

**The Opening Verses of Sefer Devarim,
and the Structure of the Sefer as a Whole**

by Rav Mordechai Sabato

(1) "These are the things that Moshe told to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the desert wilderness facing Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazerot and Di-Zahav.

(2) (It is a journey of eleven days from Horev, via Mount Se'ir, to Kadesh Barne'a.)

(3) In the fortieth year, in the twelfth month, on the first of the month, Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael according to all that God had commanded him for them;

(4) After he had slain Sihon, king of the Emori, who dwelled in Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtarot in Edre'i;

(5) On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Mo'av, Moshe began to declare this Torah, saying:"

With this preamble, the Torah introduces Sefer Devarim and informs us that we are about to read Moshe's words as addressed to the nation of Israel in the land of Mo'av, close to the end of the fortieth year. No such introduction exists for any other Sefer, and this is an indication of the uniqueness of Sefer Devarim. The great majority of Devarim consists of a record of the speeches that Moshe delivers at the end of the desert journeying. Sefer Devarim includes almost no narration of events that happened to the nation or direct Divine commands. In this sense it is different from the other four Books of the Torah.

In this shiur we shall attempt to address the significance of these introductory verses and their connection to the structure and content of Sefer Devarim.

A.

Let us begin with a brief overview of the structure of the Book.

Moshe's first speech begins in chapter 1, verse 6: "The Lord God spoke to us in Horev, saying..." This speech continues uninterrupted until chapter 4, verse 40. In chapter 4, verses 41-43 the Torah describes the setting aside of the cities of refuge by Moshe, and in verses 44-49 we find another introduction to Moshe's next speech. This second speech starts in chapter 5 and continues up until the end of chapter 26. Chapters 27-30 consist of a kind of coda to the second speech - there is a description of the ceremony of the blessing and the curse (ch. 27-28), a forging of a covenant in the wake of the speech (29), and the possibility of repentance and redemption after the realization of the curse (chapter 30). Chapters 31-34 describe Moshe's farewell to the nation, including the song (32) and the blessing before his death (33).

Sefer Devarim may therefore be divided into three parts:

1. The "historical" speech (1:1-4:40);
2. The "mitzvot" speech and its appendices (4:40- chapter 30);
3. Moshe's farewell to the nation (31-34).

The difference between the first two speeches is immediately apparent. The first includes a historical overview (chapters 1-3) and the conclusion that arises from that overview (chapter 4). This speech contains no commandments. The second speech, much longer than the first, conveys – for the most part – commandments.

The above overview of the structure is very general; its brevity is achieved at the expense of accuracy. At this stage we shall suffice with this overview; later on we shall return to clarify further details related to the structure.

B.

Let us now return to the introductory verses to the Book. These verses present several difficulties:

1. The second half of verse 1 ("in the desert...and Di Zahav") makes mention of several different places. The syntactical and informational function of these place names is unclear.
2. Verse 2 in its entirety appears out of place. It is unrelated to the time or place of Moshe's speech. The journey from Horev to Kadesh Barne'a took place during the second year in the desert; they are now in the fortieth year, encamped on the plains of Moav. What, then, is the purpose of a verse describing the length of the journey from Horev, via Mount Se'ir, up to Kadesh Barne'a?
3. Verse 3 repeats that we are about to read Moshe's speech. All of this was made clear already in verse 1; its repetition therefore demands explanation.
4. Verse 5 repeats – for the third time – the fact that we are about to read Moshe's words as uttered on the other side of the Jordan. Once again - why all this repetition?

A number of different explanations have been proposed. The scope of this shiur does not allow us to review the entire range of opinions offered by the commentators. We shall focus on only some of them, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages, and attempt – in light of their insights – to offer another explanation.

C.

Rashi writes:

"These are the things' – Since this is a rebuke and [the text] lists all the places where they made him angry before God, therefore he makes his words opaque and merely hints at them, out of respect for Israel.

Rashi continues and explains each place-name in the verse as referring to a different location where the Jews had sinned during the forty-year journey.

To Rashi's mind, the words in the second part of verse 1 – "In the wilderness...and Di-Zahav" – are meant to hint at Moshe's rebuke of Israel for various sins that the nation had committed thus far. The same understanding is reflected in Targum Onkelos. Verse 2 is similarly regarded by Rashi as a veiled criticism of Israel. From his commentary on verses 3-4 it would appear that Rashi regards these verses as a comment on the speech of rebuke – a comment determining the time of its delivery.

His commentary on verse 5 indicates that he views this verse as a new introduction that relates not to the speech of rebuke, but rather to the explanation of the Torah that follows it.

As pshat, it is difficult to regard the list of places mentioned in verse 1 as hinting at rebuke that is not made explicit in the text. For this reason, Rashbam – Rashi's grandson – offers a different interpretation. He explains that the end of verse 1 defines the exact location of Moshe's speech, such that each successive place further delimits and defines the previous one. He comments:

"These are the things' – on the literal level, all of the places mentioned in this verse are such as we commonly find where verses give one sign within another sign as to places that the text wants to indicate. (For instance), in Lekh-lekha: "on the east of Beit El, and he pitched his tent, with Beit El on the west side and Ai on the east".... And this is especially so where [the text] seeks to explain where commandments were given, as it is written, "God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai," "in the land of Egypt, this month....," "and God spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai," "on the plains of Moav".... Here too, the text gives a sign within a sign. The section before us mentions "on the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moav, Moshe began to speak..." 'On the other side of the Jordan' – on which side of the Jordan? 'In the desert' – on the side of the Jordan which is adjacent to the desert where Bnei Yisrael spent forty years, which is known to those living in Eretz Yisrael as "the other side of the Jordan".... 'Wilderness' – in other words, where exactly in the desert? In the desert that is in the plains (wilderness) of Moav. 'Facing Suf' – because the Sea of Suf starts in the east of Eretz Yisrael, as it is written, "And your border shall be from the Sea of Suf up to the Sea of the Pelishtim..." – in other words, from east to west, and this is the Dead Sea.... 'Between Paran and Tofel' – as in, "between Beit El and Ai"; 'and Hazerot and Di-Zahav' – all names of places, to be understood literally. 'And Di-Zahav' – like Bat Mei Zahav, which is a place name."

Thus, according to Rashbam, the whole of verse 1 describes the exact place where Moshe delivered his speech to Israel, and it seems that this indeed is the most accurate literal interpretation of the text [1]. While I do not accept Rashbam's interpretation of the words "facing Suf" (the Dead Sea), preferring the view that it is a place adjacent to the plains of Moav [2], the Rashbam brings persuasive examples from other places in Tanakh where the text takes the trouble to define a location by indicating a series of other places that serve to delimit and define the location in question.

A further principle that Rashbam emphasizes is that the Torah generally makes mention of a place where commandments were given to Israel. From his words it appears that he regards verse 1 as an introduction to the "commandments speech," rather than as an historical overview. Apparently Rashbam understands the verse thus on the basis of verse 5: "...Moshe began to explain this Torah" – and the word "Torah" in the text always refers to commandments. It should be pointed out that, in contrast to Rashi, who disconnects verse 1 from verse 5, Rashbam views verses 1-5 as a single unit.

How, then, does Rashbam understand the relationship between the two speeches, and why does the Torah present the introduction to the "commandments speech" prior even to the "historical speech"?

Rashbam's opinion on this question may be deduced indirectly from his commentary on chapter 4, verse 41: "...He spoke at length up to this point; now he begins to explain the commandments – how this Torah should be explained..." From this formulation we understand that Moshe's purpose from the start was really to deliver the "commandments speech," but he began with an historical overview as a sort of preparation for it. The historical overview is not an independent entity; it is meant merely to serve as an introduction to the "commandments speech." Some support for this interpretation is to be found in a comparison between the language of the introduction to the conclusion of the first speech (4:1) and the language of the introduction to the "commandments speech" (5:1):

[Devarim 4:1](#) –

"Now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments which I teach you, to perform..."

[Devarim 5:1](#) –

"Hear, Israel, the statutes and the judgments which I speak to you this day, and learn them and observe them to perform them."

The obvious similarity between these two verses points to a connection between the end of the first speech and the beginning of the second.

Attention should be paid to the fine distinction between the "hearing" of chapter 4 ("shema el") and that of chapter 5 ("shema et"). We may perhaps interpret this difference as follows: In chapter 4, what Moshe wants is for the nation to conclude, on the basis of

the historical review, that it is essential that they "listen to" (lishmo'a el) the statutes and judgments – i.e., obey them. In chapter 5, which introduces the "commandments speech" itself, Moshe asks the nation to hear (lishmo'a et) the contents the statutes and judgments. Before Moshe starts the "commandments speech," he tries to persuade Israel of the necessity of obeying the laws.

The introduction to the Sefer in the form of the verses preceding the "commandments speech" is therefore quite natural and necessary, in light of Rashbam's explanation. But now another question arises: why does the Torah repeat again a very similar introduction prior to the "commandments speech" in chapter 4, verses 44-49?

Rashbam does not address this question directly, but we may perhaps deduce his answer from his commentary on verse 1 as quoted above: "Thus it mentions [the place] and then repeats this matter when Moshe comes to explain these commandments." To Rashbam's view, the text is indeed repeating the introductory verses before embarking on an explanation of the commandments. Apparently, he understands the reason for this to be the length of the historical review and the consequent distance between the "commandments speech" and the verses that serve to introduce it.

Our hypothesis as to Rashbam's view here is expressed explicitly by Ramban.

D.

Let us now address the purpose of verse 2, according to Rashbam:

(2) "Eleven days from Horev" – Who is wise to understand this – that this verse was written only because, as it says, "We traveled from Horev and walked this entire, great, terrible desert, via the mountain of the Emorites, and came to Kadesh Barne'a" – close to Eretz Yisrael. For it was from Kadesh Barne'a that they sent the spies, and ended up staying there for forty years. Therefore, [Moshe] explains here that when they journeyed from Horev via Mount Se'ir, they could have proceeded straight into Eretz Yisrael on the eleventh day from Kadesh Barne'a. But since they sinned, they wandered around Mount Se'ir for a long time – even forty years, etc. And this is the reason why [Moshe] tells us, "We traveled from Horev...and came to Kadesh Barne'a" – in just a few days, for this is a mere eleven-day journey. But from Kadesh Barne'a I sent out spies, and you ended up staying put for forty years because of your sins."

In order to understand what Rashbam is saying here, we must take a look at the "historical speech." One of the principal aims of this speech is to show the nation what a lengthy postponement resulted from the sin of the spies: "The time that we walked from Kadesh Barne'a until we crossed over Wadi Zered, was thirty-eight years" (2:14). The significance of this postponement must be measured relative to the time that it took the nation to get from Horev to Kadesh Barne'a. For this reason the Torah mentions this detail as part of the introduction: "A journey of eleven days...up to Kadesh Barne'a."

Now the reader has a better understanding of the significance of the forty years that it took from Kadesh Barne'a up until the entry into the land [3].

We have not found any attempt by the Rashbam to address the problem of the repetition in verses 3 and 5.

E.

An approach that is fundamentally different from that adopted by the classical commentators is to be found in the Vilna Gaon's work, *Aderet Eliyahu*. He writes:

"Know that [all the text] from "These are the things" up to "the Lord our God" are the introduction to the Sefer. Therefore these verses include three mentions of Moshe speaking: "These are the things which Moshe spoke..."; "Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael"; and "Moshe began..." [The reason for this is] because this Sefer has three parts: from the beginning of the Sefer up to "Moshe called out," preceding the Ten Commandments, teaching 'mussar'; then, from "Moshe called out" up to the blessings and the curses in parashat Ki Tavo, teaching the commandments; and from then on [the section] dealing with the blessings and the curses and the other matters. Therefore prior to "Moshe called out" the text says, "These are the testimonies and the statutes...", and thereafter it begins, "Moshe called out" – which is all the same subject. Likewise before the blessings it says, "he explained well," and thereafter, "Moshe spoke."

And these three [matters] represent all of the Torah, and the Torah also consists of three Books – Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar. Bereishit is the root of all of the Torah. And therefore the Midrash is also divided into three parts: Sifra, Sifri, and Mekhilta. And this the meaning of the teaching, "He gave a three-part teaching" ([Shabbat 88a](#)), meaning three books. And the three parts of Sefer Devarim correspond to the three Books of Torah. In other words, "These are the names" (Shemot) corresponds to "These are the things"; "Vayikra" ("And He called out") corresponds to "Moshe called out," and "Bamidbar" corresponds to "Moshe spoke (va-yedaber)..."

In this teaching – as is his way in this work - the Vilna Gaon combines the level of "pshat" (the literal text) with the levels of "remez" and "sod" (the more hidden and esoteric meanings). We shall not involve ourselves here with hidden matters; we shall therefore focus only on those points in the Vilna Gaon's commentary here that relate to the literal level. His principal innovation is the proposal that these verses not be regarded as forming a single introduction (as, for example, the Ramban views them), but rather as three separate introductions, each of which stands on its own. The first introduction is verse 1, the second is verses 3-4, and the third is verse 5. To the Vilna Gaon's mind these three introductions parallel the three sections of Devarim. The first section of Sefer Devarim corresponds to what we have referred to above as the "historical speech"; in the Vilna Gaon's terms this section discusses matters of "mussar," and it corresponds to Sefer Shemot. The second section of Sefer Devarim corresponds to what we have referred to as

the "commandments speech," including its introductory verses. The Vilna Gaon agrees that this section deals with the commandments, but he does not include the blessings and the curses in this section. This is introduced by verses 3-4. The third section starts with the blessings and the curses in chapters 27-28 and includes all the chapters up to the end of the Sefer. This section, by the Vilna Gaon's definition, deals with "the blessings and curses and the other matters." Corresponding to this section is the third introduction, in verse 5. He points to a hint at this understanding in the fact that verse 5 mentions the word "be'er" (elaborated, explained), which appears again in 27:8 – "he explained well" (be'er hetev).

The Vilna Gaon's first point – i.e., that the text presents three independent introductions – seems to me to be the most appropriate explanation of the pshat. The opening of verse 3 indicates quite clearly a new beginning. The same applies to verse 5 [4]. But his second point – that these three introductions correspond to the three sections of the Sefer – is difficult to accept as a literal interpretation, for two reasons:

a. We have already said above that to our understanding, although the "commandments speech" ends in chapter 26, chapters 27-30 still look like appendices to it. As we see it, the third section starts only in chapter 31. It is difficult to see the connection between chapters 27-30 and chapters 31-34; even the Vilna Gaon refrains from giving them an overall title, but rather refers to this section as "the blessings and curses and the other matters."

b. It is difficult to accept the assertion that verse 5 corresponds to the third section of Sefer Devarim. Verse 5 states explicitly, "Moshe began to explain this Torah" – and the term "Torah" always refers to commandments. Hence we are forced to conclude that this verse corresponds to the second section of Sefer Devarim, which deals with the commandments, rather than to the third section, which addresses "the blessings and curses and the other matters." The connection between the word "be'er" in 1:5 and the same word in 27:8 must therefore be explained in a different way.

F.

Let us attempt, then, to propose a different way of understanding these verses – an approach based on the Vilna Gaon's assumption that they do indeed represent three independent introductions, but one which explains their function in a different way to the one adopted by the Gaon. We have mentioned above the close scrutiny of the verses that leads Rashbam to conclude that these verses serve as an introduction to the "commandments speech." Now, armed with the assumption that we are dealing with three independent introductions, we must pay attention to which exact verses serve as the basis for their conclusion. The main point is the word "Torah," in verse 5. To this we must add Rashbam's assertion that whenever the Torah presents a section of commandments, the text notes where these commandments were given. A description of the place is given both in verse 1 and in verse 5. Ramban also points out the use of the phrase "ALL of Israel" – an expression that occurs in verse 1. None of these details occurs in the introduction in verses 3-4. This leads us to the conclusion that the first introduction, in

verse 1, as well as the third introduction in verse 5, are both directed towards the "commandments speech." I propose that the second introduction, in verses 3-4, is directed not at the "commandments speech," but rather at the "historical speech."

Let me explain. We have already said that the principal speech deals with the commandments, while the historical overview serves as a preamble to it. For this reason, the Torah places the two introductory verses to the "commandments speech" at the beginning of the introduction (verse 1) and at end (verse 5). (I shall explain why there is a need for two introductions to the same "commandments speech" below.) In between these two introductions, the Torah inserts an additional introduction which relates principally to the historical overview. The reason for this is that this speech, although it serves as a preamble to the "commandments speech," is nevertheless worthy of being treated on its own merits – in terms of both its length and its content and significance. Even had Moshe not intended to give the "commandments speech," it would be appropriate to review the past and to learn lessons concerning observance of the commandments for the future. Support for this assertion may be brought from the conclusion of this speech - it concludes not only with the exhortation, "And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgment," which leads into the first part of chapter 4, and which serves as a preparation for the "commandments speech," but also includes another section (4,25-40). This section is unmistakably a concluding section, but with its own independent thematic content. The scope of the shiur does not allow us to elaborate here on an analysis of its content. We shall make mention only of two significant ideas that it includes. The first: even after lengthy settlement in the land, exile may occur as punishment for corruption (verses 25-28); and the second: that every exile offers the possibility of repentance and redemption (29-31). These two points are not related to preparation for the "commandments speech"; they unmistakably represent a conclusion, with substantial thematic importance. Attention should also be paid to the fact that these two points are also repeated at the end of the second section of the Sefer, in chapters 28 (exile), 30 (repentance and redemption), and in expressions similar to those that appear in chapter 4.

Additional support for this assumption may be brought from the introduction to the "commandments speech": "Moshe called out to all of Israel and said to them" (5:1). Had the historical speech been meant exclusively as a preparation for this discourse, what would be the point of calling to all of the nation over again? They would have been standing in front of Moshe all along.

In summary, the historical speech plays a dual role. On one hand it serves as preparation for the commandments speech; on the other hand it stands alone. This dual nature is discernible in the introductory verses to the Sefer. Despite the fact that the historical speech is the first speech in the Sefer, the Torah both begins the general introduction and also concludes it in reference to the commandments speech – to show that this speech is the major one, while the first speech is of secondary importance. On the other hand, the Torah does not forego an introduction to the historical speech: this is inserted between the two other introductions, to show that the historical speech is important in its own right.

Support for the assumption that verses 3-4 serve as an introduction to the historical speech may be brought from their content. These verses – in contrast to the other two introductions – make no mention of place, since they do not introduce the commandments speech, but they do include a dual indication of time. The one indication – "And it was in the fortieth year, in the twelfth month, on the first of the month"; the second – "after he had defeated Sihon... and Og." If we examine the content of the historical speech we see that these two indications of time are clearly connected to the content of the speech. We have already said that the main point of this speech is Moshe's emphasis that it was the sin of the spies that led to the lengthening of their journey to the Promised Land, from eleven days (the time it should have taken) to forty years (the time it ended up taking). For this reason it is necessary to note in the introduction that this speech is uttered in the fortieth year. Likewise, in this speech Moshe emphasizes the victories over Sihon and Og and the conquest of their land (2:31-3:11). For this reason the Torah notes in the introduction that this speech was delivered after these victories.

Mention should be made again of the Rashbam's view that verse 2 serves as a preliminary detail to enable us to understand the historical speech. According to what we have said we may say that the Torah juxtaposes verse 2, serving as this preliminary detail, to verses 3-4, which serve as an introduction to the speech. We may further say that the juxtaposition of verse 2- "Eleven days from Horev...to Kadesh Barne'a" – to verse 3, "It was in the fortieth year..." itself creates the tension and contrast between the time that the journey should have taken and the time that it actually took. This tension, as we have said, is the major subject of the historical speech.

G.

Let us now turn our attention to the question of why two separate introductions are required for the same commandments speech.

In order to explain this, we must look at the introductory verses that are repeated again prior to the commandments speech (4:44-49). Let us examine them here:

(44) "This is the Torah that Moshe set before Bnei Yisrael.

(45) These are the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments which Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael when they came out of Egypt.

(46) On the other side of the Jordan, in the valley facing Beit Pe'or, in the land of Sihon, king of the Emori, who dwelled in Heshbon, whom Moshe smote, and Bnei Yisrael, when they came out of Egypt.

(47) And they took possession of his land and the land of Og, king of Bashan – the two kings of the Emorites on the other side of the Jordan, on the east.

{ 48) From Aro'er which is on the bank of Wadi Arnon, up until Mount Sion, which is Hermon.

(49) And all of the Arava on the other side of the Jordan eastwards, up to the sea of the Arava, under the slopes of Pisga."

An examination of these verses reveals that here, too, there are two separate introductions. One is in verse 44, the other in verses 45-49. Verse 44 parallels verse 45, word for word: "This" vs. "these"; "the Torah" vs. "the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments"; "which Moshe set" vs. "which Moshe spoke"; "before Bnei Yisrael" vs. "to Bnei Yisrael." What is the purpose of this repetition?

If we pay attention to all the discrepancies that we have noted, we arrive at a clear conclusion: verse 44 describes the commandments speech not as a verbal address but rather as a written Torah which Moshe places before the nation. The expression "Torah," as opposed to "testimonies, statutes and judgments," indicates a single consolidated unit. The expression "set before" implies the placing of a physical object. Thus we conclude that this verse describe the written collection of laws which Moshe places before Israel. Verses 45-49, in contrast, indeed relate to the speech as a verbal one, delivered before Israel at a certain place and at a certain time. For this reason the text there says "spoke to" rather than "set before." And for this reason the text relates not to this body of laws as a single entity, a "Torah," but rather to the various components of the speech. For the same reason the text makes no mention of the time or place of the speech.

A study of the commandments speech demonstrates unequivocally that there are two aspects to it: it is both a verbal speech and a written Torah. The fact that it is a verbal speech is borne out by its opening and may also be deduced from the style of the speech. However, from a few places in the Sefer, we see that the commandments speech also has the status of a written "Torah" that is set down before the nation. Thus, for example, we see in the parasha of the king: "It shall be when he sits upon his royal throne that he shall write for himself a copy ("mishneh" – see Ibn Ezra) of this Torah in a book, before the kohanim and leviim" ([Devarim 17:18](#)). Likewise in the parasha of the curses we find, "If you do not observe to fulfill all the words of this Torah which are written in this Torah" (28:58). The reference appears to be to the commandments speech, which defines itself at the outset as "the Torah which Moshe set before Bnei Yisrael" [5].

Now we can explain the repetition in the introductory verses of the Sefer. Verse 1 – "These are the things which Moshe spoke to all of Israel" – undoubtedly relates to the speech as a verbal one. Let us now try to establish that verse 5, "on the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moav, Moshe began to explain (be'er) this Torah," relates to the speech as a written Torah. Although the verb "be'er" would seem to indicate an explanation or elaboration on the Torah, we shall try to demonstrate that this is not so.

The verb "be'er" is mentioned in Tanakh in only two other places. One is in [Devarim 27:8](#) – "You shall inscribe on the stones all the words of this Torah, clearly (be'er hetev)"; the second is in Havakuk 2:2 – "Write the vision and inscribe (be'er) upon the tablets, in order..." It is difficult to understand the word "be'er" in these verses as a synonym for "explain." What is the point of inscribing upon the stones all the words of the Torah, explained and elaborated at length? While Rashi comments, "He explained it to them in

seventy languages," it is difficult to accept that this is the literal meaning of the text. Likewise the verse in Havakuk is difficult to understand as meaning that the prophet is commanded to write upon the tablets the vision and its explanation. For this reason linguists conclude that the primary meaning of this verb is to dig, or inscribe. This verb is related to the noun "be'er" (a well), which needs to be dug out or "engraved" in the ground [6]. It must be remembered that engraving in stone was the first form of writing, and thus the root "be'er" indicates writing. The verse in [Devarim 27](#) therefore teaches: "You shall inscribe upon the stones all the words of this Torah, well engraved." In Havakuk, too, the prophet is commanded to write down the vision, to engrave it clearly upon the tablets.

To our view, verse 5 in chapter 1 should be understood the same way. "Moshe began to "be'er" – to inscribe" – this Torah. In other words, he began to write it [7].

The relationship between verse 5 and verse 1 of chapter 1 therefore parallels the relationship between verse 44 and verses 45-49 of chapter 4. "On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moav, Moshe began to "be'er" this Torah" parallels "This is the Torah that Moshe set before Bnei Yisrael," and "These are the things which Moshe spoke to all of Israel" parallels "These are the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments which Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael." It should further be pointed out that this parallel is chiasmic and this, too, is characteristic of biblical style [8].

In summary, the complex structure of the opening verses of Sefer Devarim are a precise and exact reflection of the complex structure of the Sefer as a whole. These verses reflect both the complex relationship between the historical speech and the commandments speech and the dual nature of the commandments speech itself, which is simultaneously both an oral teaching and a written Torah.

Hence the Torah goes on to command not only that the nation hear, listen, heed the commandments uttered by Moshe before the nation, but also that they study the Torah written by Moshe and placed before them. Indeed, this is exactly what God tells Yehoshua immediately after Moshe's death ([Yehoshua 1:6-7](#)):

"Only be very strong and courageous to observe and perform all of the Torah which Moshe, My servant, commanded you; do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, in order that you may be successful in all that you undertake.

Let this Book of the Torah not depart from your mouth; meditate over it day and night, in order that you will observe to fulfill all that is written in it, for then you will prosper in your ways and have success."

Notes:

[1] Several commentators maintain that these places indicate the various sites where Moshe spoke at different times (see, for example, Ibn Ezra). This explanation does not appear to reflect the literal meaning of the text for the simple reason that Moshe's

speeches seem to be consolidated addresses with a uniform structure; we do not see any possibility of fragmenting them.

[2] Perhaps this is the place mentioned in [Bamidbar 21:14](#) – "Vahev in Sufa." See the various commentaries ad loc. and in Da'at Mikra.

[3] This explanation typifies the approach of Rashbam, who explains many verses in Tanakh as serving as preliminary notes to help us understand better the narrative that is to follow. Usually these details appear before the beginning of the narrative so as not to interrupt the flow of the story. This theory is known as the "introductions principle."

[4] Compare R. Yaakov Tzvi of Kallenberg in his commentary, "Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah" ad loc, after he quotes the Vilna Gaon: "This is a wonderful interpretation, and quite correct. It is quite unnecessary for the other commentaries to force themselves into connecting these five verses into a single subject."

[5] See also 28:61. It should be emphasized that the act of writing a Torah is mentioned explicitly in 31:9, 24.

[6] See Mendelkern's comment in his Concordance, under "be'er," and Ben-Yehuda's dictionary, under "be'er," and elsewhere.

[7] Rav Hoffman adopts the same interpretation in his commentary ad loc.

[8] See M. Zaidel, "Hakrei Mikra," Jerusalem 5738

Translated by Kaeren Fish