

# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Re'eh*, Deuteronomy, Chapters 11-16 | August 31, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Seeking Brothers Between Two Mountains

There are locations in the Land of Israel whose significance looms large for us always: Jerusalem, of course, the locus of Jewish longing; Hebron, where the patriarchs lie buried; Bethlehem, hometown of David's family. And then there are sites that many do not know much about, but which played central roles in the history of the Jewish people. Our *parashah* mentions one such site, whose significance—and rediscovery—is incredibly, poignantly important for our current painful moment.

It is in our reading that Moses first describes a ritual that is to take place upon the Jews' entry into the land:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on mount Gerizim, and the curse on mount Ebal. (Deuteronomy 11:26–29)

What this means is that Israel is to divide itself between these two mountains, and the blessings and the curses regarding those who obey and disobey the law will be respectively recited toward one mountain and then the next.

Moses then goes on to review many of the laws of the Torah: our *parashah* covers the prohibition on idolatry, the particulars of *kashrut*, and the covenantal calendar and its three major festivals. And indeed, when Joshua arrived in the land, the required ritual of blessing and cursing was performed, and the text of the Torah itself was inscribed on the stones of an altar on one of the two mountains. As with Sinai, the entire people took part in this event:

And all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges, stood on this side of the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, both stranger, and native born; half of them over against mount Gerizim, and half of them over against mount Ebal; as



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Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded, that they should first bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the Torah. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that went amongst them. (Joshua 8:33–35)

Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, in other words, were the first seminal covenantal site after Sinai, and the first ever in the Land of Israel. It is no wonder, therefore, that decades after the entry into the land, Joshua assembled all Israel again to exhort them before he died.

But why is this site so significant in the first place? What is so important about two mountains in Samaria?

The answer would seem to lie in what lay between these two mountains: the city of Shechem.

Indeed, Joshua, at the end of his life, brought Israel back to the site of this covenant; but this time, he placed them all between the mountains. As you read this passage, see if some of it sounds familiar:



Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, Thus says the Lord the God of Israel, Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham, and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the river, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many, and gave him Isaac. And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau; and I gave Esau the hill country of Seir, to possess; but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. (Joshua 24:1–4)

A portion of this passage has made its way into the Haggadah, one of the foundational texts of Jewish identity. But if it is Shechem that makes these mountains important, what makes Shechem so central to the



Jewish story? Citing the medieval commentator David Kimhi (also known as Radak; Provence, 1160–1235), Rabbi Michael Hattin notes that it was there that the first of Israel's ancestors to come to the land marked his own arrival:

At Shekhem, nestled picturesquely between Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, their ancestor Abraham had first arrived. He and his wife Sara had answered God's summons to leave kith and kin behind at Ur upon the Euphrates, and to journey westwards to the land of Canaan:

Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all of their possessions that they had acquired, and the entire household that they had gathered at Haran, and they departed to journey towards Canaan, and they arrived in the land of Canaan. Abram traversed the land, until the site of Shekhem, until Alon Moreh, and the Canaanite was then in the land. (Gen. 12:5–6)

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## [W]hat makes Shechem so central to the Jewish story?

to inscribe them upon the stones (Josh. 8:30–35). To Shekhem, then, Israel now returns—to reflect upon their accomplishments and to be re-inspired with the tenets that underlie their mission.

Joshua carefully chooses the location of his last address to the people, for there they had gathered in a great assembly years earlier not long after they had entered the land—to hear the Torah's words of instruction and

This is a fascinating explanation; but I would take a different tack. The truth is that another famous tale in Genesis began, in a sense, in Shechem, a tale that would only end at the conclusion of the book of Joshua. That tale is the story of Joseph. Following a description of the enmity of Joseph's brothers, Shechem suddenly appears as the story takes a twist:

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am. So he said to him, Go, now, see if it is well with your brothers, and with the flock; and bring me word again. So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him wandering in the fields; and the man asked him, What are you seeking? And he said, I am seeking my brothers; tell me, I pray you, where they are pasturing the flock. And the man said, They have gone away; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. (Genesis 37:12–17)

These were the words spoken by Joseph in Shechem: "I am seeking my brothers." In Hebrew, the words are even more powerfully: "*Et abai anokhi m'vakesh*," "My brothers do I seek." Of course, this can be a purely perfunctory phrase, but as some have noted, it can be read as an expression of an underlying, existential need: "I seek covenantal unity with my brothers. Only then will I be whole."

Alas, that unity is, for Joseph, years away; but it is in Shechem that this desire for unity, consciously or otherwise, is expressed. Joseph is sold into slavery, setting in motion a chain of events that culminates in the Exodus, the



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revelation at Sinai, and the return to the land. It can therefore be no coincidence—as others have also noted—that it is in Shechem that Joseph is ultimately laid to rest, as all comes full circle:

The bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of silver; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. (Joshua 24:32)

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**[H]ow powerful it is that Moses, banned from entering the land, would nevertheless see that Joseph is brought home to be buried by his brother Israelites at the very site where he had first said, “I seek my brothers.”**

Joseph is buried in between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. We must note the powerful poignancy of this moment. For who first bore Joseph's body from Egypt? It was not—as depicted in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*—a procession of priests singing “Bones of Joseph, Bones of Joseph/ Many colors was his coat/ Bones of Joseph, Bones of Joseph/ Into bondage he was sold.” It was, according to the Book of Exodus, Moses himself, who brings forth Joseph's remains, and thereby helps to heal a family rift. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein put it, as part of a much broader reflection on Joseph's tale:

When will the shreds be made whole? Only a few hundred years later, with someone who appears on the stage of Jewish history as an infant crying in a basket among the bulrushes. It is he who seeks the bones of Yosef and, in the midst of the exodus, takes the trouble to bring them up for burial in Israel. It is only when they leave Egypt, only when they leave the territory where Yosef had been lord and ruler, and only through renewed weeping, that Yosef succeeds—that history succeeds—in sewing the pieces back together.

And how powerful it is that Moses, banned from entering the land, would nevertheless see that Joseph is brought home to be buried by his brother Israelites at the very site where he had first said, “I seek my brothers.”

Thus, when Moses commanded, on behalf of God, that the first supreme covenantal moment of the Israelites in the Holy Land would be atop Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, he was essentially instructing the Israelites to enshrine their identity in the land at the site overlooking where Joseph first uttered the words “*et abai anokhi m'vakesh*,” “My brothers do I seek.” And with those words, Moses was asking his people to express these words as well, and through them to discover their identity and their sense of national unity.

This phrase, of course, takes on a very different, and unbearably powerful, significance today. To enter the airport in Israel, and to leave Israel from it, is to be greeted by the many signs bearing the names and faces of those whose return is longed for—both the hostages who remain alive, and the bodies of those who were murdered. If there is a phrase that captures the feeling there, it is the words Joseph uttered, but with a very different meaning: we seek our brethren. *Et abeinu ve-et ahoteinu anakhnu m'vakshim*.



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Thus do these words resound through the generations, reminding us that not only the most famous of cities and sites, but every inch of this sacred land, proclaims powerful covenantal episodes in Jewish history. As we pray, we can be certain that the Holy Land will see many more powerful moments to come.

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## **Additional Resources**

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein on the Tears of Joseph, "Yosef's Tears," *Alei Etzion* 16. [Click here to read.](#)

