

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Devarim  
July 22, 2023 \*\*\* 4 Av, 5783

Devarim in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/default\\_cdo/aid/36232/jewish/Devarim.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/default_cdo/aid/36232/jewish/Devarim.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Devarim," means "the words" and it is found in Deuteronomy 1:1.

On the first of Shevat (thirty-seven days before his passing), Moses begins his repetition of the Torah to the assembled children of Israel, reviewing the events that occurred and the laws that were given in the course of their forty-year journey from Egypt to Sinai to the Promised Land, rebuking the people for their failings and iniquities, and enjoining them to keep the Torah and observe its commandments in the land that G-d is giving them as an eternal heritage, into which they shall cross after his death.

Moses recalls his appointment of judges and magistrates to ease his burden of meting out justice to the people and teaching them the word of G-d; the journey from Sinai through the great and fearsome desert; the sending of the spies and the people's subsequent spurning of the Promised Land, so that G-d decreed that the entire generation of the Exodus would die out in the desert. "Also against me," says Moses, "was G-d angry for your sake, saying: You, too, shall not go in there." Moses also recounts some more recent events: the refusal of the nations of Moab and Ammon to allow the Israelites to pass through their countries; the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the settlement of their lands by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh; and Moses' message to his successor, Joshua, who will take the people into the Land and lead them in the battles for its conquest: "Fear them not, for the L-rd your G-d, He shall fight for you."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 1:1-27

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/707608/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/707608/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah is the third of a series of three "haftarot of affliction." These three haftarot are read during the Three Weeks of mourning for Jerusalem, between the fasts of 17 Tammuz and 9 Av.

Isaiah relays to the Jews a G-dly vision he experienced, chastising the residents of Judah and Jerusalem for having rebelled against G-d, criticizing them for repeating their errors and not abandoning their sinful ways — even after having been reprimanded and punished. "Woe to a sinful nation, a people heavy with iniquity, evildoing seed, corrupt children. They forsook G-d; they provoked the Holy

One of Israel." Harsh words are employed, comparing the Jewish leaders to the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah. G-d states his distaste for their sacrifices and offerings which were flavored with pagan customs. "How has she become a harlot, a faithful city; it was once full of justice, in which righteousness would lodge, but now it is a city of murderers..."

Isaiah then speaks gentler words, encouraging the people to repent sincerely and to perform acts of justice and kindness towards the needy, orphans and widows, and promising them the best of the land in return for their obedience. "If your sins prove to be like crimson, they will become white as snow; if they prove to be as red as crimson dye, they shall become as wool." The haftorah concludes with a promise that G-d will eventually reestablish Israel's judges and leaders, when "Zion shall be redeemed through justice and her penitents through righteousness."

Note: The first word of the haftorah is "Chazon" ("The vision [of Isaiah]"). The Shabbat when this haftorah is read, the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av, is thus called "Shabbat Chazon," the "Shabbat of the Vision." According to chassidic tradition, on this Shabbat the soul of every Jew is treated to a "vision" of the third Holy Temple that will be rebuilt with the coming of Moshiach.

[To 120: Growing Old, Staying Young by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/devarim/120-growing-old-staying-young/)

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On 27 March 2012, to celebrate the diamond jubilee of the Queen, an ancient ceremony took place at Buckingham Palace. A number of institutions presented Loyal Addresses to the Queen, thanking her for her service to the nation. Among them was the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Its then President, Vivian Wineman, included in his speech the traditional Jewish blessing on such occasions. He wished her well "until a hundred and twenty."

The Queen was amused and looked quizzically at Prince Philip. Neither of them had heard the expression before. Later the Prince asked what it meant, and we explained. A hundred and twenty is stated as the outer limit of a normal human lifetime in Genesis 6:3. The number is especially associated with Moses, about whom the Torah says:

**"Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength undiminished."**

**Deut. 34:7**

Together with Abraham, a man of very different personality and circumstance, Moses is a model of how to age well. With the growth of human longevity, this has become a significant and challenging issue for many of us. How do you grow old yet stay young?

The most sustained research into this topic is the Grant Study, begun in 1938, which has tracked the lives of 268 Harvard students for almost eighty years, seeking to understand what characteristics – from personality type to intelligence to health, habits, and relationships – contribute to human flourishing. For more than thirty years, the project was directed by George Vaillant, whose books *Aging Well* and *Triumphs of Experience* have explored this fascinating territory.[1]

Among the many dimensions of successful aging, Vaillant identifies two that are particularly relevant in the case of Moses. The first is what he calls generativity, [2] namely taking care of the next generation. He quotes John Kotre who defines it as “to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self.”[3] In middle or later life, when we have established a career, a reputation, and a set of relationships, we can either stagnate or decide to give back to others: to community, society, and the next generation. Generativity is often marked by undertaking new projects, often voluntary ones, or by learning new skills. Its marks are openness and care.

The other relevant dimension is what Vaillant calls keeper of the meaning. By this he means the wisdom that comes with age, something that is often more valued by traditional societies than modern or postmodern ones. The “elders” mentioned in Tanach are people valued for their experience. “Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you,” says the Torah (Deut. 32:7). “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” says the book of Job (12:12).

Being a keeper of the meaning means handing on the values of the past to the future. Age brings the reflection and detachment that allows us to stand back and not be swept along by the mood of the moment or passing fashion or the madness of the crowd. We need that wisdom, especially in an age as fast-paced as ours where huge success can come to people still quite young. Examine the careers of recent iconic figures like Bill Gates, Larry Page, Sergey Brin, and Mark Zuckerberg, and you will discover that at a certain point they turned to older mentors who helped steer them through the white-water rapids of their success. *Asseh lecha rav*, “Acquire for yourself a teacher” (Avot 1:6, 16) remains essential advice.

What is striking about the book of Devarim, set entirely in the last month of Moses’ life, is how it shows the aged but still passionate and driven leader, turning to the twin tasks of generativity and keeper of the meaning.

It would have been easy for him to retire into an inner world of reminiscence, recalling the achievements of an extraordinary life, chosen by God to be the person who led an entire people from slavery to freedom and to the brink of the Promised Land. Alternatively he could have brooded on his failures, above all the fact that he would never physically enter the land to which he had spent forty

years leading the nation. There are people – we have all surely met them – who are haunted by the sense that they have not won the recognition they deserved or achieved the success of which they dreamed when they were young. Moses did neither of those things. Instead in his last days he turned his attention to the next generation and embarked on a new role. No longer Moses the liberator and lawgiver, he took on the task for which he has become known to tradition: Moshe Rabbeinu, “Moses our teacher.” It was, in some ways, his greatest achievement.

He told the young Israelites who they were, where they had come from and what their destiny was. He gave them laws, and did so in a new way. No longer was the emphasis on the Divine encounter, as it had been in Shemot, or on sacrifices as it was in Vayikra, but rather on the laws in their social context. He spoke about justice, and care for the poor, and consideration for employees, and love for the stranger. He set out the fundamentals of Jewish faith in a more systematic way than in any other book of Tanach. He told them of God’s love for their ancestors, and urged them to reciprocate that love with all their heart, soul, and might. He renewed the covenant, reminding the people of the blessings they would enjoy if they kept faith with God, and the curses that would befall them if they did not. He taught them the great song in Ha’azinu, and gave the tribes his death-bed blessing. He showed them the meaning of generativity, leaving behind a legacy that would outlive him, and what it is to be a keeper of meaning, summoning all his wisdom to reflect on past and future, giving the young the gift of his long experience. By way of personal example, he showed them what it is to grow old while staying young. At the very end of the book, we read that at the age of 120, Moses’ “eye was undimmed and his natural energy was unabated” (Deut. 34:7). I used to think that these were simply two descriptions until I realised that the first was the explanation of the second. Moses’ energy was unabated because his eye was undimmed, meaning that he never lost the idealism of his youth, his passion for justice and for the responsibilities of freedom.

It is all too easy to abandon your ideals when you see how hard it is to change even the smallest part of the world, but when you do you become cynical, disillusioned, disheartened. That is a kind of spiritual death. The people who don’t, who never give up, who “do not go gentle into that good night,”<sup>[4]</sup> who still see a world of possibilities around them and encourage and empower those who come after them, keep their spiritual energy intact.

There are people who do their best work young. Felix Mendelssohn wrote the Octet at the age of 16, and the Overture to a Midsummer Night’s Dream a year later, the greatest pieces of music ever written by one so young. Orson Welles had already achieved greatness in theatre and radio when he made Citizen Kane, one of the most transformative films in the history of cinema, at the age of 26.

But there were many others who kept getting better the older they became. Mozart and Beethoven were both child prodigies, yet they wrote their greatest music in the last years of their life. Claude Monet painted his shimmering landscapes of water lilies in his garden in Giverny in his eighties. Verdi wrote Falstaff at the age of 85. Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens at age 78. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright completed designs for the Guggenheim Museum at 92. Michelangelo, Titian, Matisse, and Picasso all remained creative into their ninth decade. Judith Kerr who came to Britain when Hitler came to power in 1933 and wrote the children's classic *The Tiger who came to Tea*, recently won her first literary award at the age of 93. David Galenson in his *Old Masters and Young Geniuses* argues that those who are conceptual innovators do their best work young, while experimental innovators, who learn by trial and error, get better with age.[5]

There is something moving about seeing Moses, at almost 120, looking forward as well as back, sharing his wisdom with the young, teaching us that while the body may age, the spirit can stay young *ad me'ah ve'esrim*, until 120, if we keep our ideals, give back to the community, and share our wisdom with those who will come after us, inspiring them to continue what we could not complete.

[1] George Vaillant, *Aging Well*, Little, Brown, 2003; *Triumphs of Experience*, Harvard University Press, 2012. [2] The concept of generativity is drawn from the work of Erik Erikson, who saw it – and its opposite, stagnation – as one of one of the eight developmental stages of life.

[3] John Kotre, *Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 10. [4] The first line of Dylan Thomas' poem of that title.

[5] David Galenson, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

### [Devarim: The Rights and Responsibilities of the Diaspora by Rabbi Laurie Green](https://truah.org/resources/laurie-green-devarim-moraltorah2023/) <https://truah.org/resources/laurie-green-devarim-moraltorah2023/>

I don't believe in coincidences. Certainly not when Torah is involved, so I doubt it's a coincidence that we read about the first Jewish diaspora just days before Tisha B'Av. Commemorating the destruction of the Temple, we may think of Tisha B'Av as the beginning of the Diaspora. Actually, the first diaspora begins before Moses dies. Moses speaks of it in this week's Torah portion, Devarim, in [Deuteronomy 3:18-20](#).

As part of Moses' speech to the Israelites, we are reminded of an incident from [Numbers 32](#), when the tribes of Reuben and Gad tell Moses they'd like to settle where they are and not cross into the Land of Israel. Moses replies, "Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here?"

I've heard that before. You have, too.

"You diaspora Jews, you don't send your sons to the army. You don't understand. You have no right to tell us Israelis what to do!"

For generations, we've heard this same line. "Please give us your money and your

lobbyists, your tourism and your cheerleading, but don't ever say anything bad about Israel, or you are playing into the hands of the antisemites."

This time it's different. This attempted judicial overhaul is different! This time, thinkers like Rabbi Daniel Gordis, Matti Friedman, and Yossi Klein HaLevi, who had always opposed "airing our dirty laundry in public," are publicly asking us to speak up. This time, even mainstream Jewish organizations like Jewish Federations are protesting Israeli ministers, in public, loudly.

Rabbi David Hartman z"l said, "Israel is too important to be left to the Israelis." I couldn't agree more.

Either the State of Israel is the shared project of the entire Jewish people, or it is not. Either Israel is the homeland of every Jew, or it is not. Either Israel is a democracy of all its citizens, or it is not. Either Israel operates according to Jewish values, or it does not.

The State of Israel is the greatest achievement of the Jewish people in 2,000 years. It's much "too important to be left to the Israelis."

There has always been a Jewish diaspora, even from the earliest days of our people. There have always been Jews who, by circumstance or by choice, have lived meaningful Jewish lives outside the Land of Israel. Let's look closely at the arrangement Moses makes with the Gadites and the Reubenites. This agreement has three parts. First, Moses gives them permission to stay here and build sheepfolds, BUT second, they must fight at the front of all the people. "You must go as shock-troops, warriors all, at the head of your Israelite kin" ([Deuteronomy 3:20](#)). Finally, Moses explains, you must forfeit your rights to the land set aside for you in Eretz Yisrael.

In contemporary terms, this means that those of us who choose to live elsewhere must earn that right by performing acts of loyalty and by giving up rights we could have had if we made aliyah. Our acts of loyalty might include following the news from Israel, distinguishing valid criticism of Israel from antisemitism, and calling out Israel's leaders when they are wrong. These acts bind us to the State and the people of Israel and make clear that, whatever our differences, we are one people. In turn, the most obvious right we give up is the vote. At the end of the day, we have the right to be part of a vibrant and thriving diaspora.

Yet the relationship doesn't end there. When we read about the cities of refuge in last week's parshah ([Numbers 35:14](#)) — as we will read about them again next week — we learned that the tribes outside of the Land of Israel receive three cities of refuge, just like all the tribes who cross the Jordan into the land. So perhaps, in the end, the Diaspora is equal and not entirely separate.

We are a nation of tribes — Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Haredi, secular, and so on. Each tribe has something to offer the other, even when we don't feel it.

Israel is too important for us to throw up our hands and turn away, just because it



feels like we're losing. Israel needs us and we need them. If we will it, it may not be a dream. *(Rabbi Laurie Green serves as a hospice chaplain in Baltimore, MD. Until recently, she was a pulpit rabbi for 17 years. Rabbi Green is an activist, author, educator, emma, and Progressive Zionist. She gives her thanks to colleagues at the Shalom Hartman Institute and Truah for helping clarify her thinking in this d'rash.)*

[Devarim: Belonging to the Land by Matthew Mausner](http://canfeinesharim.org/devarim-belonging-to-the-land/)  
<http://canfeinesharim.org/devarim-belonging-to-the-land/>

“...You have dwelt long enough at this mountain. Turn and journey, and come to the mountain of the Amorites and to all its neighboring places, in the plain, on the mountain, and in the lowland, and in the south and by the seashore, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, until the great river, the Euphrates River. See, I have set the land before you; come and possess the land which the Hashem swore to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them and their descendants after them. [1]

The idea of belonging runs deeply throughout the Torah, and particularly in this week's Torah portion, Devarim. For the Jewish people, belonging is not only manifested in the sense of belonging to a people, but also a very deep sense of this people belonging to a land. We belong to Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel), and only here can a deep aspiration for wholeness in our homeland be fulfilled, and can we truly manifest as a nation. While being a light unto the nations may sometimes require us to bring messages of healing from slavery and spiritual brokenness and exile to the farthest corners of the earth, the essence of our tikun (repair of ourselves and of the world) is strong Jewish life in the Jewish homeland.

Reading Torah as an organic whole, a message stands out: This is how the world needs to be fixed – You, the Children of Israel, need to live according to the mitzvot (Divine commandments), not just anywhere, but “in the land which I will show you.”[2] That is to say, the world will be fixed by the Jewish people doing G-d's will in the land in which G-d gave us to live.

One such expression of G-d's will is caring for the Land of Israel. To live in exile is to live a contradiction. If a person does not live in his or her homeland, if one has no concrete expectation that his or her descendants will be living on the same land, then what reason is there to treat the land right, to live sustainably, and to ensure that the resources and health of the land will be there for future generations? Human beings are hard-wired with instincts to protect and feed our children; these instincts can and should reinforce our attitudes towards our land. We should feel just as strongly that our land and its health must be protected. We should know in our bones that they are one and the same. But when we do not live

in our land, when we are separated from that deeper commitment, then we are disconnected from the wholeness of our instincts.

To do the 'right' thing according to Torah, and to do the right thing according to secular morals or science, are often seen in opposition. [3] But even to make a separation between the environment and society, or to separate nature from the world of human interaction, speech, morals, and behavior, is a classic example of the mentality of dualism so prevalent in Western culture. [4] Yet as Jews we know that the spiritual environment is not separate from the natural environment.

People who treat other people horribly while seeking to protect land or sustainability are not doing anything laudable; the Nazis, for example, were big proponents of organic gardening. [5]

American Indians have a saying: decisions should be made for the 'seventh generation'. Conduct in a land, the way one treats the environment, is best determined by having in mind what will be best for one's descendants. [6] One's great-grandchildren, it is presumed, will be living in and dependent on that very same land. Deep ecology from the family outward: the only truly responsible way to make decisions is to have the seventh generation in mind—and the many, many generations of microorganisms, plants, insects, and animals who constitute the web of life on which all depend. In Devarim, the Torah is trying to clue us in to this logic, but is rightly placing a deeper rationale above any simple self-interested rationalism (or nationalism).

We learn that not only our own health and prosperity, but the health of the land, depends on our conduct: "And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give the rain of your land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated. Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you." [7]

This is really an environmental concept: our national moral conduct helps make it rain, helps the soil be healthy, helps bring the blessings of the Divine on all life in the land. This is a holistic prescription: if we fulfill our role, shalom (peace) will envelop Israel, its land, its people, and the entire world. [8]

The fabric of life on earth is interwoven and interdependent. Our conduct, our self-control over the numerous collective human efforts that create and pollute—is essential to maintaining the health of this fundamental web of life on which we all depend.



Jews are meant to be a light unto nations: by living in an exemplary way, by fully and proudly manifesting our mission in our national homeland, by conducting ourselves in ways that respect both the eternal laws revealed in Torah, and the natural laws on which life on earth depends. To be ecologically responsible, to be spiritually responsible, and to be politically responsible: these are all really the same thing at root. The Torah teaches us again and again how must treat trees, plants, animals and individual people. In Devarim, we learn how we must relate as a nation to our land. (*Matthew Mausner is a historian, teacher and writer in Jerusalem. He is currently completing a thesis on tribal identity and belonging at Israel's Bar Ilan University. He teaches for Jewish Agency programs and for the Eco-Beit Midrash at Yeshivat Simchat Shlomo, and is helping create the New Jerusalem Talmud, a Gemara-shaped blog that discusses environmental subjects from many perspectives.*) [1 Deuteronomy 1:6-9. [2]Genesis 12:1 [3]See "The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel" by John C. Merkle, pp. 3-18, or Spinoza, "Principles of Cartesian Philosophy", pp. 28-41. [4]See Robert Godwin, "One Cosmos Under God: The Unification of Matter, Life, Mind and Spirit", pp. 12, 156 for example. [5 See George L. Mosse, "Nazi Culture, pp. 104-130 for example. 6]See, for example, John Gneisenau Niehardt Black Elk Speaks, pp. 94-103, or Jerry Mander's In The Absence of the Sacred, pp. 211-220, or Dee Brown's Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee, pp. xi, 308, etc. [7Deut. 11:13-17; this passage is the second paragraph of the Shema prayer. (translation from website of chabad.org). [8]This is a general theme found in the writings of both Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag.

### Isaiah on the Streets of Modern Israel by Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ilkr4RfTj5klhlouQEDcnLgO-cWCxyAq/view?pli=1>

Some years back, as I passed the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem on my way to the Yeshiva, I stopped in my tracks. There was a man staffing the protest booth (a common sight) wearing a T-shirt reading (in Hebrew) "*How the faithful town has become a whore...Your rulers are rebellious and companions of thieves; All loves bribes and chase payoffs.*" Isaiah's words in this week's haftarah were being broadcasted again on the streets of Jerusalem!

Let's look at Isaiah's succinct warning to the leaders and people of Jerusalem:

*How has the faithful town has become a whore? [once] filled with justice;*

*Righteousness lodged in it, and now – murderers!*

*Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water.*

*Your rulers are rebellious and companions of thieves;*

*All loves bribes and chase payoffs.*

*The orphan they do not defend, and the cause of the widow will not come before them. (Isaiah 1:21-23)*

Small falsehoods grow into system-wide corruption. The economy is threatened when impure silver and diluted wine are passed off as authentic in the market. The streets reflect a deeper problem: from the very top comes the message of corruption.

A society must ask itself how it treats corruption by its leaders. Some are happy to tolerate it (and benefit from it.) For others, it is a line that cannot be crossed. If the leader is corrupt there are no boundaries. When money can buy a law, or preferential treatment in court, or clearing of any abuse, then it is not righteousness but rather possessions that rule. If morality is bought with money and justice with promises of power, if judges are controlled by the elite in control, then courts lose their authority as the check and balance of the ruling group.

In this setting, those who seek redress in the court system discover that not all are equal before the law. Radak and Rashi comment (v. 23) that the widow understands that it is not in the interests of the people who should fight her battle to take up her cause. *“Nor does the cause of the widow come before them”* – She will not even bother turning to the court for justice. Corruption becomes the golden standard.

A system like that seems hopeless. None could raise a voice against it. Those with enough power have a vested interest in perpetuating the system, and those who need it changed are powerless to affect a change. Only a prophet with the word of God can demand a functioning justice system that reflects honest leadership. To give some teeth to this demand he explains “plan B”: God will get involved and purge that which they do not clean up. Such a purge will be painful; we would do well to improve on our own.

Some 2700 years later the streets of Jerusalem are burning with Isaiah’s divine message, demanding as we do in the Amidah prayer, *“I will... bring back your judges as before and your counselors as long ago.”* (vv. 24-26, translation by Robert Alter.) *(Vered Hollander-Goldfarb teaches Tanach and Medieval Commentators at the Conservative Yeshiva and is a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC’s weekly message on the weekly Torah portion. She received her M.A. in Judaic Studies and Tanach from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and studied at Bar-Ilan University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Before making aliyah, Vered taught at Ramaz School and Stern College in New York.)*

### [Moshe's Memoir by Ilana Kurshan](https://www.exploringjudaism.org/torah/sefer-devarim-book-of-deuteronomy/parashat-devarim/parashat-devarim-dvar-torah/moshes-memoir/)

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The Book of Deuteronomy, which we begin reading this week, presents an interesting paradox to the literary reader of the Bible.

### [The Style of Moshe's Memoir](#)

It is written in a different style than the earlier biblical books—not from the perspective of an omniscient (and presumably divine) narrator, but from the perspective of a human being, Moshe. At the same time, the book is included in the divine Torah, in which every word and every letter is traditionally believed to have been revealed by God.

Over time, traditional commentators and academic scholars have offered various views on the provenance and authorship of Deuteronomy, shaping our understanding of the literary genre to which this book belongs, and its contemporary relevance.

The book of Deuteronomy is traditionally regarded as having the same divine provenance as the other four books of Moses.

### Divinely Inspired?

The Talmudic rabbis teach that anyone who denies the divinity of any word of the Torah is regarded as a heretic and has no share in the World to Come, “even if he asserts that the whole Torah is from Heaven, except a particular verse, which he maintains was uttered not by God but by Moses himself” (Sanhedrin 99a).

We are to believe that every word in the Torah was spoken by God, and thus every word has the same religious authority.

This understanding is reflected in the laws governing how a Torah scroll is written, which do not admit any difference between the book of Deuteronomy and the four other books. A Torah scroll that is missing a single letter or has an extra letter is invalid, regardless of whether that letter is missing from Deuteronomy or from any of the preceding books.

Moreover, each and every one of the Five Books of Moses is regarded as having more sanctity than all later biblical books; Maimonides teaches that when stacking books, the Five Books of Moses may be placed on top of the Prophets or Writings, but the Prophets and Writings may never be placed atop any of the Five Books of Moses, because Moshe’s prophecy—unlike those of other, later prophets—reflects God’s will in its purest and most unadulterated form (Mishneh Torah, The Book of Love, Laws of Torah scrolls 10:5).

According to this understanding, Deuteronomy, though spoken in a human voice, is fully part of the divine Torah.

### Derived from Humans?

In contrast, academic scholars of the Bible maintain that the book of Deuteronomy is the product of a group of revolutionary Jewish sages who were active in the kingdom of Judea prior to and following the destruction of the First Temple, when the book reached its final form.

The prevailing academic theory, first put forth by the German scholar W.M.L. de Wette in 1805, identifies the book of Deuteronomy with the scroll discovered by the priest Hilkiyah during a major renovation of the Temple in the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE, as recounted in II Kings 22. Scholars argue that this text was composed in the context of religious reforms advanced by King Josiah, including the prohibition on religious worship outside the Temple, which appears only in Deuteronomy and not in the preceding biblical books.

The Judean monarchy, in an effort to centralize religious worship in the Jerusalem Temple, articulated its theology in the form of a lengthy address delivered by Moshe to the Israelites. According to this view, Deuteronomy, though spoken in Moshe's voice, is part of a religious reformation dating half a millennium after Moshe's death.

Yet as Micah Goodman notes in *Moses' Last Address* (published in Hebrew in 2014, publication in English forthcoming), both the traditional and the academic approaches to Deuteronomy ignore the book's own claim about its provenance, which appears in the first verses of this week's parashah: "These are the words that Moshe addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan ... in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month" (Deuteronomy 1:1-3).

### [Moshe as the Author?](#)

Deuteronomy purports to have been authored by Moshe himself—this is the assumption the book asks its readers to accept when they begin reading. Most of the book is written in the first person and is narrated from Moshe's perspective, refracted through his own emotional experience of struggle, anxiety, and triumph. Today we might refer to it as Moshe's memoir, an increasingly popular literary genre in which the author shapes his or her own experiences into a literary work guided by aesthetic considerations and often more faithful to the author's subjective, emotional experience rather than to the reality of what "actually" happened.

[There are many seeming discrepancies between the earlier books of the Bible and Deuteronomy which indicate that the latter is more memoir than history.](#)

For instance, the book of Exodus recounts that Yitro observed Moshe's difficulty in attending to all the people's needs and warned him, "You will surely wear yourself out," urging Moshe to appoint "chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people" (Exodus 18:17, Exodus 21-22).

In our parashah, however, Moshe omits all mention of Yitro and speaks to the people about how they exhausted and depleted him: "Thereupon I said to you, 'I cannot bear the burden of you by myself... the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering! Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads'" (Deuteronomy 1:9, Deuteronomy 12-13).

For the sake of Moshe's account, it doesn't matter that the idea for the tribal chiefs originated with Yitro; most salient for Moshe, as he reflects back on the wilderness journey, is his own difficulty in shouldering the burden of the people, and his dire need of assistance.

### [How to View Deuteronomy as Moshe's Memoir](#)

If we are to regard the book of Deuteronomy as a memoir of sorts, we must recognize that it is different from any other memoir in the sense that Moshe's life

is also the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the forging of the Jewish nation, and the giving of the Torah, as narrated in the previous biblical books.

As such, Deuteronomy is not just Moshe's artistic rendering of his own life experiences; it is also a rewriting of the previous biblical books from Moshe's perspective. It is both part of the Bible and the earliest commentary on the Bible, in which an individual reflects on and interprets Torah in light of his own experience.

### [Moshe's Memoir as the first Oral Torah](#)

According to Rabbi Zadok Ha-Cohen, who lived in Lublin in the nineteenth century, the book of Deuteronomy may be considered the first book of the Oral Torah, since it is the human part of the divine Torah. Rabbi Zadok quotes from the beginning of our parashah: "On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Torah" (Deuteronomy 1:5) (see Pri Zadok on Deuteronomy 1).

Moshe's address to the people is his expounding on Torah—it is his oral commentary on the written Torah of the previous four books. As Micah Goodman notes, Rabbi Zadok inverts the traditional view that even the Oral Torah is divine, and argues instead that part of the Written Torah is in fact human.

In our own day and age, it has become very popular for everyone to tell their own version of their life story.

Not only are memoirs a popular literary genre, but platforms such as Facebook and Instagram encourage individuals to "curate" their experiences and accomplishments to share with a wider audience.

The book of Deuteronomy—at once Moshe's memoir and his contribution to Torah—is a reminder that if we live our lives in accordance with Jewish tradition, then the story of our lives is not just our own personal memoir; it is also part of the next chapter in the unfolding of the story of the Jewish people. *(Ilana Kurshan teaches Talmud at the Conservative Yeshiva. She has a degree in History of Science from Harvard and in English literature from Cambridge, and has worked in literary publishing both in New York and in Jerusalem – as a translator, a foreign rights agent, and as the Books Editor of Lilith Magazine. Since October 2020, Ilana has been a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly parashat hashavuah blog.)*

### [Yahrtzeits](#)

Lisa Paley remembers her father Leon Lindenbaum on Monday July 24<sup>th</sup>.

Shari Mevorah remembers his mother Helen Kirstein on Tuesday July 25<sup>h</sup>.

Ilisia Kissner remembers her mother Etta M. Strassfeld on Friday July 28<sup>th</sup>.

Mike Hessdorf remembers his father Ralph Hessdorf on Friday July 28<sup>th</sup>.