

Torah Weekly

PARSHAT DEVARIM

2 - 8 Av 5785
27 July - 2 August 2025

Torah: Duet. 1:1-3:22
Haftorah: Isaiah 1:1-27

FINAL WORDS

Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, of blessed memory, former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, related:

“The Rebbe once learned of a scheme to personally humiliate one of the Israeli prime ministers. He made every effort to stop the individuals from doing so. He said, ‘To rebuke their actions, yes; to humiliate them, no.’

“It takes special strength to rebuke and love at the same time.”

This delicate and unique balance between love and rebuke, concern and compassion, truth and tolerance, recalls a different rebbe: Moses.

Final Words

As the book of Deuteronomy opens, Moses is left with five weeks to live. He has lots to say to the people he’s led for forty years, and even more to say to a people whose promising but uncertain future looms just beyond the Jordan River.

The fifth book of Moses is thus, essentially, his last will and testament. Here’s how it begins:

These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the plain, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban and Chatzeroth and Di-Zahab...

“These are the words”—what words? This group of verses seems only to catalog the Israelite desert itinerary, making no mention of any words spoken by Moses. Were they perhaps edited out, one wonders?

The noted Bible commentator Rashi offers a creative insight.

“These are the words” refers to words of rebuke that Moses directed at the Israelites. Moses here enumerates all the places where the Jews angered G-d.

Thus, “in the wilderness” is not a nostalgic reference to the setting of a memorable road trip, but serves to introduce a homily given by Moses to Israel, in which he recalls their many transgressions against G-d, by means of mentioning the places where they fell short.

The geographical notes in these verses delineate Israelite pitfalls, not pit stops.

For example: “In the wilderness” alludes to the time the Israelites angered G-d in the desert, by saying, “If only we had died by the hand of G-d.”

“In the plain”: He rebuked them for their worship of the Baal Pe’or deity in the plains of Moab.

“Opposite the Sea of Reeds”: A reference to their rebellion at the Red Sea, when they said, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to the desert to die?”

And the list goes on (as enumerated by Rashi ad loc.).

What’s puzzling here is the veiled way in which Moses chose to reproach his people. How out of character for a man whose hallmark was clarity and truth! Does not allusion leave room for confusion - problematic behavior for any leader, any time?

But here lays the true greatness of Moses, or rather the greatness of his truth.

The truth he embodied and communicated wasn’t the cold and metallic type, the variety which smacks of judgment, self-righteousness and condescension.

It was, rather, a warm and tender truth, packaged in an embrace, laced with sensitivity, and graced with compassion.

Thus, while these words of rebuke were absolutely necessary, when speaking them Moses made sure to allude instead of accuse, to beat around the bush rather than burn it down, in order to open, rather than close, the hearts and minds of the people he addressed.

He avoided hurt with heart. Moses taught that to humiliate is to annihilate. No matter the transgressor or transgression.

Thoughtful Omissions

There were, point out the commentators, two instances of national sin that Moses failed to mention in his last talk.

The first one happened at Marah: “*They could not drink the waters at Marah because they were bitter. The people complained against Moses...*”

The second occurred in Kadesh: “*There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moses... They quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Why have you brought the congregation of G-d to this wilderness to die here...?’*”

What’s particularly striking about Moses’ omission of these transgressions is that these crimes were directed not (only) at G-d, but at himself. We can just imagine how these accusations must have hurt - especially that mother-of-all-chutzpah tirade at Kadesh!

Not to mention that as an indirect result of that rant, Moses was dealt arguably the harshest blow of his lifetime: G-d withheld from him the fulfillment of his lifelong dream of entering the Holy Land.

Yet, amazingly, this calculated omission from his speech was not despite the hurt and betrayal he felt, but because of it.

Moses worried that his personal grievance might somehow smuggle its way into his words or tone of voice when speaking to the Jews, and that as a result his words of admonishment would be tainted with a bitter edge,

putting his listeners on the defensive, possibly pushing them further as opposed to the intended nearer.

This is the thinking of a leader in love with his flock. Of what use might referencing to Marah and Kadesh be in the grander scheme of things, if even a chance existed that it might stunt rather than assist the growth of his beloved people?

Moses recognized how sensitive people are when admonished, and adjusted and divested himself accordingly.

What’s in it for Me?

Sometimes it’s our responsibility to admonish. When that happens, we must ensure that there’s no bite in our bark. It will be picked up by the recipient, and the rebuke will be discarded.

By all means, hand out an earful when necessary; just make sure it’s full of heart.

*By Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson
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HOW HAVE WE SURVIVED?

What is the biggest miracle of our generation? The fall of Communism? The peaceful political transition in South Africa? That Fidel Castro still runs Cuba?

Surely for us, indisputably, the greatest miracle of all must be that, after the Holocaust, the Jewish people picked themselves up and rebuilt Jewish life and Jewish communities. Is there anything more extraordinary than that Jews who were singled out for extermination because of their faith should nonetheless want to embrace that same faith and still be Jewish?

This week we enter the period of the “Nine Days” leading up to Tisha B’Av, our national day of mourning. We remember the destruction of both our Temples and pray for Jerusalem to be restored to her former glory.

In Eichah, the Book of Lamentations, which we read on Tisha B’Av, there is a verse (3:22) that reads, “*G-d’s kindness surely has not ended, nor are His mercies exhausted.*” Rashi offers an alternative interpretation: it is by G-d’s kindness that we have not come to an end. In the words of the Midrash, “He spent His wrath on the wood and stones” of the Temple structure - His house was destroyed but His people survived.

So, this is an appropriate time to reflect on Jewish survival. In the face of the demise of all the great ancient civilizations and empires - Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, Persia, and more recently, the Third Reich - what is the unique secret of Jewish

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Positive Mitzvah 24 Sanctification of a Priest before Service

The Kohanim (priests) are commanded to wash their hands and feet before entering the Holy Temple's sanctuary and before commencing any of their Temple duties.

Negative Mitzvah 78 A Ritually Impure Person Entering the Temple Mount

All ritually impure individuals [aside from individuals impure due to contact with a corpse] are forbidden from entering the Temple Mount.

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survival? Despite the destructions and diasporas, notwithstanding the holocausts that have decimated us through the ages, how did we survive? How do we survive? And most importantly, how will we survive?

Of course, the simple answer is that G-d will never allow us to disappear. We live by the ongoing miracles of divine intervention. But let us take a quick tour of history to see if we can put our finger on the most important ingredient in our unbelievable tenacity of spirit.

Some people might say it is our national homeland that has been the one key element in our continuity. Indeed, Israel is our eternal homeland, and we pray for the return to Zion three times a day and more. It is central to everything we believe in; it is our heart and soul. It unites us wherever we are and wherever we have been. It is in our dreams, hopes and aspirations.

But, while we will never relinquish our eternal claim to it, the reality is that we have been away from our homeland longer than we've been in it. The fact of the matter is that, even today, there are more Jews scattered around the world than there are in Israel. So, as uncompromisingly committed as we are to our homeland today, and as critical as it is to our global stature and security, geography could not have been the main factor in our survival throughout history.

Is it, perhaps, a common language? Indeed, Hebrew is our national language, and is still the language of our prayerbook. But are there not people reading these lines who could not read them if they were in Hebrew? Certainly, the vast majority of Jews today do not speak Hebrew, and I shudder to estimate the percentage of intelligent Jews who are Jewishly illiterate.

Throughout history we had a variety of vernaculars. Aramaic, Greek, and even Arabic, were at one time the most popular languages in Jewish communities of old. In more recent generations Yiddish or Ladino, like English today, have been the preferred vehicles of

communication for most Jews. We simply cannot claim a common language to be the overwhelming factor in our continued uninterrupted existence.

How about culture? Well, have you ever tried offering a Sephardic Jew gefilte fish? Or an Ashkenazi Jew couscous? Food and music are cornerstones of any culture; both will vary markedly between East and West. A regular synagogue-goer from Golders Green will probably be totally lost at a service in Singapore. And vice versa. Honestly speaking, we actually do not have one common culture. We have adopted many nuances of style in food, music and dress from our host societies. Environment affects.

The one and only feature absolutely common to all our people all the time, the uniquely unifying entity that has gone beyond borders, across continents, cultures, languages and lifestyle, has been the Torah. Whether in Israel or Babylon, Minsk or Madrid, Sydney or San Francisco, Johannesburg or Jerusalem, the Jewish way of life as enshrined in our holy Torah and its commandments has been the single most important element in keeping the Jewish spirit alive and vibrant. Not some vague, sentimental sense of "Yiddishkeit" either, but a clearly defined value system that has been transmitted faithfully down the generations wherever we have lived.

The clearest proof of this idea is the fact that where there has been an abandonment of the traditions of Torah, assimilation has followed almost immediately - and with tragic consequences. Those pockets of Jews have simply not survived.

Of course, G-d is the ultimate miracle maker of Jewish survival. But there's no magic at work here. G-d has given us the secret. We hold His key in our hands. Just being Jewish by birth does not guarantee survival of any kind. Only where there has been a concrete commitment to the study of Torah, to teaching it to our children, and to the fulfilment of its eternal practices, has this miracle been seen to happen.

May our dedication to Torah grow, so that Jewish survival and the flourishing of Jewish life may be assured forever. Please G-d, our prayers for the rebuilding of Zion and the wholeness of our land and our people will soon be answered. Amen.

*By Rabbi Yossy Goldman
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Association*

DEVARIM IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Devarim," means "the words" and it is found in Deuteronomy 1:1. On the first of Shevat 2488 (1273 BCE) (thirty-seven days before his passing), Moses begins his repetition of the Torah to the assembled children of Israel, reviewing the events that occurred and the laws that were given in the course of their forty-year journey from Egypt to Sinai to the Promised Land, rebuking the people for their failings and iniquities, and enjoining them to keep the Torah and observe its commandments in the land that G-d is giving them as an eternal heritage, into which they shall cross after his death.

Moses recalls his appointment of judges and magistrates to ease his burden of meting out justice to the people and teaching them the word of G-d; the journey from Sinai through the great and fearsome desert; the sending of the spies and the people's subsequent spurning of the Promised Land, so that G-d decreed that the entire generation of the Exodus would die out in the desert. "Also against me," says Moses, "was G-d angry for your sake, saying: You, too, shall not go in there."

Moses also recounts some more recent events: the refusal of the nations of Moab and Ammon to allow the Israelites to pass through their countries; the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the settlement of their lands by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh; and Moses' message to his successor, Joshua, who will take the people into the Land and lead them in the battles for its conquest: "Fear them not, for the L-rd your G-d, He shall fight for you."

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 2 Av 5785 - 27 July 2025

Vel' d'Hiv Roundup (1942)

On the 2nd and 3rd of Av 5702 (1942), more than 13,000 Jews were rounded up by French police and interred in the Vel' d'Hiv, an indoor bicycle stadium in the center of Paris. They were later transported to Auschwitz to be killed. Within days, the Vel' d'Hiv was cleaned up and ready for recreation.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn Arrives in Israel (1929)

In the summer of 5689 (1929), Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Rebbe of Chabad, visited the Land of Israel (the only Chabad Rebbe to do so). The stated purpose of the trip was to pray at the gravesites of the righteous individuals interred there. Among the cities he visited during his two-week-long stay were Jerusalem, Safed, Meron, Tiberias, Hebron, and Tel Aviv.

The Rebbe departed the Holy Land two days before the Arab riots of 5689 (1929), in which scores of Jews were massacred in Hebron and Jerusalem.

Wednesday, 5 Av 5785 - 30 July 2025

Passing of "Ari" (1572)

Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi, known as Ari HaKadosh ("The Holy Lion") passed away on the 5th of Av of the year 5332 (1572). Born in Jerusalem in 5294 (1534), he spent many years in secluded study near Cairo, Egypt. In 5330 (1570) he settled in Safed, where he lived for two years until his passing at age 38. During that brief period, the Ari revolutionized the study of Kabbalah, and came to be universally regarded as one of the most important figures in Jewish mysticism. It was he who proclaimed, "In these times, we are allowed and duty-bound to reveal this wisdom," opening the door to the integration of the teachings of Kabbalah - until then the province of a select few in each generation - into "mainstream" Judaism.

Passing of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (1940)

Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski served as rabbi of the prestigious Jewish community of Vilna, Lithuania, for over fifty years. He was a distinguished scholar, and he authored *Achiezer*, a collection of halachic responsa.

A devoted communal activist, Rabbi Chaim Ozer worked together with the fifth and sixth Lubavitcher Rebbes, Rabbi Sholom DovBer and Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, on many projects to ease the plight of Russian Jewry. He passed away on 5 Av 5700 (1940).

Friday, 7 Av 5785 - 1 August 2025

First Temple Invaded (423 BCE)

After nearly a month of fierce fighting inside Jerusalem, on 7 Av 3338 (423 BCE) the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia broke through into the Temple compound, where they feasted and vandalized until the afternoon of 9 Av, when they set the Holy Temple aflame.

Shabbat, 8 Av 5785 - 2 August 2025

Civil War in Jerusalem (67 CE)

On 8 Av 3827 (67 CE), fighting broke out inside the besieged city of Jerusalem between Jewish factions divided on the question of whether or not to fight the Roman armies encircling the city from without. One group set fire to the city's considerable food stores, consigning its population to starvation until the fall of Jerusalem three years later.