

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Devarim, Deuteronomy, Chapters 1-3 | August 10, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Faith and the Defeat of Fear

In the past two weeks, we have witnessed Israel carry out audacious operations and heard an Israeli prime minister deliver an eloquent, stirring, and historic address to Congress. But perhaps the most inspiring image of all came after these things had already occurred: a brief video clip distributed on social media, which featured not statesmen and generals but regular Israelis. The scene was of shoppers in Mahaneh Yehudah marketplace in Jerusalem, colloquially known as the *shuk*.

At this point, Iran had already flown its “red flag of revenge,” and there was a sense that escalation by Israel’s enemies was imminent. One might have expected an empty market, scenes of citizens cowering in fear. And yet there the Israelis were, packing the market, as on any other week. One might not have noticed any difference between this week—in a time of war—and any other. But suddenly, seemingly led by someone in one of the stores, several people began singing a song by Eyal Golan that was composed and released soon after October 7:

*Ki am ha-netsah l’olam lo m’fahed,
Afilu k’she-kasbeh lir’ot,
Kulam b’yahad, af ehad poh lo boded.*

For the eternal people will never be afraid,
Even when it is difficult to see,
All are together, not one is alone.

The crowd begins to swell in song as the chorus begins:

*Am Yisrael hai,
Im lo nishkah tamid lih’yot m’uhadim,
Am Yisrael hai,
Ba-aliyot, ba-y’ridot, gam ba-sha’ot ha-khi kashot.*



The people of Israel live,
If we do not forget to remain united,
The people of Israel live,
In the ups, the downs, and even in the most difficult of times.

And then, embodying the union that the song celebrates, nearly the entire market bursts into song together,

*Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu shomer aleinu,
Az mi yakhol aleinu?
Ki ein lanu od m'dinah.*

The Holy One, Blessed be He, protects us,
So who can overcome us?
For we have no other country.

[T]he question of courage, and the defeat of fear, is central to Moses' message throughout [Devarim] . . .

The short clip captured courage, reflected in the ordinary lives of citizens; *this* was a moment that did not fail to inspire.

We consider this as we ponder the beginning of *Sefer Devarim*, the Book of Deuteronomy. Its Hebrew name, which means “words,” refers to Moses’ message

to Israel before his death, his description of what transpired in the previous generation, and the lessons for posterity therein. And rightly understood, the question of courage, and the defeat of fear, is central to Moses’ message throughout the book, but especially in our reading this week.

Let us see how this is so by studying the opening words of *Devarim*, which may seem merely introductory, but, rightly understood, pack a powerful punch.

These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah over against Suph, between Paran, and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dizahab. It is eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea. And in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel, according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them; after he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Astaroth and in Edre-i. (Deuteronomy 1:1–4)

We must briefly unpack these sentences, for they do more than mark the time and place in which Moses spoke; they are redolent with meaning. As the medieval commentator Rashbam (Samuel ben Meir, France, ca. 1085–1158) notes, there is a painful and poignant irony in this introduction: Moses speaks on the Moabite Plains, on the Western border of the Promised Land, but he notes that this is the “fortieth year,” and that 40 years ago, Israel was already near the southern border of the Promised Land—a mere eleven-day journey from Horeb,



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from Sinai. Following the return of the spies, and their infamous report, the Israelites give in to fear, and refuse to go forward. Caleb and Joshua ask the Israelites to have courage, but to no avail; the fear expressed by the other spies becomes contagious. Thus we read several months ago:

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry; and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword . . . ? (Numbers 14:1–3)

The Israelites are punished, doomed to die in the desert, succeeded by a new generation.

It is to this new generation that Moses speaks in our *parashah*. *Devarim* thus begins nearly 40 years after the episode of the spies by reminding us that Israel is still only an eleven-day journey away from Sinai. The Israelites have not progressed at all; they could have been in the Promised Land long before, and Moses with them. Instead, 40 years later, they are only eleven days from Sinai. The very opening of *Devarim* is thus laden with a recognition of ancient Israel's failure, of its giving in to fear. The mood of the opening verse is thus captured by this famous bit of poetry from John Greenleaf Whittier:

For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: "It might have been!"

It is only when we understand this that we can comprehend the painful power of the next verse, which gives us the precise time, 40 years later, when Moses spoke to the next generation of Israel:

after he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Astaroth and in Edre-i. (Deuteronomy 1:4)

Why is this military victory invoked? The point, it would seem, is that 40 years earlier the Israelites had given in to fear, not believing in God's protection. But now, suddenly, with the battle against Sihon and Og, Caleb's courage has been vindicated, and the cowardice of the spies has been refuted.

It is therefore to be expected—and this is the theme of most of our *parashah*—that Moses would open his remarks by explaining why the previous generation had failed. He retells the story of the spies, imploring the Israelites to learn its lessons, to avoid the mistakes of their ancestors, not to give in to fear. But as Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) notes, in recounting the story, Moses seems to imply that he too was responsible, in some way, for what had occurred. Moses describes God's reaction to Israel's profound fear of the inhabitants of the Promised Land thus:

Then I said to you, Do not be in dread or afraid of them. . . . Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the Lord your God, who went before you in the way, to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night, to show you by what way you should go, and in the cloud by day. And the Lord heard your words, and was angered, and he swore, Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land, which I swore to give to your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh . . . (Deuteronomy 1:29–36)



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Then something entirely new appears: Moses informs the next generation of Israelites that he too was punished because of this episode.

The Lord was angry with me also on your account, and said, You also shall not go in there; Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter; encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it. (Deuteronomy 1:37–38)

Moses here seems to say that because of Israel's fear, he too was barred from entering the Land of Israel. This verse is difficult to understand for a number of reasons. How is Moses linked to the sin of the spies? Moreover, we had been previously informed in the *parashah* of *Chukat* that Moses was banned from the Holy Land because of a different mistake: striking the rock when Israel asked for water.

In addressing these questions, Abravanel argues that whereas of course Moses was not complicit in this terrible failure of the spies, and whereas of course Moses had no fear of Israel's enemies, nevertheless, for Abravanel, one thing that Moses said helped set the stage for this failure.

Let us go back to the original tale in the Book of Numbers: God asks Moses to send forth men that they may *examine* the land of Canaan—in Hebrew, “*v'yaturu et eretz K'na'an*.” Moses, however, elaborates on this command and adds the following in his instructions:

And see that land, what it is, and the people that dwell therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. (Numbers 13:18)

God, Abravanel argues, merely asked for a description of the land; Moses, however, added an investigation of its military might. Now Moses, of course, did not fear the forces they were about to face; he had absolute and total faith that God would allow Israel to overcome any army that fought against them. But, Abravanel argues, by making an evaluation of Canaanite power part of the spies' mandate, Moses inadvertently opened the door for the spies to misuse their position and sow seeds of fear among the people of Israel. Moses therefore declares in Deuteronomy that he too bore a bit of the responsibility.

Abravanel, as we discussed in Bible 365, then goes further. It was in his view Moses' mistake regarding the spies for which he was ultimately punished; the Bible merely focuses on the tale of the rock, a much more minor failing, to preserve his dignity.

Abravanel's assertion is somewhat shocking, and whether or not one adopts his approach, his words contain an important insight: leaders must always be careful not only to be courageous, but also to inspire courage in those they lead. And indeed, throughout our reading, this is what Moses seeks to achieve in his words, by referring to the present generation's victory over the kings of Sihon and Bashan.



Then we turned, and went up the way to Bashan; and Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edre-i. But the Lord said to me, Do not fear him; for I have given him, and all his people, and his land, into your hand; and you shall

do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites, who dwelt at Heshbon. So the Lord our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan . . . (Deuteronomy 3:1–3)

For our *parashah*, courage is a manifestation of *faith*, a faith derived from the miraculous story of the Jewish people, and an awe at the way in which God makes Himself manifest within it.

And as our *parashah* comes to a close, Moses relates his instructions to Joshua:

And I commanded Joshua at that time, Your eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings . . . (Deuteronomy 3:21)

Moses follows this statement by referring to the mighty tribes that Joshua would face in the future:

Do not fear them . . . (Deuteronomy 3:22)

Because of the experience of the spies, Moses is most concerned that Joshua not give in to this one emotion.

The *parashah* thus encourages us to ask: what is courage? How does it work? Churchill famously described courage as the original virtue that allows other virtues to make themselves manifest:

Men and kings must be judged in the testing moments of their lives. Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because, as has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all others.

It is a wonderful quote, but it is one, unfortunately, with which Scripture may not agree, at least in the context of God's covenantal nation. For our *parashah*, courage is a manifestation of *faith*, a faith derived from the miraculous story of the Jewish people, and an awe at the way in which God makes Himself manifest within it. The Jewish approach to courage, then, is better expressed not by Churchill but by another great man: Natan Sharansky, who described how the Psalms inspired him while he was in a prison.

King David now appeared before me not as a fabled hero or a mystical superman but as a live, indomitable soul—tormented by doubts, rising against evil, and suffering from the thought of his own sins. He was proud, daring, and resolute, but in order to be bold in combat with his enemies, he had to be humble before the Lord. The fear of God guided David when he entered the valley of death.



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Thus the famous title selected by Sharansky for his memoir: *Fear No Evil*. Several people who have met Sharansky in Jerusalem report that he readily produces the Psalms book from prison that is still in his pocket. When surprise is expressed that he still carries it, he immediately replies, “it carries me.”

This courage, for Jewish Scripture, is made manifest not only by warriors or leaders, but by so many ordinary members of God’s covenantal people. If we did not know this already, we need only watch the small clip of marketgoers in God’s holy city, who simultaneously sing and implore in prayer that faith ensure their unity as a people. The song continues:

*Ta’aseh shalom beineinu,
Shmor al y’ladeinu,
Ki lo avdab ha-emunah;
Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu shomer aleinu,
Az mi yakhol aleinu?
Ki ein lanu od m’dinah.*

Make peace amongst us,
Protect our children,
For the faith is not yet lost;
The Holy One, Blessed be He, protects us,
So who can overcome us?
For we have no other country.

May their prayer be fulfilled; and may the citizens of Israel—they and their children—know only safety in the days to come.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

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Additional Resources

Israelis in Mahaneh Yehudah Sing Eyal Golan, X, August 2, 2024. [Click here to watch.](#)

