

Good Shabbos... This week's parasha is Devarim -- the first parasha of the last book of the Torah. The standard understanding of this parasha is that it is the beginning of Moses's extended farewell address to the Jewish people. In thinking about this dvar, I started out with that standard understanding of the parasha in mind. But then I came to Moses's simple admonition to the Jewish people --

-- "Do not fear and do not lose resolve." My thinking suddenly changed. I was no longer thinking so much of a farewell address, but instead of an inaugural address -- Franklin Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address to be precise. Delivered at the height of the Great Depression on March 4, 1933, this was the speech in which Roosevelt famously declared, "All we have to fear is fear itself." There are actually 3 additional references to not fearing that are spread throughout this parasha --

I'm certainly not suggesting that this week's parasha was a conscious or direct influence on FDR's famous address, although Roosevelt does in fact mention "a plague of locusts" at one point in the speech. But, some comparisons between the lives of Moses and FDR can be revealing, even startling. First, both Moses and FDR each had a significant physical disability -- Moses, a stutter and FDR, polio. Second, both grew up in affluence -- Moses in the palace of Pharaoh and FDR as part of the leisured, landed gentry along the Hudson River. Third, both had powerful, even dominating, mothers. Fourth, growing up, neither Moses nor FDR had a particularly religious upbringing or openly devout faith. Fifth, and of course most poignantly, both died on the very brink of victory -- Moses literally within sight of the Promised Land and FDR less than 4 weeks before the final collapse of Nazi Germany and less than 4 months before the end of World War II. But perhaps most significant of all is a sixth similarity. Neither Moses nor FDR could become the great leader each was destined to be until each had undergone a major personal moral awakening that allowed them to identify with the needs of those beyond their immediate privileged circle. In the case of Moses, this moral awakening involved his direct field observation of the Jewish people's oppression by their Egyptian taskmasters. In the case of FDR, this moral awakening was probably triggered by his devastating attack of polio in 1921. But this moral awakening may possibly have been kindled even earlier while he served as

Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Woodrow Wilson's administration. In that post, he got to observe the often harsh working conditions in American armament factories prior to America's entry into World War I. Because of their personal moral awakenings, both Moses and FDR were able to say with such authority to the people they needed to lead --

-- "Do not fear and do not lose resolve" or its later version -- "All we have to fear is fear itself." Attempting to draw close comparisons between Moses and FDR across thousands of years and thousands of miles is of course always elusive. But certain common human and historical threads are still unmistakable. I personally believe there is a very deep, special, and ongoing connection between Jewish history and American history. This just might be one of those connections... Good Shabbos.