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The Secret of Great Teaching

Imagine receiving the news that you have only weeks left to live. The people you led for decades - through rebellion and triumph, despair and deliverance - who you thought you'd lead on their final mission - must go on without you. Moses faced this reality as he stood at the border of the Promised Land, banned from entering, blocked from fulfilling his greatest dream. Yet instead of withdrawing in disappointment or despair, Moses

dedicated his final days to preparing the Nation for their future.

These final teachings became the book of Deuteronomy. Unlike the first four books, which were dictated verbatim by God with Moses serving as a faithful scribe, the Talmud¹ teaches that, in Deuteronomy, Moses assumes the role of narrator, conveying God's message through the lens of human experience.

Why this change? Why would God's perfect words need Moses' interpretation? And if Moses is simply retelling God's laws in his own words, why does Deuteronomy repeat certain commandments while completely omitting others?

Making the Timeless Timely

The answer to all three questions lies in a brilliant observation of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. When discussing Jewish holidays, Moses focuses exclusively on Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—the pilgrimage festivals that would come into effect only when the nation would enter the land. In doing so, he omits Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, which could be observed anywhere.

This selectivity reveals Deuteronomy's master class in education: A teacher doesn't just share knowledge; he anticipates which knowledge will matter most, making timeless wisdom immediately relevant for his students. Moses applies this principle throughout Deuteronomy, systematically addressing every challenge



Devarim (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22) *basic compendium*

awaiting the nation as they conquer and settle the Land:

In matters of governance, to replace his direct oversight, he emphasized the laws that establish judicial systems (16:18-20) and military protocols (20:10-12). For spiritual integrity, to maintain divine connection when obvious miracles faded, he dedicated extensive passages to eliminating idolatry (7:1-6) while prescribing daily disciplines like the Shema (6:4-9). In economic and social life, to prepare them for permanent settlement after nomadic desert life, he outlined everything from tithing (14:22-29) to inheritance rights (21:15-17).²

Even the narrative sections follow this theme. When Moses recounts the nation's desert travels, our Sages teach that his mention of specific locations subtly reminds them of past failures.³ His message carries both warning and hope: 'If you stumbled in the desert amid open miracles, prepare for greater challenges in the Land. Yet with proper awareness and preparation, you will succeed.'

The Role of a Rabbi

No one in Jewish history carries the title "*Rabeinu*" (our Rabbi) except Moses—not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any other towering figure. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that Moses earned this unique designation not for his perfect transmission in the first four books, but for his revolutionary role in Deuteronomy: becoming the first person to translate eternal wisdom into practical guidance for a specific generation.

This insight reframes our understanding of teaching itself. Information transfer—even perfect information transfer—doesn't qualify someone as a rabbi. True rabbinic leadership requires the much more difficult art of translation: taking timeless truths and making them speak to immediate circumstances.

Consider the difference:

- A lecturer shares knowledge
- A teacher creates understanding
- A rabbi transforms lives

Moses achieved this transformation by focusing not on what had been revealed, but on what his students would need to succeed in their unprecedented challenges ahead.

Speaking to Our Generation

We live in an era of information overload where ancient wisdom feels increasingly irrelevant to modern struggles. Young people abandon tradition not because it lacks truth, but because no one has translated that truth into language that speaks to their actual challenges—career anxiety, relationship confusion, purpose crisis, social media comparison. Those privileged to study Torah bear the responsibility to share it with others. But effective teaching requires following Moses's example—carefully considering our audience's challenges and translating Torah's timeless wisdom into immediate guidance.

Whether you're a parent guiding children, a rabbi leading a community, or simply someone with wisdom to share, ask yourself:

- What unique challenges does my audience face that previous generations didn't?
- Which timeless principles will they need most for their specific journey?
- How can I present ancient wisdom in language that speaks to their experience?

In following the insights we gain from these questions, we honor the selflessness of Moses, who, rather than despairing, created something more lasting than any physical conquest: a template for making timeless truth relevant to every generation. Thousands of years later, we still turn to Deuteronomy not just for its content, but for its method.

May we merit to follow in Moses' footsteps, finding ways to align Torah's eternal truths with the unique challenges of our generation.

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

1. Megillah 31B
2. Rabbi Hirsch identifies six major categories: National Security and Diplomacy (chapters 20-21), Religious Infrastructure (eliminating idolatry 7:1-6, establishing worship centers 12:5-14), Civil Administration (judicial systems 16:18-21:9), Economic Framework (tithing 14:22-29, debt relief 15:1-11, business ethics 25:13-16), Family and Social Structure (inheritance 21:15-17, marriage/divorce 24:1-4), and Spiritual Maintenance (daily disciplines in chapters 6 and 11).
3. Rashi on Deuteronomy 1:1 explains that the place names mentioned in the opening verse are not merely geographical locations but subtle reminders of Israel's past failures. According to Rashi, Moses chose to reference their sins indirectly through place names rather than explicitly detailing their failures, out of respect for the nation's dignity.



Something To Cry About

This week's portion recalls how the Jewish people cried when the 12 spies returned from scouting the Land of Israel (Deut. 1:45). They cried out of self-pity: "Israel is not going to be an easy land to conquer. To build and settle it will be even harder!" Instead of embracing the challenge, they cried.

As ever, the Torah is talking about something that is part of human nature. When things are tough, it's so much easier to wallow in our own self-pity than to embrace and overcome the challenge.

The Sages tell us that the date the spies returned was the 9th of Av. God decreed that because the Jewish people cried on this date for no reason, in future times - on this same date - He would give them good reason to cry. And so, on this date, both Holy Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed, the Jews were expelled from Spain, and many other tragedies befell the Jewish people.

At first glance, it may seem a bit harsh and even vindictive on God's part: "You cried for no reason, so I will give you something to cry about."

I believe the point is this: If you are going to cry anyway, then better that you have a reason to do so. In other words, it is better to cry from pain, than from self-pity.

In Jewish thinking, crying is usually considered an important expression of emotion. If you cry to express pain, be it physical or emotional, that's healthy. If you cry in frustration at being unable to achieve what you want, that's also healthy. But crying in self-pity, at your hopeless situation in life, can only be destructive. It undermines your resolve to face the challenges of this world. And so, if you must cry, better that you have good reason to do so.

This is what God said to the generation of the spies: If you are going to cry anyway, I will give you a reason to do so - so that your crying can at least be productive.

The same is potentially true for us. If we cry for no reason, God may just give us reason to cry. When I returned from a trip to Poland, a place where Jews had reason to cry for hundreds of years, this point was all the more poignant for me. Having walked on the graves of over 600,000 Jews in Belzec, more in Treblinka and perhaps even more in Auschwitz-Birkenau, it was a reminder for me today of just how good we have it. Surely we have nothing to cry about. Surely we should celebrate how good our lives are.

Surely the Jews in the desert should have celebrated, too. But they chose to cry instead - just as we often choose to cry. And *that* is truly something to cry about.



Fulfill Your Potential

In a popular film some years ago, the main character dies and goes to the "next dimension" where he is asked to defend his life down here on earth. According to Jewish tradition, there is no concept of actually "defending" oneself in the afterlife. Yet given Hollywood's recent spate of interest in Kabbalah, one wonders if the writer of this film hadn't spent a little time studying the esoteric teachings himself. Because the mystical teachings do say that a person will be shown what he accomplished in life - compared to what he **could have** done had he taken full advantage of earthly existence. In fact, it is the soul's sense of embarrassment at the realization of what could have been accomplished that is, according to some sources, the Jewish definition of "hell."

This week's Parsha - and for that matter the entire fifth book of the Torah - is called Devarim which means "words." The "words" being referred to are Moses' divinely directed farewell speech to the Jewish People. Before his death, Moses presented to the Jewish people an eloquent review of the past 40 years including in his words admonishments and great moral insights. The concept of lost opportunities appears over and over again.

From the very outset, Moses chastises the Jews for "what could have been." Deuteronomy 1:2 notes that it is but "*eleven days (journey) from Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea.*" As Rashi notes, this verse was a subtle rebuke of the nation: Because of their sins, it took them 40 years to reach the Promised Land, a trip which should have taken a mere eleven days.

Next, Moses reminds the nation, how (40 years earlier) he had established a judicial system so that he would not have to guide them alone. But, as Rashi points out, here too the people erred. How could the people forego the opportunity of having Moses as their legal arbiter? Shouldn't they have protested this new arrangement?!

Perhaps most troubling of all, is Moses' next topic: the sin of the spies. Ten spies are sent as an advance guard to reconnoiter the land of Canaan prior to its invasion. The spies come back from the land and report that it is unconquerable. At this point, the people have a choice: either to believe the spies, or to believe in God's assurances that all would be well. Incredibly, the people opt to believe the messengers of flesh and blood! As a consequence, Moses now reminds his listeners, the nation was sentenced to 40 years wandering in the desert.

By contrast, we can look at the life of Moses, a man who is known to have fulfilled tremendous potential.

The book of Devarim begins by announcing "*These are the words that Moses spoke before the children of Israel...*" This notion that Moses had become a man identified with majestic speech is truly remarkable. Some 40 years earlier, at the

Burning Bush, when the Almighty asked Moses to lead the Jewish People out of Egypt, he flatly out refused. The reason Moses gave was "I am not a man of words." Now 40 years later, this man who had felt ill equipped to express himself issued forth with wonderful month-long soliloquy that constitutes 20 percent of our Torah!

Each of us has the choice whether or not to fulfill our potential. Make the commitment today. Because tomorrow may be too late!



The Courage of Judges

Is courage a trait that we are born with or can it be learned and cultivated?

Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener, in his book *The Courage Quotient*, contends based on research and experience that we *can* increase our levels of courage and he outlines several useful strategies. As one example, at times fear is increased by egocentrism. The more we focus on ourselves and the potential consequences that can befall us, the more we tend to be afraid. Consequently, one potential intervention to decrease fear is to promote an outward focus, rather than an inner one. The more we remove ourselves from the situation, the more potential courage we can feel.

The first topic Moses elucidates as he commences his farewell address to the Children of Israel is the laws pertaining to judges. The main thesis of the guidelines he presents is that the judges must act to promote justice and prevent corruption. In this context, the verse states, “*lo taguru mipnei ish, ki hamishpat leilokim hu*” – “do not ‘taguru’ before man, for judgement is God’s” (*Devarim 1:17*). What does the word *taguru* mean? Rashi presents two interpretations. The first is that the word means fear, so the verse is commanding judges not to fear other people.

The second explanation, based on the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 6b*), is that *taguru* means to hold back. The example given concerns a student observing his teacher judge a case between a rich and poor person, and the student discerns an argument for the poor person, the student should not withhold his point. Whether he is nervous about his teacher’s response or the rich man’s, he must not suppress his thought. Yet, even if this second explanation of Rashi is correct and the word literally means to hold back, the message of the

verse is still about fear. Fear of another human being cannot be a factor when pursuing justice.

The commentators differ as to the meaning of the continuation of the verse, “*ki hamishpat leilokim hu*” – “for judgement is God’s.” Rashi, based on the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 8a*) explains that if a judge rules falsely, it becomes an inconvenience for God. Since God is just, He will need to ‘work overtime’ to figure out a way to return the money to the rightful owner. Ramban, perhaps dissatisfied with that answer, presents a broader theological and moralistic explanation of the verse. The reason why judges cannot let fear pervert justice is because they are standing as representatives of God. They serve as God’s messengers to bring justice into the world, and if they distort the truth, they are derelict in their hallowed duty.

Both Rashi and Ramban understand that when the verse says “for judgement is God’s,” it functions as a reason for why a judge shouldn’t pervert judgement. Don’t fear man, either because you will be inconveniencing God or because you are perverting your mission from God. However, based on the idea from “The Courage Quotient” quoted above, perhaps we can suggest that the phrase does not function as a *reason* why judges shouldn’t fear man, but as a *strategy* as to how they can decrease fear of man. Meaning, the way to decrease fear is to realize that justice belongs to God. If fear of another man is increased by a focus and concern for what harm that person can cause the self, the judges should remove the focus from themselves and direct their attention to the Divine. They should increase their courage by



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transcending concerns of person and ego and focusing on their Divine mission.

Even though the verse concerns judges, the message can be applied to each of us. There will be times when we will be confronted by a moral dilemma. When standing up and doing the right thing requires courage. When concern of what others will say or do can lead to fear and inaction. In those moments, may we find the courage by rising above our personal worries and remembering that we too can become emissaries of God's word and will to bring justice to this world.

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