

And they shall be utterly burned with fire in their place — There is no repair there other than burning it with fire and sitting and being warmed up before it. So too the wicked have no repair, other than being burned in Gehenna.

In their place — The Holy One, blessed be He, sits on the throne of justice.

The contrast between them is the contrast between the spectacular sight of the sparkling light created when a ray of sun meets the raindrops caught among the blades of grass, and a great thorn that requires the protection of iron tools in order to uproot it, and that has no repair other than burning it in fire.

The *Sifrei* sees in this comparison, or in the verses that describe the wicked, words of rebuke. On the face of it, this meaning does not accord with the plain meaning of the text, according to which King David is offering thanks for his lot and describing the kingdom that will grow from him as connected to beauty and life, because of the covenant made with the God of Yisrael.

It, therefore, seems that this *derasha* is "weaker" than the previous *derashot*, in which the cited verses express penetrating rebuke:

But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked, you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become gross; and it forsook God who made it, and contemned the Rock of its salvation. (*Devarim* 32:15)

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Shomeron, that oppress the poor, that crush the needy, that say to their lords: Bring, that we may feast. The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: Lo, surely the days shall come upon you, that you shall be taken away with hooks, and your residue with fish-hooks. (*Amos* 4:1-2)

**The words of Kohelet**

This "weakness" is intensified in the last *derasha* of the *Sifrei* here, regarding the book of *Kohelet*:

And from where do we know that they were words of rebuke? As it is stated: "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down" (*Kohelet* 1:5).

"The wind goes toward the south, and turns about to the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuit" (v. 6).

This is east and west.

"All the rivers go to the sea" (v. 7).

He referred to the wicked by the terms sun, moon and sea — those who will not receive reward.

The *derasha* becomes clear when we examine the verses cited in the *derasha* in their original context, among the first verses of "the words of Kohelet":

The words of Kohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says Kohelet; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

What profit has man of all his labor wherein he labors under the sun?

One generation passes away, and another generation comes; and the earth abides forever.

The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to its place where it rises.

The wind goes toward the south, and turns about to the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they go again. (*Kohelet* 1:1-7)

The Book of *Kohelet* describes the endless periodicity of nature — the sun and the water — which expresses the necessity, the deterministic element in reality, in relation to the human plane. Thus, man too is trapped within a predetermined causality and is not free. The *derasha* echoes the need to read the verses in one breath, as part of the same idea, and turns the description of nature, which parallels man, into a metaphor. Still, why are these "words of rebuke"?

In the wake of what we have seen above, it seems that the "weakness" of the last two *derashot* in the *Sifrei* is deliberate, and therefore we must seek additional meaning in the *derashot* of the Sages.

**Rebuke as a declaration of direction**

Let us look again at the verses presented as a rebuke throughout the *derasha*:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Character | Verse | The situation described in the verse | The time to which the rebuke relates |
| Moshe | But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked, you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become gross; and it forsook God who made it, and contemned the Rock of its salvation. | Yisrael is entering the land and forgetting God | The future |
| Amos | Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Shomeron, that oppress the poor, that crush the needy, that say to their lords: Bring, that we may feast. | A corrupt judicial system in the kingdom of Yisrael in the days of the prophet | The present |
| Yirmeyahu | For thus says the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask you now, and see whether a man does travail with child; why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is a time of trouble for Ya’akov, but out of it shall he be saved. | A situation of crisis out of which salvation will grow | The future |
| David | But the ungodly, they are as thorns thrust away, all of them, for they cannot be taken with the hand.But the man that touches them must be armed with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in their place.  | Identification of the kingdom of the House of David with the good in the world | The present and the future |
| Shelomo | The words of Kohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says Kohelet; vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has man of all his labor wherein he labors under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; and the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to its place where it rises. The wind goes toward the south, and turns about to the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they go again.  | Man's situation as a creature of nature | All times |

An examination of the table reveals that all the verses of "rebuke" relate to the future or the present, and not one of them relates to the past. This is a matter of great significance, particularly in light of the issue under discussion, the issue of rebuke. The entire concept of rebuke relates to an action performed or to a situation prevailing in the past, for which one person rebukes another. How can we talk about rebuke without a past?

The *derasha* seems to speak about a different concept of rebuke, which relates to the future or the present, but not to the past. This rebuke arouses the person to the challenge one is now facing or will face in the future, and prepares one for it. The person is called upon to see reality, what struggles must be faced, and how to face them.

Thus, according to the *Sifrei*, Moshe informs the people of Yisrael of their future stumbles, as part of the preparation for entering into the land, in order to sharpen their awareness of the responsibilities and dangers before them.

Amos points to the corrupt judicial system of the kingdom of Yisrael in order to correct the injustices.

Yirmeyahu teaches the people how to deal with the crises that will come upon them in the future, and to see how salvation rises from the ashes.[[10]](#footnote-10)

David expects them to understand the significance of the establishment of the Davidic dynasty for the advancement of good in the world, towards the coming of the Redeemer — not just as personal, familial or tribal dynasty.

Finally, Shelomo seeks to deepen the view of the human condition as a whole, and to elevate the existence of man above nature.

The rebuke spoken of in the *derasha* in the *Sifrei* calls upon a person to understand the magnitude of the value of the phenomena, processes and periods in which one lives. One must live them intensely, without their being subsumed in the natural flow of life.

These words are appropriate for this period, days of mourning over a Temple that has not yet appeared. It is the time to draw into one’s inner being the full power and meaning of this message, and not to let it pass one by unnoticed.

These words are fitting for the generation of the ingathering of the exiles that faces the challenge of reuniting the tribes of Israel: to understand the magnitude of the hour, and to act.

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Our *shiur* revolves around the *derasha* that opens the first *parasha* of the *Sifrei* on *Devarim.* The *Sifrei* continues with the theme of rebuke, relating to rebuke in its basic sense, as referring to past failings. It is clear that this issue disturbs the rest of the Tannaim — Whom to rebuke? By whom? When? — and they draw strength and inspiration from the figure of Moshe before his death.

You are invited to continue studying the words of the Tannaim.

I would be happy to hear from you.

*Shabbat shalom*!

Anticipating the imminent redemption,

Tziporah

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(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Parallel Midrashic passages include the following: *Midrash Tannaim*, *Devarim* 1:1; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana,* *Divrei Yirmeyahu*; *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber) *Ki Tisa* 17. Compare *Sifrei, Bamidbar* 99; *Kohelet Rabba* 1, 1, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is possible that the *Sifrei* follows the methodolodgy of Rabbi Akiva, received from Nachum of Gimzo, to expound the words *et*, *rak*, and *gam*, which he extends to additional words in the Torah. The same is true about the exegesis of the Amoraim in relation to that of the Tannaim. See, for example, *Bereishit Rabba* 42, 3: "Wherever it says, 'And it came to pass in the days of,' [this refers to days of] trouble." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The biblical commentators divided the book in different ways. The most common division of the Book of *Devarim* is into three (see Malbim's commentary to *Devarim* 1:1): the oration of rebuke (Chapters 1-11); the oration concerning the *mitzvot* (Chapters 12-27), and the oration concerning the covenant (Chapters 28-32). The oration concerning the *mitzvot* is the longest among them.

It seems that the Sages relate to the content of Moshe's speeches at the beginning and at the end, and not to the Book of *Devarim* as it appears before us. In this context, we should take note of the Malbim's approach to Moshe's orations (*Devarim* 1:3) as speeches delivered to the people across forty years at the times and places mentioned in the verse (“in the wilderness, in the Arava, over against Suf”). Moshe is then commanded by God, before his death, to commit to writing these speeches as the final part of the Torah.

See also the words of the *Sifrei* at the end of the *derasha* concerning the theme of rebuke:

“Moshe spoke to all of Yisrael” (*Devarim* 1:3) — Did Moshe prophesy only these words? From where do we know that all the commandments in the Torah, minor and major, the verbal analogies, the general rules and the specific details, the main principles and the particular applications [were transmitted by Moshe to all of Yisrael before his death]? Therefore the verse states (ibid.): “Moshe spoke… according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them” (1, end of sec. 2, p. 11 in ed. Finkelstein). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Finkelstein points out that the Books of *Devarim*, *Amos*, *Yirmeyahu* and *Kohelet* each open with “*devarim*” or “*divrei,*” from *davar*, and not with other terms of prophecy, such as "vision" (*chazon*) or "burden" (*masa*). I have not found any other place in *Tanakh* where the word *divrei* or *devarim* introduces the words of a person. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It may be argued that the difficulty in explaining this statement, based on the reading of the majority of manuscripts, might attest to its being the original reading.

Another argument that supports this reasoning is the repetition of the formula: "Now did … prophesy only these?" which appears another four times, regarding Moshe, Yirmeyahu, David and Shelomo. According to this reading, the *Sifrei's* question is: That which appears in the Book of *Amos* is not all of his prophecies, because he delivered more prophecies than any of the other prophets of his time; how then can it say that these are "the words of Amos"?

Quantitatively, Amos' book (nine chapters) is small in comparison to that of Yeshayahu (sixty-six chapters) and Hoshea (fourteen chapters) "who prophesied at the same time" (see BT *Bava Batra* 14b). The Sages may have had a tradition regarding a large number of prophecies that Amos delivered for his own time, but were not committed to writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See his edition p. 2, n. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This was the word of Yirmeyahu the prophet, commanding Seraya, son of Neriya, son of Machseiya, when he went with King Tzidkiyahu of Yehuda to Babylon in the fourth year of his reign. Now Seraya was quartermaster. And Yirmeyahu wrote in one book all the evil that should come upon Babylon, even all these words that are written concerning Babylon.

And Yirmeyahu said to Seraya: When you come to Babylon, then see that you read all these words, and say: O Lord, You have spoken concerning this place, to cut it off, that none shall dwell therein, neither man nor beast, but that it shall be desolate forever.

And it shall be, when you have made an end of reading this book, that you shall bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates; and you shall say: Thus shall Babylon sink, and it shall not rise again because of the evil that I will bring upon it; and they shall be weary.

Thus far are the words of Yirmeyahu. (*Yirmeyahu* 51:59-64).  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The identification of the two books remains unclear. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yirmeyahu's prophecy here is part of the prophecies of consolation in his book (see Chapters 30-33), and the great difficulty described in the verse brought by the *Sifrei* is part of the process of the "birth" of redemption. See *Yirmeyahu* 30:1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)