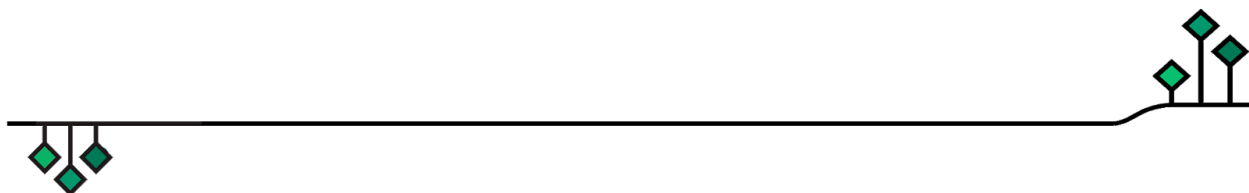


## Moses' Narrative—and Ours

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### Parashat Devarim 5781

When the book of Numbers ends, Moses' life is in ruins. At that moment, an honest judgment on his life would have to rate it as a failure. The people he led out of Egypt, with a promise that they would be taken to a homeland where they would live free as God's people, were definitively condemned to die in the desert (Numbers 14:23, 29:34; 20:12). Moses' impassioned plea to experience the Land of Israel himself was rejected. He could catch a glimpse of it, but he would never enter the Holy Land (Numbers 27:12-15). Siblings Miriam and Aaron—his closest associates for a lifetime, his indispensable co-leaders in coping with the insatiable demands and unending challenges of the Israelites—died, leaving him alone and bereft (Numbers 20:5-6, 22-29). Moses is directed to appoint his successor, Joshua bin Nun, who will lead Israel in the next generation. He is to consecrate Joshua to henceforth serve as general and leader in battle, so that this leadership function is no longer his either (Numbers 27:22-23). One would think that the only thing left for Moses to do is to climb Mount Avarim, view the land, and die, as Aaron did at Hor Hahar.



The looming end crystallizes for Moses what he can and must do before the end: to preserve the Jewish people. Instead of giving up and checking out of living, Moses decides to review his life and his teachings. He focuses on the Torah's narrative and whether he taught it properly and applied its values correctly. Moses' narrative—the book of Deuteronomy—is not a record of earlier events. Rather, it is a narrative where Moses organizes his thoughts and makes sense of his career; this explains why the facts are not always the same as reported in the earlier books.<sup>1</sup>

When he concludes that he has the narrative right, he is empowered to realize his mission: to teach that narrative to the next generation. He renews the covenant by bringing them in and opening the partnership to all who would join in the future. They, in fact, will realize the Torah's goals and turn Moses' teaching into the longest running, most influential vision of all time.<sup>2</sup>

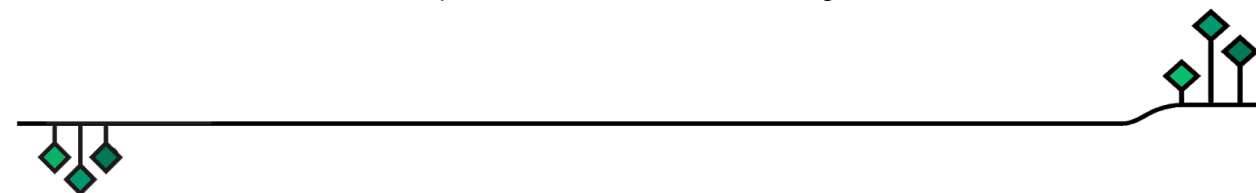
There is a midrashic principle that what happens to the ancestors is a marker for the children.<sup>3</sup> Moses' experience can be applied to our moment in the similar situation of apparent failure and futility Diaspora leadership faces right now. Less than a century after the Holocaust, there is a worldwide upsurge of anti-Semitism. After generations of post-war faith renewal, the Pew Study of American Jewry projects that there is going to be a big fall off in affiliation and identification with Jewry's faith and/or with the Jewish state. The enormity of the problem would make it tempting to throw up one's hands and give up. The lesson that Moses

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Deuteronomy 1:12-15 where Moses' first action is to recruit additional leaders with Numbers 11 where additional leaders are brought in because Moses feels that he has lost control of the food situation. Also see Joshua's ambivalence about sharing Moses' charisma with other leaders (Numbers 11:28-29).

<sup>2</sup> This vision underlies and shapes Christianity, Islam, and in its redemptive theme, modern civilization as well.

<sup>3</sup> "*Ma'asei avot siman la-banim*," literally "the acts of the ancestors are a sign for the children."



teaches us in the Book of Deuteronomy is to not do so. But first, we should understand the process of Moses' turnaround.

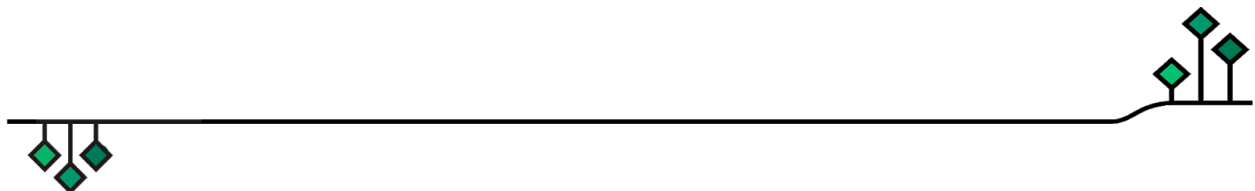
Moses' review starts briefly with the aborted final stage of the desert journey (Deuteronomy 1-3). He moves on, however, because he quickly realizes that his main life purpose was not to conquer the Land of Israel, as perhaps he had originally thought, but rather to bring the Israelites into the covenant of Sinai, and to teach them how to live a good life through following the Torah's guidelines.

Moses then analyzes the teachings of the Torah and explores how they can be better passed on. He incorporates whole blocks of *mitzvot* and values not hitherto detailed at length. Among the central new themes in his narrative is the "*Shema* / Hear O Israel" instruction (6:4-9). It communicates that the main commandment guiding the relationship between Israel and God is to "love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might" (6:5). Not obedience, not imposing rituals, not bringing gifts or sacrifices—but establishing a relationship of love and mutual respect is the key calling in connecting to the Divine.

It will be a long time before the people can live by this standard, and without the rewards, punishments, and divine interventions that shaped the religious life in those generations. In the meantime, one must teach this to one's children and speak of it all the time.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Bible represents the first stage of covenantal living, in which God intervenes directly and forcefully in human affairs. Following the good path out of love of God becomes more prominent in the second stage, during the Rabbinic period. The Rabbis reduced the salience of reward and punishment in this world, in part by pushing them off to the world to come. They also stressed the natural order's objective operation more than the Bible did. The movement to complete service of God, based on love and relationship, and minimizing the expectation of *quid pro quo* in religious behaviors, is characteristic of the third stage of the covenant in our era. This in a nutshell is my historical read of the covenant and the journey to redemption of the Jewish people. In the interim



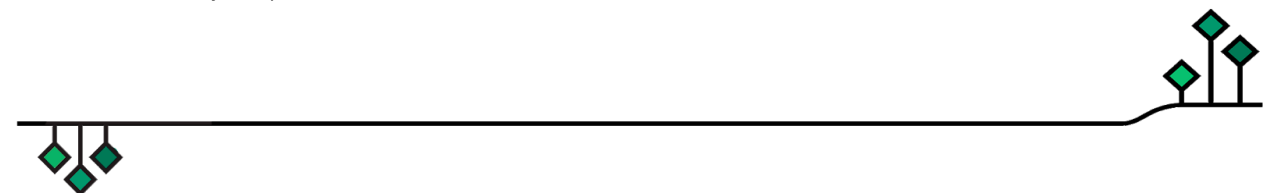
Moses himself recognizes this inescapable lag and includes in Deuteronomy laws that fall short of upholding the centrality of love—whether it be arranging for a king to rule (chapter 17), or the laws of the blood avenger who seeks to punish one who kills a family member accidentally (chapter 19). The laws of warfare also reflect upholding the realism of rough justice, or of establishing ground rules for war, in a world which is not yet ready for peaceful resolution of all conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Then Moses builds in an incremental system of regulation and limits, while setting up judges and a justice system to regulate conflicts and deal with emerging social problems.

Moses' reflections lead him to an epiphany. What is the central message of the Torah? His summary: “Behold I place before you today... life and good, death and evil” (30:15). At every moment in life, in every life behavior there is an element of choice. The choice is between elements of life and elements of death. The Torah's guidance is to “choose life” (30:19). The purpose of the commandments is to help us discern and make that choice of life. Moses states: “That I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in [God's] ways, to observe [God's] commandments, statutes, and laws” (30:19)—all of this is about **choosing life**. If one lives life routinely—if one eats anything that comes along, if one speaks any word

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period between the revelation of the Shema and the postmodern period, one is instructed “*ve-shinantam le-vanekha*,” to teach the idea of the centrality of the love relationship to your children. This keeps the idea alive until the time comes when it can be realized. For more discussion of the evolution of the *berit*, see my essay on Parashat VaYitzei, “The Journey to Maturation in the Covenant,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/journey-maturation-covenant>.

<sup>5</sup> See Deuteronomy chapters 16-18 and 20.



that comes to mind, if one acts ethically or not—one is missing the Torah's main teaching, namely that one should consciously review every moment and every action and **choose life**.<sup>6</sup>

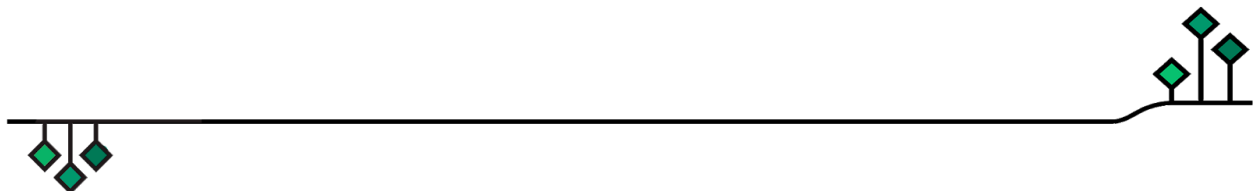
Having reviewed his Torah and clarified its message, Moses understands that whether the people live by it or not is not the final determinant whether his life was well spent—or not. He realizes that he is teaching not only the living generation but all the generations of the covenant. What this generation failed to understand or carry out may still be corrected and upheld in a future generation.

This process of values clarification leads Moses to understand that his ultimate task as a leader is to **renew the covenant**. Gathering the Israelites on the plains of Moab (1:5), he invites the new generation to take up the cause. If they live the life of Torah, if they show the courage and determination to conquer a homeland and build a society, then his life is validated, and his work was not in vain.

In the final moments of his life, Moses reminds us that the *berit* (covenant) is open—always open—“to those who are here standing with us before the Lord, Our God, and those who are not with us here today” (29:13). As long as there is a generation that understands the Torah with clarity and chooses to join the covenant, then Moses' life is not in vain, nor is the hope of Israel finished. The living generation's leader must teach clearly the vision and promises of the Torah. Then one can trust that its power will attract another generation to take up the calling and carry on the grand mission of humanity—until all will be fulfilled.

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<sup>6</sup> For one example of how this dynamic plays out in the Jewish dietary laws, see my essay on Parashat Shemini, “Kashrut: Eating as an Act of Choosing Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/kashrut-eating-act-choosing-life>.



The lesson for us from Moses' final narrative is that all is not lost in any one moment in history. To follow his lead, Diaspora leadership must refocus on the narrative of the Jewish people, then teach it to the next generation and renew the covenant. This is our chance to go from “dead end” to “breakthrough” as Moses did. We should realize the remarkable vision that Judaism continues to offer to all of humanity for a good life and the way forward to a better world. We could harness the power of the new platforms that this generation lives on to spread the word. If the trend of social media at this moment is against us, we should not despair—because Judaism is in it for the long haul. By speaking of this covenant to our children, we deepen our and their love for God and for all humans. Then we can trust that people will step forward and “choose life” and carry forth the mission until we reach the promised land for all humanity.

