



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

45 Va'etchanan — Ongoing Zionism; Ongoing Revelation

Text

דברים ג

כג ואתחנן אל-יהוה בעת ההוא לאמר. כד אדני יהוה אתה החלות להראות את-עבדך את-גדלך ואת-ידך החזקה אשר מי-אל בשמים ובארץ אשר-יעשה כמעשיך וכגבורתך. כה אעברה-נא ואראה את-הארץ הטובה אשר בעבר הירדן ההר הטוב הזה והלבנן. כו ויתעבר יהוה בי למענכם ול'א שמע אלי ויאמר יהוה אלי רב-לך אל-תוסף דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה. כז עלה ר'אש הפסגה ושא עיניך ימה וצפ'נה ותימנה ומזרחה וראה בעיניך כיל'א תעבר את-הירדן הזה. כח וצו את-יהושע וחזקהו ואמצהו כיהוא יעבר לפני העם הזה והוא ינחיל אותם את-הארץ אשר תראה. כט ונשב בגיא מול בית פעור.

דברים ד

ט רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן-תשכח את-הדברים אשר-ראו עיניך ופן-יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חייך והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך. י יום אשר עמדת לפני יהוה אל היך בח'רב באמר יהוה אלי הקהל-לי את-העם ואשמעם את-דברי אשר ילמדון ליראה אתי כל-הימים אשר הם חיים על-האדמה ואת-בניהם ילמדון. יא ותקרבון ותעמדון תחת ההר וההר בער באש עד-לב השמים ח'שך ענן וערפל. יב וידבר יהוה אליכם מתוך האש קול דברים אתם שמעים ותמונה אינכם ר'אים זולתי קול. יג ויגד לכם את-בריתו אשר צוה אתכם לעשות עשרת הדברים ויכתבם על-שני לחות אבנים. יד וא'תי צוה יהוה בעת ההוא ללמד אתכם חקים ומשפטים לעש'תכם אתם בארץ אשר אתם ע'ברים שמה לרשתה.

מא אז יבדיל מ'שה של'ש ערים בעבר הירדן מזרחה שמש. מב לנס שמה רוצח אשר ירצח את-רעהו בבלי-דעת והוא ל'א-ש'נא לו מתמ'ל של'ש'ם ונס אל-אחת מן-הערים האל וחי. מג את-בצר במדבר בארץ המיש'ר לראובני ואת-ראמת בגלעד לגדי ואת-גולן בבשן למנשי. מד וז'את התורה אשר-שם מ'שה לפני בני ישראל. מה אלה העדות והחקים והמשפטים אשר דבר מ'שה אל-בני ישראל בצאתם ממצרים. מו בעבר הירדן בגיא מול בית פעור בארץ סיח'ן מלך האמ'רי אשר יושב בחשבון אשר הכה מ'שה ובני ישראל בצאתם ממצרים. מז ויירשו את-ארצו ואת-ארץ עוג מלך-הבשן שני מלכי האמ'רי אשר בעבר הירדן מזרח שמש. מח מער'ער אשר על-שפת-נחל ארנ'ן ועד-הר שיא'ן הוא חרמון. מט וכל-הערבה עבר הירדן מזרחה ועד ים הערבה תחת אשד'ת הפסגה.

דברים ה

א ויקרא מ'שה אל-כל-ישראל ויאמר אלהם שמע ישראל את-החקים ואת-המשפטים אשר אני ד'בר באזניכם היום ולמדתם אתם ושמרתם לעש'תם. ב יהוה אל'ינו כרת עמנו ברית בח'רב. ג ל'א את-אב'תינו כרת יהוה את-הברית הז'את כי אתנו אנחנו אלה פ'ה היום כלנו חיים. ד פנים בפנים דבר יהוה עמכם בהר מתוך האש. ה אני כ'י ע'מד בין-יהוה וביניכם בעת ההוא להגיד לכם את-דבר יהוה כי יראתם מפני האש ול'א-עליתם בהר לאמר. ו {ס} * אני כ'י יהוה אל' היך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים ל'א-יהיה לך אל'הים אחרים על-פני.



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Devarim 3

23 I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, 24 "O Lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! 25 Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." 26 But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! 27 Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan. 28 Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see."

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Devarim 4

9 But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: 10 The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to Me, "Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." 11 You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. 12 The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape — nothing but a voice. 13 S/He declared to you the covenant that S/He commanded you to observe, the Ten Commandments; and S/He inscribed them on two tablets of stone. 14 At the same time the Lord commanded me to impart to you laws and rules for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy. . . .

44 This is the Teaching that Moshe set before the Israelites: 45 these are the decrees, laws, and rules that Moshe addressed to the people of Israel, after they had left Egypt, 46 beyond the Jordan, in the valley at Beth-peor, in the land of King Sihon of the Amorites, who dwelt in Heshbon, whom Moshe and the Israelites defeated after they had left Egypt. 47 They had taken possession of his country and that of King Og of Bashan — the two kings of the Amorites — which were on the east side of the Jordan 48 from Aroer on the banks of the wadi Arnon, as far as Mount Sion, that is, Hermon; 49 also the whole Arabah on the east side of the Jordan, as far as the Sea of the Arabah, at the foot of the slopes of Pisgah.

Devarim 5

1 Moshe summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the laws and rules that I proclaim to you this day! Study them and observe them faithfully!

2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our parents that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today. 4 Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire — 5 I stood between the Lord and you at that time to convey the Lord's words to you, for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain — saying, 6 I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 7 You shall have no other gods beside Me.



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Context

Parshat Va'etchanan opens with Moshe's final petition to be permitted to enter the Promised Land. His poetic plea rejected, Moshe blames the people for his unhappy fate. Moshe goes on to enjoin the Israelites to observe the divine covenant and the commandments after they enter and possess the land - with Yehoshua at their helm. Moshe praises the greatness of God, the Torah and its laws, and the direct revelation at Horeb. A slightly different phrasing of the Ten Commandments from the one in Parshat Yitro, and the first verses of the Shma – the Jewish credo of faith - follow. The justification for following the commandments is the Exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Horeb, and the goodness that comes from a life informed by the Torah. The parasha ends with a warning to destroy those in the land who distract from their path, and the harm that will come if they reject God.

Explorations

In Parashat Va'etchanan, Moshe continues speaking to the Israelites, reviewing their experiences in the wilderness. Here we explore two interconnected and monumental themes: Moshe's final petition to enter the land, and the revelation.

Moshe's final petition

Moshe's request to fulfill the divine promise is poignant – many interpret the scene in terms of the prayer model it presents. The Sifri, an ancient collection of halachic midrash relating to Sefer Devarim, mentions twelve forms of prayer in the Tanakh:

- *Zaaka*, crying out
- *Naakah*, groaning
- *Shavah*, sighing
- *Batzar*, distressing
- *Rinah*, calling out
- *P'giah*, entreating
- *Nipul*, falling down in supplication
- *Pilul*, wrestling with God
- *Atira*, imploring
- *Amida*, standing
- *Chilui*, pleading
- *Techina*, beseeching, entreating

The talmud relates a story about how Ima Shalom tried to prevent her spouse, Rabbi Eliezer from saying the prayer, *tachanun* (related to the last form of prayer mentioned in the list, *techina*). Ima Shalom knew that he would pray for the death of her brother, Rabban



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Gamliel because he had excommunicated Rabbi Eliezer following a serious dispute. She also knew that her spouse's prayer would not go unanswered. Ima Shalom therefore disturbed Rabbi Eliezer's *tachanun* prayer each day to protect her brother. One day, Ima Shalom did not interrupt Rabbi Eliezer because she mistakenly thought it was Rosh Hodesh- the first day of the new month, when *tachanun* is not recited. At that moment, Ima Shalom answered a knock on the door and gave bread to a beggar. When she returned, she found Rabbi Eliezer reciting *tachanun*. She called him, “Get up! You are killing my brother!” At that moment, it was announced that Rabban Gamliel, her brother, had died. (Bava Metzia 59b)

This legend attributes power over fate to prayer. Ima Shalom's act of generosity to sustain a stranger ironically occasions the loss of her own brother due to her spouse's violent will expressed in prayer.

Though Moshe chooses the powerful *techina* form, even his prayer does not succeed to overturn the divine edict. Throughout the Torah, God accepts Moshe's prayers – on behalf of the Israelite people. This time, God does not yield to Moshe.

Based on the divine promise and the eternal yearning that Moshe's prayer initiates, the Jewish People persevered with desire for our homeland for two millennia – through to modern Zionism. This biblical scene in which Moses pleads to enter the Promised Land has important implications for Jewish destiny and our relationship to the Land of Israel. In my recent book about Zionism, I write,

The greatest Jewish prophet is barred from entry into the Promised Land. Moses is permitted to see the land, but not touch, feel, smell, hold, turn in his own hands, taste the fruit or be nourished by the produce. The rejection of Moses' final plea formulates the land as unattainable. Moses ends his life in existential and material exile. Concluding its narrative on the far bank of the Jordan River, the Torah authors an enduring condition of longing for Zion.

In 1948, the declaration of the State of Israel inaugurated a paradoxical reality for the Jewish People: the unattainable had been attained [after two millennia of longing since the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.]. The material fulfillment of Zionism conflicts with the daily conditioning of exile embedded in the Jewish psyche. The new political reality did not instantly transform that consciousness. More than two generations have grown up with the assumption of the existence of Israel. At the same time, the liturgy, texts and traditions of the Jewish People perpetuate the idealization of Zion as a yet unattained homeland. Both longing and fulfillment co-exist in the Jewish relationship to Israel. We can activate this creative tension to contribute toward updating the Zionist enterprise for the twenty-first century. ([Rereading Israel: The Spirit of the Matter, 11](#))

I invite you to read my book for further explanation about drawing inspiration for



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contemporary Zionism by interpreting biblical and rabbinic texts with Israel in mind.

The Revelation

The revelation at Mount Sinai is one of the foundation narratives of Jewish Peoplehood and identity. On that monumental day, the entire Jewish people collectively experiences divine communication – women, men and children. The Torah twice recounts and frequently mentions how God spoke commandments directly to the people during those awesome moments (see our lesson on Parshat Yitro). Moshe introduces his re-telling of the revelation and covenant at Sinai with the following words,

“God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not [only] with our ancestors did God make this covenant, but with us, we who are here today, all of us living. Face to face God spoke with you on the mountain from the midst of the fire” (Devarim 5:2-4).

In response to the full participation in revelation and covenant expressed here, the Israelites were fearful of continued exposure to the divine presence. Therefore, God ceases such direct communication and conveys and instructs Moshe about the Torah teachings later, during private encounters. Moshe reminds the people about his role in the revelation,

I stood between God and you at that moment to tell you the word of God because you were afraid because of the fire . . .” (Devarim 5:5)

Later in the chapter, Moshe explains,

Devarim 5

20 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, you came up to me, all your tribal heads and elders, 21 and said, "The Lord our God has just shown us His majestic Presence, and we have heard His voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that man may live though God has spoken to him. 22 Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. 23 For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? 24 You go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will willingly do it."

In the first verses quoted above (Devarim 5:2-4), Moshe makes no distinctions about different peoples' reception of the revelation and participation in the covenant. However, Moshe's role later in the chapter mediates the direct revelation to the entire people. Moshe transmits the revelation, sharing the divine teachings as he understands them, interpreting the divine word.



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While we may all be full partners in the covenant, our understanding of its meaning and obligations are filtered through Moshe. Though Moshe includes all of Israel, and by extension, all of us today, in the experience of direct revelation and covenant with God, there appears to be privileged authority in the transmission of the divine word, beginning immediately after the Sinaitic revelation.

According to Jewish tradition recorded in the mishna, the Torah was handed down through a direct chain – from Sinai to us:

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua; Yehoshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets transmitted it to the *Anshei Knesset HaGedola*-Members of the Great Assembly. They made three statements: Be deliberate (patient and restrained) in judgment; establish a large cadre of disciples; and construct a fence around the Torah. (Mishna Avot, 1:1)

This text does not state outright, but implies that the source/author is divine, and that the transmission is true and accurate. Rambam states in his commentary on the mishna that belief in the divinity and immutability of the revelation are two of the thirteen principles of Jewish faith.

Over the course of the Modern period, doubt about the integrity of the revelation of the Torah and claims about multiple authors proliferated historical and text-critical theories about the sacred text. The career of a great rabbi and scholar of the past generation, Rabbi Louis Jacobs, was derailed by his progressive views on the authorship of the Torah. In what became known as “the Jacob's Affair,” one of his books caused such a stir among Anglo Jewry that Rabbi Jacobs was denied the position of chief rabbi and exiled from his pulpit.

It all began with a book. It was called *We Have Reason to Believe* and was written by Rabbi Jacobs in 1957 - the end product of a series of talks at a discussion group he had led in New London Synagogue. The main thesis of the book was that Jews in the modern world did not have to abandon reason in order to retain their faith in God and his Torah. To be a bit more specific, not abandoning reason in this instance meant that one did not have to believe that the Torah was literally handed over to Moshe by God, or dictated word for word. Rather, it was a divinely inspired text which evolved over time and this, Rabbi Jacobs claimed, did not diminish its holiness or authority. (from louisjacobs.org)

In her book, Orthodox feminist theologian, Tamar Ross explains that feminism is part of the ongoing and cumulative process of revelation. Feminism is, in Ross' view, “a gift from God” (*Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*, 210).

Rather than regarding them as static historical events, the longing for and attainment of Israel and revelation may both be understood to be ongoing covenantal processes that bear today on our own lives as well as on the fate of the Jewish People.



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Questions for Discussion

- Discuss the meaning of divine rejection of Moshe's last prayer to enter the Land of Israel – for yourself, for the Jewish People, and for Zionism. What ought we to learn from the tremendous challenge of rejection?
- Although we are all full partners in the covenant with God, we are not all equally equipped with the skills and education to interpret the Torah text. We have therefore relied on leaders and teachers throughout history and today to mediate our covenant with God. Do you think that the gender of these teachers and leaders affected the interpretations that they have transmitted, and why? By what criteria ought we to choose these leaders and interpreters today? Do you believe that people have qualitatively different roles in the covenant with God? What is the basis for our distinctions - is gender an admissible distinction – why yes or not? What changes ought we to make or not make in Jewish practice in order to address your views?
- Do you believe that the Torah was revealed to Moshe by God, word-by-word? If so, how should we best explain the text's seeming contradictions, omissions, and inconsistencies?
- Does transmission of the Torah through Moshe and/or via complex cultural-historical processes affect the way we understand the word of God? Why? Does the text of the Torah reflect human fallible social structures (such as gender inequality)? If yes, then, does this facilitate or hinder our encounter with the divine?
- Discuss your yearning for -- or fear of -- an unmediated encounter with the divine such as the one Moshe describes as “face to face”?
- Like the biblical Israelites, many Jews rely on others to interpret the Torah, avoiding such personal covenantal opportunities as are offered in Parshat Va’etchanan. Some even *live* their Judaism vicariously through their rabbi. Many Israeli Jews rely on ultra-Orthodox communities to discharge religious obligations on their behalf, both Torah study and rituals – according to what many consider to be *authentic* Judaism. What mitzvot-commandments if any do you rely on someone else to interpret and/or fulfill on your behalf? Why? Learn about one or more of these mitzvot and consider whether you might interpret its meaning and perform it yourself. Explain how mitzvot are -- or are not -- important if you are not committed to doing them personally?
- How does identifying ourselves as vital participants in a divine-human covenant affect our role in Judaism, and Zionism?



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Study Links

In terms of gender roles and the ongoing process of revelation, the [Beit Morasha Advanced Halacha Program for Women](#) in Jerusalem graduates ten women annually who complete exams on the same material studied in the official Israeli Orthodox rabbinical ordination study programs for men.

We are not able to enter a thorough discussion here of the scholarship concerning the authorship of the Torah. Here are some links that might be helpful:

- Bible scholar Tzemah Yoreh created [this website](#) where he color-codes his theory about the compositional layers of the Torah according to his “Supplementary Hypothesis.” He also explains and compares the more traditional “Documentary Hypothesis”.
- “It was all [transmitted] directly from the Almighty, and it is all the Torah of God, complete, pure, sacred and true.” In “[Torah Min Ha-shamayim: The Divine Origin of the Torah](#),” David Silverberg discusses Rambam's 8th principle of faith - the divine revelation of the Torah.
- One rabbi, Avi Shafran, makes a simple argument against critical scholarship, and for the divine origins of the Torah, “[Who Wrote the Bible?](#)”
- “The first and most obvious concern that historians raise about the unity of the text of the Torah deals with the fifth book, Deuteronomy. The focus of the book on the unity of the people of Israel and its unified worship in a single place, and the illegitimacy of any worship outside of Jerusalem are concerns that do not seem to fit with most of Israelite history until the late seventh century BCE. Strikingly, at that point, during the reign of King Josiah, a book is “discovered” during repairs to the Temple, which become the basis for “reforms” that align almost perfectly with the language and concerns of the book of Deuteronomy.” Rabbi Jeffrey Spitzer appraises different approaches to the authorship of the Torah - “[Literary, historical, and theological perspectives on whether the Torah is divine, human, or something in between.](#)”

Summary of Issues

Moshe's final plea to enter the Land of Israel propels forward an ongoing desire for Israel and proposes a continuous process of refining Zionism. The meaning of divine revelation might be seen similarly as an ongoing process of Interpretation and refinement.

Methods & Observations

The dominance of an historical outlook that focuses on a linear sequence of events disables us from appreciating the continuity and complexity of human and divine processes. The repetition of events in Devarim hints at more robust and evolving meanings of such events as Moshe's unfulfilled prayer to enter the Land, and the revelation at Sinai. We have the possibility to participate in and continue to unfold each of these two processes. Feminist interpretations of Zionism and of revelation contribute to the ethics and relevance of these processes during our lifetime.



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