

I hear a very different tone as Moses nears the end of his time on earth: quieter, humbler, partaking far less of planning, action, and decision—and far more of wisdom. Two passages from the final portion of our teacher’s final lecture are especially meaningful to me.

First: the recognition (29:28) that some of what we would most like to know before we die—“the concealed things”—belong to God, and not to us. We will never penetrate those secrets in this life, and perhaps not in any other life either. However, it is also true that “the revealed things are given to us and our children forever, to do all the words of this Torah” (ibid.). We cannot and will not have some of what we most *want* in this world—knowledge of what awaits us after death, for instance, and what is in store for the world; why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper; why God keeps such a distance, even while commanding us to love. But we, and our children after us, have what we *need* to go on. Most importantly: we have the words of this Torah, and a family and community with whom to hear those words.

Second: God has set life and goodness before us, along with death and evil; “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your descendants will live” (30:15, 19). We are human: constrained by the limits of our years, our bodies and our imaginations. We do not always have the resources or capacity needed to accomplish what we want to do, should do, need to do. But within those limitations, there is goodness that can be chosen, blessing that can be ours—and there is life. No greater affirmation of the value of life and of the world has ever been declared by any religious tradition or philosophy. Moses dies, “his strength undimmed and his vigor unabated” (34:7), leaving behind a legacy of confidence that each of us matters and the world matters. The *devarim* we say and do matter more than we dare to know.

These final verses of Deuteronomy contain in equal measure a sense of completion and of new beginning. The story continues without Moses, as it had begun without him; our stories too will continue, even after we are gone. Our children, students, and successors will—as Joshua did—assume the mantle of responsibility and leadership. This is hard to imagine when a person is young, and hard to accept at any age. But sometimes—a life of achievement behind you, a child sleeping or playing on your knees, the Torah scroll rolled to start again at the beginning—you know that it is good.

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Devarim 5778

דברים תשע"ח



Taking Life’s Journey with Torah

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This week’s commentary is part of a special series for 5778, in which Chancellor Eisen reflects on the main themes of each of the five books of the Torah and their meaning for contemporary Jewish life.

“Hear, O Israel,” the book of Deuteronomy proclaims over and over, the verb always in the second person singular. The Torah wants every one of us to listen carefully, whoever we are, at whatever stage of life. It knows that each person will hear its words somewhat differently—and will perhaps listen differently—this day than in the past.

When I was younger, the opening chapters of Devarim were among my favorites in all the Torah. A new generation of Israelites, assuming adult responsibility for the future of their people, stand across a narrow river from possibility greater than any the world has ever known. God has promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, and unprecedented access to God’s presence. As if that were not enough, God has granted them a blueprint for a society marked by both justice and compassion. Moses struggles to make his words (*devarim*) adequate to the reality (another sense of *devarim*) that his people have the opportunity to create with God’s help, but that he will not live to see. The Israelites for their part will soon have the task of living up to the promise of the *devarim*, word and deed, that Moses had imprinted on their memory.

The vision is thrilling to a person of any age, and is especially so to an individual or couple, standing with life’s spacious possibility about to unfold in front of them. It is more exciting still if, like me, your own youth corresponds with that of the new State of Israel just established in the Land that the Israelites of Moses’s day stood ready to enter.

Decades later, my children grown, I am still greatly moved by Deuteronomy’s vision of Life with a capital L opening up across a narrow river, if only one has the wisdom and courage to reach for it. But I find myself drawn more and more to the very different vision set forth at the end of the book. Picture this scene with me now: Moses is looking back upon his years, taking stock of both achievement and frustration. He is trying in the short amount of time he has left to formulate lessons

that will endure among his people long after he is gone. What do you say—what *devarim* do you choose, what *devarim* do you recall or omit—when you know that the end of your speech will also mark the end of your days? What shall we hear in Moses’s words, you and I? What events in *our* lives shall we recall or omit as we look back—now that we are able to appreciate limit, failure, mortality, and love in a way we did not when we were younger?

I think the Torah wants its readers to engage in this sort of reflection. From the very first chapters of Genesis to the final verses of Deuteronomy, the Torah impels us to go deeper into the text with the help of personal life experience, even as we go deeper into life with the help of the text. I will follow the Torah’s lead and read Deuteronomy that way in this reflection on the book. Let’s begin by looking at the programmatic chapters near the start of Devarim—or better, by *hearing* them—through the eyes and ears of a new generation of adults about to set out on its way.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is One,” Moses declares. The words have been recited morning and evening by faithful Jews for over two millennia, along with the passage, which follows at once, commanding every Israelite (in second person singular once more) to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). Read as a categorical statement of truth or duty, these verses arouse incomprehension, hesitation and doubt. Countless volumes of theology have been devoted over the centuries to the meaning of God’s oneness—and much blood has been spilled. How can love be commanded? Why would God demand a degree of wholeness from human beings that seems beyond our capacity to achieve?

Read the passage as instruction or invitation to a young individual or couple building a home or a family, and the words take on a different valence, abounding in significance. One desires nothing more fervently at that stage of life than to love one’s partner or child (or to have a partner or child to love) with this sort of devotion: nothing held back, no part of the self standing aside or removed from the love. The Torah lacks the words to tell us what it would mean to love God in this way. No religion or philosophy has the words, for we are mere mortals, and God is God. So the Torah summons us as best it can to the task of loving God, connecting that task to the experience in this world that we most savor, the love that makes us feel alive as nothing else can. These are the words, the facts—the *devarim* in both senses—that God commands each of us to keep “on your heart,” as we love one another and try to love God. This is the life lesson we are meant to teach our children in the house and on the way, lying down and rising up, shaping all we do and framing all we see.

There are few happier moments in a parent’s life (and few more weighted with responsibility and care) than those graced with the sound of children in the house.

One so wants to protect these kids, your kids, and to raise them well! We promise ourselves daily that we will shield them, come what may, from the evils transpiring in the world beyond our doorsteps and our gates: the violence, the suffering, the cynicism and cruelty. We will try our best to fill them with purpose and joy, and to store up enough love in their hearts to last a lifetime. And behold: what we most *want* to do is precisely what God *commands* us to do in this paragraph of Torah, which in Jewish tradition is called, “And you shall love.”

I’ve come to believe in recent years that the allness of the love to which we are commanded or invited in this verse of the Torah is made possible by the oneness of the God who issues that charge. I read the word אַתְּ (“*et*”) that follows “you shall love” and precedes “the Lord your God” not only as the particle that always accompanies a direct object in Hebrew but also in its other sense, “with”—a usage found as nearby as Deut. 5:3: “Not only with (אִתּוֹ) our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant . . .” Read this way, we are commanded to “love *with* the Lord your God,” drawing, whenever we love, on the treasury of love that originates in our Creator and is transmitted by our family, and replenished whenever we love or are loved in turn. Loving *with* God, who is One, we too are equipped to aim at allness or wholeness.

The middle section of Deuteronomy sketches the project of imposing God’s legal blueprint on the Promised Land. Moses’s exposition of law is both methodical and repetitious; the vision set forth is ambitious, all-embracing, totalistic. It leaves no room for alternative ideals, beliefs, or practices, and expresses no doubt or hesitation whatever. “You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshipped their gods,” Moses declares at the very start of his law-giving (12:2). Seers and necromancers are not to be consulted in Israel’s new society. Prophets of other gods and other paths are not to be heeded. Anyone seeking to lead Israel astray must be killed. Sacrifices will henceforth be offered to the One God at one central place that the Lord will choose rather than at altars scattered throughout the country, as had been the case heretofore. “Justice, justice shall you pursue that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord is giving you” (16:20).

There is something grand about this part of the book of Deuteronomy—and there are elements that are not a little scary. Can a society or culture ever eliminate doubt and dissent as the book seems to intend and command? Why would it want to? Is the dream of a just society with God in its midst so fragile that it cannot brook the presence of naysayers? Is this the perspective on social and political life that stands behind the paradoxical instruction to “remember what Amalek did to you on your journey leaving Egypt . . . therefore . . . you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (25:17–19). Remember not to forget to blot out the memory of all that stands opposed to the vision of justice that you shall pursue!