



Mapping a Relationship: Chapter 4 of Devarim

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Parashat Va'Ethanan 5777

A map is reflected in Chapter 4 of the book of Devarim, a complex map of the relationship between Israel and their God. This map can also be used as a basis, a background, or an arena for thinking about relationships in general.

It is accepted in biblical criticism to divide Deuteronomy into two speeches—one short, and another long which has in it a large collection of laws. Alternatively, there are those who identify two introductions in the book, after which a comprehensive collection of laws appears. The collection of laws begins in chapter 12 with the words: “These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe in the land” (Devarim 12:1), whereas the speeches or introductions made by Moshe both begin with a reference to the Torah—perhaps in its narrow meaning, as a collection of laws. Thus, at the beginning of Moshe’s first speech it says: “On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moav, Moshe undertook to expound this Torah, this Teaching...” (Devarim 1:5), and similarly in the second speech: “This is the Torah, the Teaching, that Moshe set before the Israelites” (Devarim 4:44). According to these views, chapter 4 of Devarim forms the seam between Moshe’s two speeches, or between the two introductions to the large collection of laws it contains. This chapter also contains a short set of verses whose topic is the cities of refuge allocated on the far side of the Jordan river.

However, one can also view chapter 4 in another light, as an independent unit with an independent thought process and statement. According to this view, the chapter presents the characteristics of the unique bond between the people of Israel and their God. These characteristics are: place, behavior, and exclusivity. An additional emphasis is placed on the role of history, in two ways. Firstly, history is emphasized as the basis on which the relationship between Israel and God is predicated; and secondly, history is presented as the force that maintains this relationship during times of crisis.

The chapter raises another claim, according to which the nature of relationships is that they traverse a wide spectrum, and not just the space between one extreme and the other. At the two extremes of this range are, on the one hand, relationship, and on the other hand, rupture, but it includes both mistakes and the possibility of making amends—*teshuvah*.

The chapter thus serves as a model, not only for the relationship between Israel and its God, but for relationships in general.

1. On three things

Chapter 4 presents the principles that render the relationship between God and the people unique. These principles include exclusivity, a special place, and behavior that takes into consideration the desires and requests of each of the partners in the relationship.

The chapter opens with a declaration made by Moshe regarding the importance of observing God's laws, as a complete and closed system—one to which one must not add and from which one must not detract:

דברים ב, א' – ב'

¹וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְעֵ אֱלֹהֵי הַחֻקִּים וְאֱלֹהֵי הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת לְמַעַן תִּחְיִי
וּבְאַתֶּם יִירָשׁתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם: ²לֹא תֹסֵפוּ עַל-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי
מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִגְרְעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם:

Devarim 4:1-2

¹And now, O Israel, **give heed to the laws and rules** that I am instructing you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that YHVH, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ²**You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of YHVH your God** that I enjoin upon you.

At the same time, Moshe clarifies that there is a causal relationship between observance of God's laws and entering into, and existing in, the Land of Israel: “**so that you may live to enter and occupy the land** that YHVH, the God of your fathers, is giving you” (v. 1). Entering the land and residing in it are a result of a punctilious observance of God's commandments.

But observance of God's commandments are not the be all and end all of the relationship with God; Moshe continues to clarify the importance of fidelity to God: (4:3-4)

דברים ב, ג' – ד'

³עֵינֵיכֶם הָרְאוּת אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה ה' בְּבַעַל פְּעֹר כִּי כָל-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הִלֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּעַל-פְּעֹר הַשְׁמִידוּ ה'
אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִקֶּרְבְּךָ: ⁴וְאַתֶּם הַדֹּבְקִים בַּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תִּימִם כֻּלְכֶם הַיּוֹם:

Devarim 4:3-4

³You saw with your own eyes what God did in the matter of Ba'al-peor, that YHVH your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Ba'al-peor; ⁴while **you, who held (who hold) fast to YHVH your God, are all alive today.**

Cleaving to God and fidelity to the relationship with God are keys to life.¹

The commandments and the laws, the land, and the exclusive relationship between the people of Israel and God, form a triple basis for this relationship.

2. History

An important aspect touched on by chapter 4 is the role of the past in grounding a relationship. According to the chapter, the foundational events which formed the basis for the relationship between the people of Israel and God are the covenant at Mount Sinai and the covenant made by God with the Hebrew patriarchs. However, these events function in almost opposing ways: the covenant made with the patriarchs serves as a reminder for God of the relationship, whereas the covenant of Sinai is directed to the people of Israel.

The covenant of Sinai serves as a reminder to the people of Israel, whose role it is to anchor and fortify the observance of the commandments:

דברים ב, ט' – י'

וְיָקֻם הַשֹּׁמֵר לָהּ וְשָׁמַר נִפְשָׁהּ מֵאֵד פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רָאוּ עֵינֶיהָ...¹⁰ יוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַדְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּחֶרֶב בְּאֶמְרָה ה' אֵלֵי הַקְּהֵל־לִי אֶת־הָעָם וְאֲשַׁמְעֵם אֶת־דְּבָרֵי אֲשֶׁר יִלְמְדוּן לִירְאָה אֹתִי כְּלִי־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם חַיִּים עַל־הָאָדָמָה וְאֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם יִלְמְדוּן...

Devarim 4:9-10

⁹But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes... ¹⁰The day you stood before YHVH your God at Horev, when YHVH said to Me, “Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear

¹ This uniqueness is an internal experience, but an outside observer can also detect it: “Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples... For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is YHVH our God whenever we call upon Him?” (vv. 6-7).

My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children...”²

If the covenant at Mount Sinai is mentioned in the chapter as an historic event whose role is to remind the people of Israel of the importance of their relationship with God, the mention of the patriarchal covenant is brought as a reminder to God, whose love for the patriarchs serves as a reason and a fortification for maintaining his relationship with the people of Israel: “And because He loved your fathers, He chose their heirs after them; He Himself, in His great might, led you out of Egypt” (v. 37).

In this way, past becomes covenant, and in this case two historical covenants, that serve as a reminder of the relationship between God and Israel, and create an experience of this relationship that is more mutual, in which both sides are moved time and again toward each other.

3. A private moment—and the possibility of repentance

At this stage in the chapter, there appears a seeming interruption to the flow of Moshe’s words. Moshe appears to deviate from the topic of Israel and speaks instead of himself and of his private sorrow:

דברים ב, כ"א – כ"ב

וְהָיָה הַתְּעֹנָה־כִּי עַל־דְּבָרֵיכֶם וַיֵּשְׁבַע לִבִּי לְבַלְתִּי עֲבֹרִי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן וּלְבַלְתִּי־בֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ נָתַן לָךְ נַחֲלָה: ²²כִּי אֲנֹכִי מֵת בָּאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֵינֶנִּי עֹבֵר אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן וְאַתֶּם עֲבֹרִים וַיִּרְשְׁתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה הַזֹּאת:

² The mention of the covenant of Sinai in the chapter even raises the suggestion that the only fitting place in which to observe the commandments is the Land of Israel: “At the same time God 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” (v. 14).

Devarim 4:21-22

²¹Now God was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that YHVH your God is assigning you as a heritage.

²²For I must die in this land; I shall not cross the Jordan. But you will cross and take possession of that good land.

This deviation, however, is only an apparent one, as there is a close link between Moshe's punishment and the things he has said thus far in the chapter. The force of Moshe's punishment becomes evident specifically through the manner in which the uniqueness of the relationship between Israel and God is presented: Moshe's punishment is, in fact, a fracture in the relationship between himself and God. His personal punishment functions as a mirror image for the relationship that was described between God and his people.

Furthermore, Moshe's punishment functions as a testimony to the intensity of God's anger and its ramifications:

דברים ב, כ"ג – כ"ד

²³הִשְׁמַרְוּ לָכֶם פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּחוּ אֶת־בְּרִית ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת עִמָּכֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם פֶּסֶל תְּמוּנַת פֶּלֶא
אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ: ²⁴כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת הוּא אֵל קָדָשׁ:

Devarim 4:23-24

²³Take care, then, not to forget the covenant that YHVH your God concluded with you, and not to make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, against which YHVH your God has enjoined you. ²⁴**For YHVH your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God.**

As in Moshe's personal case, in the case of the nation too, the punishment for a betrayal of the relationship with God is damage to the relationship, and the forbidding of continued existence in the land:

דברים ב, כ"ה – כ"ו

²⁵כִּי־תוֹלִיד בָּנִים וּבָנֵי בָנִים וְנוֹשְׁנֵתָם בְּאֶרֶץ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲתָם וַעֲשִׂיתָם פֶּסֶל תְּמוֹנֹת כָּל וַעֲשִׂיתָם הֲרַע בְּעֵינַי
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְהַכְעִיסוֹ: ²⁶הַעִידְתִּי בְכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אֶבְדֶּה תִּאֲבִדוּן מִהָרָ מֵעַל
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲתֶם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא־תֹאבְדוּ יָמִים עָלֶיךָ כִּי הַשָּׁמַד תִּשְׁמָדוּ:

Devarim 4:25-26

²⁵When you have begotten children and children's children and are long established in the land, **should you act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing YHVH your God displeasure and vexation,** ²⁶**I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land** that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out.

However, through the description of God's reaction to betrayal and the depths of damage to the relationship that is the result of a crisis in the relationship between God and man, a new concept arises-the idea of repentance, *teshuvah*:

דברים ב, כ"ט – ל"א

²⁹וּבִקְשִׁיתֶם מִשָּׁם אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמָצָאתָ כִּי תִדְרֹשְׁנֻוּ בְּכָל־לִבְכֶּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ: ³⁰בְּצָר לְךָ וּמִצָּאוּךָ כָּל
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים וְשַׁבְתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעַתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ: ³¹כִּי אֵל רַחוּם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא
יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתֶךָ...

Devarim 4:29-31

²⁹But if you search there for YHVH your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul—³⁰when you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, **return (*veshavta—teshuvah*) to YHVH your God** and obey Him. ³¹For YHVH your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish...

Out of the sin and the disconnect between God and people, the people need to turn to seek, demand, the presence of God, and find Him. This is repentance, *teshuvah*, and it is made possible thanks to the strength of the relationship between God and his people, a relationship which, as mentioned above, is predicated on God's covenant with the patriarchs: "He will not forget the covenant which He made on oath with your fathers" (v. 31).

The covenant between God and the patriarchs, if so, is the basis for the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai and the entrance into the Land of Israel. It is the basis for the uniqueness of the relationship between God and Israel, and here it is revealed also as the key to repentance, the possibility of *teshuvah*. It is further evident that *teshuvah* is made possible when there are **two** active partners to it. In our case, God must remember the covenant He made with the patriarchs, which arouses in Him a desire to accept those who repent, and the people of Israel, on their part, must acknowledge God's power: "**Know** therefore this day and keep in mind that YHVH alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other" (v. 39).

Between sinners and keepers: The mistaken ones

At this point there seems to come a turning point in the chapter, and the story of the separation of three cities of refuge to the east of the Jordan river is told:

דברים ב, מ"א – מ"ב

אֲזַי יִבְדֹּקִיל מֹשֶׁה שְׁלֹשׁ עָרִים בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן מִזְרְחָהּ שְׁמֹשׁ: ⁴²לָנֶם שְׁמָה רוֹצֵחַ אֲשֶׁר יִרְצַח אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ
בְּכַל־דָּעַת וְהָיָא לֹא־שֹׁגָא לוֹ מִתְמָל שְׁלֵשָׁם וְנָס אֶל־אַתֶּת מִן־הָעָרִים הָאֵל וְחָ:

Devarim 4:41-42

⁴¹Then Moshe set aside three cities on the east side of the Jordan ⁴²to which a manslayer could escape, one who unwittingly slew a fellow man without having been hostile to him in the past; he could flee to one of these cities and live.

As in the case of the mention of Moshe's sin, the mention of the cities of refuge is also tightly linked to the central topic of the chapter. Firstly, the decision to set aside cities of refuge to the east of the Jordan, in addition to those already allocated to its west, indicates a complete acceptance of the request made by the two-and-a-half tribes to remain on the eastern bank of the river and not enter the land. While God is the one who gives laws and commandment, people also have desires and request, and God responds to these as well. The cities of refuge to the east of the Jordan signal mutuality in this respect as well.

Secondly, the cities of refuge also teach us of the boundaries of divine anger, and indicate God's ability to tolerate mistakes and errors. Within the dichotomous system of observing or not observing the commandments, residing in the land or being exiled from it, there is space in the relationship with God also for mistakes.

The chapter ends with the words "This is the Torah, the Teaching, that Moshe set before the Israelites" (v. 44). This is, then, the Torah: The exclusivity of the relationship with God, which includes a past, a particular place and particular behaviors, an understanding of the ramifications of betrayal, the possibility of *teshuvah* and the ability to hold those who sin and make mistakes. And perhaps these can also serve as anchors for our relationships with our fellow humans.