

Great speeches have great openings. Orators choose their opening words for their music and their meaning. A great speech has to soar, but it also has to deliver. It has to inspire but it also has to impart. Abraham Lincoln began his address at the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania with these words: **Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.** As has been pointed out many times, he chose the locution, **four score and seven**, rather than simply the number, **eighty-seven**, to evoke a sense of awe and biblicality. He was channeling the



King James translation of Psalm 90:10: **The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.** This temporarily

transported the listener to the realm of the sacred, where the Bible was read and heard, to the church, to the hearth, to the bedside. More importantly though, he took the audience back to the beginning of the nation, drawing on the memory of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Using the imagery of conception and birth, he reminded his audience that this nation was still very new, and that its uniqueness, encoded in the Declaration was that it was dedicated to an idea: that all men are created equal. With the remaining 242 words of his speech, he was able to reframe the war as a conflict against slavery, and offer the hope **that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.** Deuteronomy can be described as an anthology of Moses's last speeches to the people. The book opens by telling us that the people is now situated, in the fortieth year since the Exodus, on the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab. Moses begins his first speech with these words:

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ דָּבַר אֵלֵינוּ בְּחֹרֵב לְאֹמֶר רַב לָכֶם שָׁבֶת בְּהָרָה הַזֶּה. (דב' א':)
Ado-nai our God spoke to us at Horev, saying: Enough for you, staying at this mountain! (Deut. 1:6)

How does this verse function as an opening to a speech? What does it accomplish? How do these eleven words set the stage for what is to come? To answer these questions, let us break it down into its constituent elements.

¹ The most important verse in which we find this form of God's name is of course, שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד. **Hear Israel, Ado-nai-our-God, Ado-nai Alone!** When Moses says that to the people (Deut. 6:4), he is including himself.

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. **Ado-nai-Eloheynu.** When we recite a typical blessing, we tend to separate those two words by a pause or a beat. To wit: **Barukh ata Ado-nai - Y (pause) -Eloheynu Melekh Ha'olam Y (pause)...** But in this locution **Ado-nai** and **Eloheynu** are linked together as a compound name of God: **Ado-nai-Eloheynu, Ado-nai-Our God.** It is one of several compound names of God that we find in Deuteronomy (see chart on other side of the page). Why is Moses using this term here? Because he is trying ever so subtly to convey to his audience, that **we are all bound to each other. Bound by our relationship to our God, we are all going to embark on this journey together.** Lincoln accomplishes this deftly. In the Address, he uses the word **we** ten times, **us** three times, and **our** twice. The cumulative impact of the first person plural is the feeling of connection to the speaker. **We are all in this together.**¹

אֱלֹהֵינוּ דָּבַר אֵלֵינוּ בְּחֹרֵב לְאֹמֶר **Spoke to us at Horev, saying.** Once again Moses uses the first-person plural to dissolve the barrier between himself and the people. But here is the rhetorical trick that he is performing: **he is identifying the audience in front of him with the previous generation.** The people that he is talking to right now were most definitely **not** present at Sinai-Horev. But he is getting them to imagine that they are there. Just like Lincoln is taking his audience on an imaginative leap back to 1776-Philadelphia, Moses is taking his audience on an imaginative leap back to post-Exodus Sinai-Horev. God said many important things there, including the Ten Commandments. But for a split second, we are wondering what part of what God said there is going to apply to us here? Like Lincoln's **Four score and seven** Moses' opening words raise an immediate rhetorical tension that require an immediate rhetorical resolution.

הַזֶּה הָהָרָה לָכֶם שָׁבֶת בְּהָרָה הַזֶּה **enough for you staying at this mountain.** When have we heard the words **לָכֶם רַב-rav lakhem (enough)** before? At the Korah rebellion. Korah and the rebels charge Moses with taking too much upon themselves: **לָכֶם רַב-You have gone too far!** (Num. 16:3) When Moses reacts and issues his challenge to them, he spikes them back with those exact words: **לָכֶם רַב-you have gone too far, sons of Levi!** (Num. 16:7). As Yosemite Sam might say, **Them's fightin' words!** Thus, when Moses quotes God as saying, **לָכֶם רַב-it is enough for you,** he



injects a tone of rebuke into his speech right at the outset. The melody as it were, suddenly changes key. In an instant we go from the lofty **we-are-all-in-this-together** sentiment, to an **elbow-jab-in-the-ribs, get-yourself-up-and-get-**

Throughout history, when Jews recite that verse, not only are they declaring the essence of God's oneness, but they are leaping into solidarity with Jews in every place and in every era, simply by saying **Ado-nai Eloheinu - The Lord our God.**

moving, rebuke. In the next couple of verses, that sense of prodding and exhortation is loud and clear: **פָּנוּ וּסְעוּ לָכֶם - Face about, march on!** **וּבְאוּ הָרַ הָאֲמֹרִי - Go to the Amorite highlands!** (v. 7), **בָּאוּ וְרִשְׁוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ - Enter, take possession of the land!** (v. 8).

Like many other moments in Deuteronomy, Moses' recollection is slightly different from what was originally said.² Nearly forty years ago, at Mount Sinai, God was angry at Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf. After that whole incident, God tells Moses in a slightly chastising tone, to lead the people forward to the land. However, because of their idolatry, God said that he would not be going with them in their midst, lest he destroy them. He would be sending a messenger to lead them.³ When the people hear that, they react with despair. Moses beseeches God to relent.

It is striking to observe that Moses chooses to begin his final speeches to Israel in this way. He could have chosen to be like Joshua who, when he gave his final valedictory address at the end of his life, went all the way back to the beginning of Israel's story, citing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Josh. 24).⁴ Or he could have been like Solomon, who, when he gave his magnificent speech at the dedication of the Temple, started out with a benediction and a brief recap of Israel's history.⁵ Here, at the beginning of Deuteronomy, when we are ready to hear a grand valedictory address, it as if we are joining a speech already in progress. We feel that we have missed a line or two. What starts out with a slight hint of togetherness, ends up having no hook, no grandiloquent introduction, no lofty *exordium*.⁶ Indeed, Moses will yet offer other big speeches with big rhetorical moves, but we will have to wait until the end of the book to hear them. Nevertheless, why would Moses start a speech like this?

Some thoughts: **1.** He is, in some way, expressing the disappointment and frustration of having to wait forty years to bring the people into the land. Had things gone the way they were planned, they would have already been in the land, secure and living out God's promise **under his leadership**. But the people's obstinacy and rebelliousness resulted in the 40-year delay. Instead of the original Exodus generation who should have entered the land, now their descendants are standing ready to go in. The Exodus generation stood at the starting line, and the desert generation is now standing at the finish line. Moses is making a rhetorical connection between the two moments. **2.** As much as we would have wanted Moses to be *Lincolnesque* in this speech, he has a different agenda

² See Exod. 32:33-33:4.

³ Exod. 33:3.

⁴ We are familiar with that speech because a portion of it is included in the Haggadah: **Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods....** (Josh. 24:2)

⁵ **Praised be the ETERNAL, the God of Israel, who has fulfilled with deeds the promise made to my father David. For [God] said, 'Ever since I brought My people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city among all the tribes of**

here: **Recall, review, and rebuke**. He wants to **recall** the defining events of the last forty years; he wants to **review** the basic legislation that has been given; and he wants to **rebuke** the people so that they will steward their lives in the land in accordance with God's will. From the very first sentence of the very first speech, Moses sets out to do that. He connects to the people, but he also situates himself in opposition to them. He is, after all, God's emissary. Therefore, as much as he is **a part of them**, he is also **apart from them**. That's his vocation.

3. There is a heavy dramatic tension that permeates this entire book: Moses knows that he is not going with them into the land. His audience at the banks of the Jordan River knows this. We know it as well. Here is a man who is standing in front of his people on his last days, knowing that soon he will be gathered to his kin. Wanting so much to enter the land with them, he had to reconcile himself to the fact that he will not be going there. Therefore, he had to figure out a way of still leading the people into the land, despite the fact that his body will be forever situated across from it. How would he accomplish that? Moses understood that the only thing he had to offer them in order to them after he was gone was his words. Lincoln understood that as well. Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address with full knowledge that they would outlast him. He was right. They have resonated with us ever since. Moses was giving these speeches with full hope that Israel would take these words with them into the land. He was right. We, the descendants of those who stood at Sinai and those who stood at the Jordan, have been reading, reciting and studying his words to this very day.

Shabbat Shalom!

Forms of God's Compound Names in Deuteronomy

ה' אֱלֹהֵי	Ado-nai your (sing.) God	234	75%
ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם	Ado-nai your (pl.) God	44	14.1%
ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ	Ado-nai our God	22	7%
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיךָ	Ado-nai God of your (sing.) fathers	4	1.3%
ה' אֱלֹהֵי	Ado-nai my God	3	.96%
ה' אֱלֹהָיו	Ado-nai his God	2	.06%
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵכֶם	Ado-nai God of your (plural) fathers	1	.03%
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ	Ado-nai God of our fathers	1	.03%
ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתָם	Ado-nai God of their fathers	1	.03%
Total # of times God's name is compounded:		312	

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Israel for building a House where My name might abide; but I have chosen David to rule My people Israel. (1 Kings 8:15-16).

⁶ This is a fancy-shmancy pretentious term from classical rhetoric. The purpose of the *exordium* is to capture the listener's attention and establish the credibility of the speaker. We are more familiar with the term, *peroration*, which refers to the rousing conclusion that summarizes the speech and often presents a call to action. Moses is not bound by classical rhetorical conventions. But that's the point.