



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

D'VARIM

Count Me In

The book of D'varim begins with the majestic introduction, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Israel" (1:1). What follows is a long farewell message summing up forty years of leadership and teaching.

The mood is positive, but also negative. Where Israel need encouragement, encouragement they get. Where they deserve rebuke, the rebuke is forthcoming.

A leader about to step down from office is entitled to look back on his career and to say critical things about people and events, and that is what Moshe does. His audience is Israel, Kohanim, Levites, ordinary people, old and young, men, women and children.

Introducing the leader's message, however, the Torah could just as well have said, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to Israel". Why does the text actually say, "to ALL Israel"?

The Midrash gives an answer: "All Israel" includes Moshe himself. To whom does he address his criticism?

To the people, yes; but to himself too. Indeed, he rebukes himself first, according to the Midrash, before he rebukes the people.

A career in leadership must never blind the leader to his own failings. He has to know himself and acknowledge, at least to himself and to God, that for all that he has achieved, he might have achieved even more had he been able to change himself and work on his own shortcomings.

HOW?!

EICHA, "How!", figures three times this week - in the Torah portion, in the haftara, and in the Book of Lamentations.

The EICHA in the Torah portion is a rhetorical question by Moshe: "How can I bear by myself your troublesomeness, your burden and your strife?" (D'varim 1:12).

Moshe is telling the people how hard it is to be a leader. They make his life difficult, they blame him for everything, and they are never satisfied. He gets so weighed down that he probably begins to blame himself whenever anything goes wrong.

It happens with most leaders. Rabbis are particularly prone to self-doubt. If people don't come to synagogue, the rabbi thinks it is due to him. If the community moves to another district, he thinks he caused it. If a program is

not a success, he accuses himself. Obviously no rabbi is perfect and his failings have an effect, but self-blame is too easy.

Bear in mind that sometimes a synagogue flourishes regardless of the rabbi; sometimes the rabbi is unfortunately a mediocrity but it is his luck to be in a congregation that suddenly benefits from demographic changes.

This does not imply that the rabbi is an irrelevancy, but it is unfair for the congregation to think everything is the rabbi's fault and for the rabbi to blame himself regardless. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH