

History

The Book of Devarim, Deuteronomy, is the farewell message of Moses after forty years in the wilderness, before he dies and before he passes the baton on to Joshua.

It contains two parts. The first is the apparent recapitulation by Moses of the history of the past forty years. As he tells it. As he remembers it. And the great commentators disagree as to whether these are the words of Moses himself or the words that God conveyed to him. The second element is a recapitulation of the laws (excluding most of the priestly, purity and sanctuary laws to be found at the end of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers).

The difference would be that the discrepancies we shall deal with, could simply be the result of the passage of time and human fallibility. Or they could be intended as repetitions and variations to expand on earlier ideas and laws, to clarify and qualify in the light of experience.

History is the record of events that took place in the past. This record comes from documents, inscriptions and the works of historians who try to reconstruct events that took place earlier. But we know that two people can see the same event differently. We also know that human memory is not always reliable. What happens when we have different conflicting records? Which one do we accept? Perhaps sometimes both views of the same event might be right. Just as we have different sides to our faces. They are not the same. We think we have one face and it is balanced. Yet one eye might be bigger than the other or shaped differently. One ear lower than the other. When we look at others we combine both views into a single portrait.

History is like that. There are historians, each giving a personal view. We talk about fake news. But the truth is that there is no such thing as objective news. It is all biased to some degree.

When, in the Book of Bamidbar, the episode of the spies was described, it said explicitly that "God said to Moses, send spies." But here in this week's reading of Devarim, Moses says "And you all got together and came to me and said, let us send spies...and I agreed." Which version was correct? Perhaps both were correct. The Torah often tells narratives in different ways, repeats and adds an extra dimension. There is not only one history.