

DEVARIM

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WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Devarim



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

DEUTERONOMY 1:1-3:22

Parashat Devarim / פרשת דברים

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Our journey through the Torah has reached its final leg with the opening portion from the Book of Deuteronomy! We could easily reduce this “re-telling” to a mere recap of events in Israel’s history, but there’s something much deeper at play here. Let’s journey deeper...

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What was really at stake when Israel sided with the “evil report” brought by ten of the Twelve Spies? It would be easy to assume that all the negative drama way back in Numbers 13 was based on what the spies *saw* in Canaan, but what if it was the result of what they *failed to see*? This article invites us to consider another angle that this week’s *parsha* brings to light.

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

IDs please. This week’s HWS is for those who are 21 and older. “Why?” you may ask. Because we’re going to dive into some ~~beer~~ *be’er*. We’re not sorry—that joke may be lousy, but it is mandatory. Seriously, however, this Hebrew word is rich in its range of meaning. Even more fascinating is the fact that it has inspiring connections to *Yeshua* in the Gospels.



OVER VIEW

Devarim is both the title for the final volume of the “Five Books of Moses” and the first Torah portion therein. *Devarim* means “words.” This Hebrew title for the Book of Deuteronomy comes from the opening phrase of the book: “These are the words (*devarim*) that Moses spoke to all Israel across the Jordan” (Deuteronomy 1:1). One ancient name for the book of Deuteronomy is *Mishnah HaTorah*, which means “repetition of the Torah.” This is similar to the Greek Septuagint name *Deuteronomos* (“Deuteronomy” is derived from *Deuteronomos*), which means “second law.”

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Devarim* / פרשת דברים | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

Parashat Devarim kicks off the final book of the Torah—*Devarim* (or Deuteronomy). But let's be clear: this isn't just Moses giving a sentimental farewell speech. Deuteronomy is a covenantal gut-check. Forty years in the wilderness are ending, and Moses is standing at the edge of the Jordan, staring into the future while dragging the past behind him like a ledger of accountability. He's not holding back, and neither should we.

The name *Devarim* means "words," and that's no accident. Moses isn't performing; he's testifying. He retells Israel's journey, but not just to refresh their memory. He's calling out rebellion, fear, disobedience, and misplaced priorities. He reminds them of *Kadesh Barnea*, where they chickened out and refused to take the land. That moment was a turning point—not just in geography but in identity. God promised—the people panicked. And that generation spent the rest of their lives walking in circles because they couldn't walk in faith.

Moses walks them through every detail, and he names names. He brings up the appointment of judges—how he couldn't carry the people alone because of their constant complaining. He points out how God instructed them to enter the land, but instead, they demanded a scouting mission, then rejected God's promise due to fear. He reminds them of how they tried to rectify their mistake by going up to fight without God, and they were crushed. Why rehash all of this? Because truth matters, and so does history. You don't get to move forward in covenant without owning past failures.

But here's the brilliance of Moses' leadership—he doesn't just air out dirty laundry. He reminds them of God's faithfulness. Despite their failures, God never abandoned them. He led them, fed them, protected them, and now they're standing ready to inherit what He promised their fathers. The message is clear: You're not here because you earned it. You're here because God is faithful—even when you weren't.

Moses also reminds them that their inheritance doesn't give them a monopoly on God's favor. He tells them not to mess with Edom, Moab, or Ammon, because God has also given those nations their lands. In other words, Israel's chosenness doesn't justify arrogance. It demands humility. You're chosen *for* something, not *over* someone else.

This *parsha* is all about preparation, but it's spiritual, not logistical. Before the Children of Israel cross into the land, Moses knows they need more than strategy. They need clarity. They need to know who they are, where they've been, how they've failed, and why God is still with them. And so do we.

Parashat Devarim reminds us that we don't merely inherit covenant, we "own" it. We don't get to walk into God's promises without confronting our past. Leaders must be learners. And in order to follow, one must be willing to trust God more than one's fear. So the question remains: Are we ready to stop wandering and start walking in what God has been preparing all along? Because He's ready. **He always is.**

New Testament Tie-In

Deuteronomy's opening chapter takes the reader back to Numbers 10. The chapters that immediately follow are not positive. In one scene, the people were complaining so intensely that **"the Lord heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the Lord burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp"** (Numbers 11:1 NKJV). Chapter twelve details Miriam and Aaron's infamous grumbling. This series of unfortunate events culminated with the bad report from the ten spies. As you may recall, they entered Canaan on a reconnaissance mission, seemingly in preparation to go in and possess it. The ten returned with an evil report that discouraged the Children of Israel. Despite protests from Joshua and Caleb, the people decided not to enter the Promised Land.

In Deuteronomy 1, Moses' account of that disastrous decision (to forsake God's purposes) includes a phrase that merits our attention: **"ADONAI your God, who goes before you"** (cf. vv. 30 and 32-33). Jeffery Enoch notes that the original Hebrew is "even though ADONAI ha-holech lifneichem ([is] the One Who walks before you)...a phrase connoting military leadership."¹ In other words, Israel ultimately didn't fail because they lacked the courage or self-confidence (**"We seemed like grasshoppers in our eyes as well as theirs!"** – Numbers 13:33). Israel failed because they didn't recognize the assignment: they weren't "invading" Canaan—they were following ADONAI as He invaded Canaan! Look at the two references from chapter one mentioned above:

"Then I said to you, 'Don't tremble or be afraid of them. ADONAI your God, who goes before you, He Himself will fight for you—just as He did for you in Egypt before your own eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how ADONAI your God carried you as a man carries his son, everywhere you went until you came to this place.' Yet for all this you did not trust in ADONAI your God—the One who goes before you on the way to scout out a place for you to camp and to show you the way you should go, in fire by night and in the cloud by day." – Numbers 1:29-33 (*emphasis added*)

As Moses described the invasion of Canaan, "ADONAI your God" was Israel's "first wave"—the One who would establish a "beachhead" for them, securing victory. They refused to join Him on the mission He was leading. Not only did that generation miss out on the houses they didn't build and the vineyards they didn't plant—they missed the experience of fighting alongside **"ADONAI mighty in battle!"** (cf. Psalm 24:8)

God's people are still called to move into "enemy territory." The command to **"Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to every creature"** (Mark 16:15) will lead us into moments of profound opposition and resistance. The "Great Commission" is often intimidating. Those we are trying to reach with the gospel can seem like "giants," and we—due to personal failures and limitations—can see ourselves like "grasshoppers." But Yeshua's words in the Gospels echo Moses' description of ADONAI:

- **"I go to prepare a place for you."** – John 14:2 (NKJV)
- **"Yeshua said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life!'"** – John 14:6
- **"And remember! I am with you always, even to the end of the age."** – Matthew 28:20

The essence of Yeshua's call to us is, "Follow Me!" Even when we are going, we are following. And that "following" will include trouble. It will involve a cross. As Peter the Apostle wrote, **"For you were called to this, because Messiah also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His footsteps"** (1 Peter 2:21). But we face all these things in the strength of the One who transformed the cross into a symbol of love's unstoppable power. We march into our "Canaan's," not looking up at giants but down at His footsteps.

Hebrew Word Study

be'er [באר] / "explain"

There are two factors one must consider at the outset of Deuteronomy. First, this final volume of the Torah represents a time of critical transition for Israel: from nomadic clans wandering the Negev to a nation settled in Canaan, from a generation that slaved away in the shadows of the Egyptian Empire to another that only knew life in the desert. And second, God's interaction with this group—from Abraham to Mount Sinai—was always covenantal. Hence, Deuteronomy is comprised of three monumental sermons that Israel's leader Moses preached to facilitate their transition to the Promised Land in covenantal faithfulness.

Before we ever get the opportunity to read a single word of these sermons, the text notes that "**Moses began to explain this Torah saying**" (Deuteronomy 1:5 *emphasis added*). In other words, these sermons are "explanations." This concept goes beyond inspiration (preaching) and information (teaching), in hopes of **lasting transformation**. What is the basis for such a claim? The Hebrew word translated as "explain" is *be'er* (באר). No, Israel's most revered prophet was not drinking a hoppy beverage; *be'er* means "to elaborate, to give an account and clarify the meaning of something through discourse."² As we often note, *be'er* has a tri-consonantal root:

- *Bet* (ב) / 2
- *Aleph* (א) / 1
- *Reysh* (ר) / 200

Astute readers might have already connected *be'er* to a meaningful place in Jacob's story. On his way to Egypt following Joseph's reunion with his brothers, we read, "**So Israel set out, along with everything that belonged to him. When he came to Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac**" (Genesis 46:1 *emphasis added*). One Hebrew meaning of *Beersheba* (באר שבע) is "the well of the oath."³ It is a combination of *be'er* ("well") and *sheva* ("seven"). "Wait just a minute"—you might be thinking—"I thought you said *be'er* meant to explain or elaborate!" Exactly.

No, you're not confused. This Hebrew word means both—to explain something (in verb form) and a well (as a derivative noun). Why would this be so? We can find a hint in the lexicon's definition of *be'er* as to "**clarify** the meaning of something." By implication, one can only clarify something that is not obvious or readily visible. Teachers facilitate this sort of unveiling in classrooms every day. Similarly, one digs through the dirt to reveal the life-giving water pulsing beneath the surface. Moses wasn't just teaching—he was digging up "the words" (*devarim*) of God to bring life to the Children of Israel. Israel (i.e., Jacob) came to **Beersheba** (a well) as he transitioned from Canaan into Egypt. Likewise, "Moses began to [*be'er*] this Torah" to the Children of Israel as they prepared to transition from Egypt—via the wilderness—back into Canaan. Only firmly anchored in the Torah would the Israelites thrive in the Promised Land.

One last point is worth considering. Some in the rabbinic tradition have claimed, "Water actually stands for Torah, as it is said (by Isaiah, 55:1), 'Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water.' Having gone for three days without Torah, the prophets among them stepped forth and legislated that the Torah should be read on the second and fifth days of the week as well as on Shabbat so that they would not let three days pass without Torah."⁴ With this concept in mind, consider what *Yeshua* (the "Word" who became flesh – John 1:14) said: "**But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty. The water that I give him will become a fountain of water within him, springing up to eternal life!**" (John 4:14) Perhaps it's no coincidence that, although it wasn't Beersheba, He spoke these words at "Jacob's well" (v. 6).

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HEBREW WORD STUDY

באר

באר / *be'er*: declare, make plain; a well, pit.

It describes writing on tablets of stone made clear and distinct (Deut 27:8) or some writing upon tablets which is legible at a hurried glance (Hab 2:2). In figurative use the verb means to make clear by explaining (Deut 1:5).

Wells for water were dug in the earth (Gen 21:30) and the discovery of water was an occasion for rejoicing, celebrated in song (Num 21:17–18). Ordinarily water had to be drawn (Gen 24:11), and so a flowing well (“living water”) was a particularly good fortune (Gen 26:19). In a land where water was scarce, wells were a source of contention (Gen 26:19–21). Israel promised that they would drink no water from the wells of Edom and Ammon if they were allowed to pass through their territory (Num 20:17)....Water was drawn by women, and so the well served as a meeting place for the servant of Abraham and Rebekah (Gen 24:11ff.), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29:2ff.), and Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2:15ff.).

taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- “We don't merely inherit covenant, we **own** it.” Believers are often quick to tout the fact that they are people of “covenant.” But what does this mean for daily life and practice? We all know that living faith is evidenced by corresponding action (cf. James 2:20). Consider how you can “own” the covenant you have with the Lord in your specific context.
- To be human is to be afraid (at times). Eugene Peterson wrote, “The world is a frightening place. If we are not a little bit scared, we simply don't know what's going on.”⁵ Unfortunately, we can get “a lotta bit scared” and let that hinder us from following God into “Canaan.” Can you recall a situation when fear got the better of you? What lessons did you learn? How has the Lord redeemed that?

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NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Vaetchanan* / פרשת ואתחנן

TORAH

Sunday / Deuteronomy 3:23-4:4

Monday / Deuteronomy 4:5-40

Tuesday / Deuteronomy 4:41-49

Wednesday / Deuteronomy 5:1-18

Thursday / Deuteronomy 5:19-6:3

Friday / Deuteronomy 6:4-25

Saturday / Deuteronomy 7:1-11

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Isaiah 40:1-26

New Covenant Reading:

Luke 3:2-15

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

¹ Jeffrey Enoch. Feinberg Ph.D. and Kim Alan Moudy, *Walk Deuteronomy! Words* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2003), 18.

² *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

³ Roswell D. Hitchcock, ed., "An Interpreting Dictionary of Scripture Proper Names, Showing the Meaning of Nearly All the Names of Persons and Places in the Bible," *Hitchcock's New and Complete Analysis of the Holy Bible: Or, the Whole of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: A. J. Johnson, 1871), 1105.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, BavaKama 82a

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (S.I.: Intervarsity Press, 2022), 51.