דברים | DEUTERONOMY

A PARSHA COMPANION

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Rabbi David Fohrman

Deuteronomy: A Parsha Companion
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The *Parsha Companion* series
is reverently dedicated by

Ronny & Toby Hersh

in memory of their parents

אברהם בן אהרן הלוי ז"ל
אסתר בת אברהם יהושע ז"ל

Abraham & Esther Hersh *z"l*

שמואל משה בן פסח יוסף ז"ל
חיה רבקה בת צירל ז"ל

Moshe & Rivka Zytelny *z"l*

and the many among their family
who perished in the Shoah

About Our Parents

Our parents surmounted great tragedy and hardship to live exemplary lives. They loved us, nourished us, and sacrificed much to help us flourish and become committed Jews. In their example, we saw sacred values of the Torah brought to life. We live in the shadow of their deeds.

ABRAHAM AND ESTHER HERSH hailed originally from the Carpathian Mountains. They were both survivors of Auschwitz, and they met after the war in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Shortly thereafter, they made their way from the ashes of Europe to the Land of Israel, where Abraham fought in Israel's War of Independence. He was a fierce lover of both the land and the Torah of Israel. Together, Abraham and Esther lived difficult lives but, through it all, somehow always maintained a deep faith in Hashem. Their strong values — commitment to family and to Judaism, and an abiding love of the State of Israel and the Jewish people — made powerful impressions upon their children.

RABBI MOSHE AND RIVKA ZYTELNY made their way from Europe to America. Toby's father was, in his younger years, a *yeshivah bachur* in Kletzk. Before Lakewood was a gleam in the eye of history, he became a close student of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, and a *chavruta* of his son, Rabbi Shneur. He escaped the ravages of war by heading, with his yeshivah, first to Siberia and then to Kazakhstan, where he met his wife, Rivka. The couple moved from Kazakhstan to France — and all this time, despite war and constant upheaval, Rabbi Aharon remained like a father to him. To this day, Ronny and Toby cherish letters in their possession that Rabbi Aharon sent to Rabbi Moshe in France, advising him on major life decisions. Eventually, Rabbi Moshe and Rivka came to America, where he rejoined his rebbe and yeshivah in Lakewood. There, he became part of an unlikely success story, as he helped reestablish a vibrant center of Torah on new and distant shores. All in all, Moshe was the only one in his entire immediate family to survive the war. Together, he and Rivka raised seven children.

Our parents lived through harrowing times and emerged with a steely, strengthened faith; they sacrificed much to pass on their vibrant heritage. We remember them with love, and are honored to carry their legacy forward.

Ronny & Toby Hersh

The Deuteronomy volume of the
Parsha Companion is dedicated
in loving memory of our father,

DON KIRSHNER
דוד בן אליהו משה ז"ל

in honor of our mother

ELEANOR KIRSHNER
חיה אנא בת יעקב ורייזל שתחי'

At first glance, *Sefer Devarim*, the Book of Deuteronomy, might seem a dry recitation of legal and historical fact. Yet, as we approached the text anew, preparing this dedication to our parents, we found ourselves drawn to themes in the book that transcend the mere details of law and precept. It struck us how many of those core themes were lessons of our childhoods: the call to love and serve God, to cherish God's commandments, and to care for the vulnerable and the stranger.

Our father lived a life of service and dedication, embodying the phrase *Ivdu et Hashem besimchah* — serve God with joy. He founded Maine Township Jewish Congregation, a shul in the Chicago suburbs, and served that synagogue and its community for thirty years. After late nights of working at Edward Don & Company (another community dear to his heart), he woke early every day for *gabbai* duty. During *Elul*, our home was filled with the sound of the *shofar* as our dad prepared for his role of *ba'al tokeiya*. His spirit of service continues to guide each of us. In supporting this project, we follow his example — making this not only a dedication to his memory, but a testimony to his life.

We are privileged to continue learning from our mother's example of hospitality. When we were growing up, our mother opened our home with Shabbat and holiday meals where all were welcome — friends,

neighbors, and strangers alike. As adults, we look back with wonder at the triumphs of her annual community-wide Sukkot meals. Her hospitality reflects *Sefer Devarim*'s insistence that love of God is inseparable from love of people.

In offering this dedication, we honor both of our parents. We hope this edition serves as a small expression of our gratitude, and that the lessons of *Sefer Devarim* inspire future readers as deeply as our parents' example has inspired us.

Mayer and Shani Kirshner
Sherry and Harry Friedman
Terri and Andrew Herenstein
Susan and Jeremy Sheldon

We gratefully acknowledge the following patrons who, with generosity and vision, have dedicated individual volumes of this *Parsha Companion* series:

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Some Words of Appreciation

THE PUBLICATION OF *Deuteronomy: A Parsha Companion* heralds the conclusion of this series, a labor of love that has spanned nearly a decade. That's not quite as long as Israel's forty-year sojourn in a wilderness before reaching the Promised Land, but hey, it's not nothing, right? As I near the milestone of publishing this last volume, it feels to me like a moment to really express deep thanks to all those who've made the Torah in these volumes come to life, and those who, along the way, have done so much to make this journey smoother and more delightful for me, personally.

Ronny and Toby Hersh are the patrons of this five-volume series of *Parsha Companions*. I have spent many memorable afternoons learning parsha with Ronny and Toby and their extended family, and it feels especially fitting for this series of books to bear their names. They have dedicated the series to the memory of their parents, Abraham and Esther Hersh *z"l* and Moshe and Rivka Zytelny *z"l*.

I would also like to acknowledge the Legacy Heritage Fund for its generous support in making this series of books possible. The foundation focuses much of its effort on supporting Jewish education. I am honored that the fund has included this series of books among the many worthy projects they've chosen to champion.

This *Devarim* volume of the series has been generously sponsored by Terri and Andrew Herenstein, along with their children, in loving memory of Terri's father, Don Kirshner, *z"l*, and in honor of her mother, Eleanor Kirshner, may she live and be well. Terri and Andrew have been longtime supporters and dear friends. A number of years back, they dedicated *The Queen You Thought You Knew,* a book I wrote that expounds on Megillat Esther. And so it is especially meaningful to partner with them again on this concluding volume, which contains, by the way, a bit of an epilogue to *The Queen:* an extended meditation on the persona of Esther, to be found in the Ki Teitzei essay. The Herensteins have been instrumental in supporting Jewish intellectual and spiritual life in our generation, having founded the Sacks-Herenstein Center at Yeshiva University, among their other philanthropic endeavors. It is a real honor for me to have them associated with these *Parsha Companions*.

I also want to acknowledge those who have dedicated other volumes

in the *Parsha Companion* series: Tuvia Levkovich *z"l,* and Barbara; Dan and Jamie Schwartz; Dr. Bruce Greenstein and Ms. Monica Patricia Martinez, along with the many dedicators of the Vayikra volume. Sadly, Tuvia, patron of the Genesis volume, has passed away since the publication of the volume that bears his name. May the thanks of those who've benefited from his generosity continue to nourish his soul in the Land of the Living.

* * *

A number of folks have helped shepherd the ideas in this book into the essays that you now hold in your hands. I'd like to offer them my thanks and tribute.

The principal editing of this volume was done by Shoshana Brody. She has an eye for beauty, a sensitivity to spirituality, and a mind that will not tolerate fuzziness or redundancy. She has brought all these qualities to bear in editing these essays. She's also designed the graphics and charts that grace these pages. Immanuel Shalev was invaluable as a *chevruta* partner working through many of these ideas, and, along with Tikva Hecht, has read early drafts and provided important counsel on the content and structure of many of the pieces herein. Adina Blaustein capably project-managed the production of this volume, and I'm grateful to her for this, as well as for reading and commenting on a number of the essays. I want to thank, as well, Rabbi Elinatan Kupferberg, whose research skills, judgment, and stature as a *talmid chacham,* I relied on throughout the manuscript. My thanks also go to Cory Rockliff, who designed the series' overall aesthetic.

On the Koren Jerusalem side, my thanks go to Matthew Miller and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. They are the leading lights of a publishing firm that has done so much to help illuminate Torah in our time. For their work on this volume, I want to acknowledge Caryn Meltz, Estie Dishon, Debbie Ismailoff, and Rachelle Emanuel, as well as other members of the Koren team.

Many of the ideas in this book on Deuteronomy were first expressed, in at least fledgling form, in *parsha* videos I created with the help and support of the amazing team at Aleph Beta (you can find those videos at www.alephbeta.org). I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, those behind the scenes who have, over the years, helped to transform Aleph Beta from a mere idea, to a fledgling startup, to a viable, going concern: its founders, board of directors, and officers. They

are Etta Brandman, Alan Broder, David Hamburger, Jeff Haskell, Josh Malin, David Pollack, Donny Rosenberg, Robbie Rothenberg, Dan Schwartz, Kuty Shalev, and Steve Wagner.

The *Parsha Companion* series, not to mention the rest of my work, would not have been possible were it not for three men, each of whom is no longer with us. All three played an outsized role in nurturing my development over the years. My father, Moshe Fohrman *z"l*, passed away when I was quite young, but he taught me so much about life, people, and relationships in the short years we had together; his love and influence continue to pervade my work. My stepfather, Zev Wolfson *z"l*, a man of towering accomplishments, took me under his wing, believed in me, and helped me thrive. LeRoy Hoffberger *z"l*, a bulwark of the Baltimore Jewish community, became a dear friend and mentor. Roy and I first met when he attended a class that I taught at the Johns Hopkins University; he took a keen interest in my work and ultimately helped give it life by creating the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies. The love of all three I shall carry with me as long as the One Above deigns that I walk the earth.

In addition to these three father-figures in my life, I also want to acknowledge Rabbi Ezra Neuberger *z"l*, a dear mentor of mine who passed away just a few months ago. Rabbi Ezra introduced me to the thrilling world of Jewish ideas when I was just a teenager, and taught me a way of thinking, not to mention a way of lovingly and carefully reading text, that has remained an enduring force in my life and work. I will miss his presence in this world terribly. A bit more of an appreciation of him appears in the introduction to this work.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family. My wife, Reena, has given me her unfailing love and support. She has partnered with me in the greatest endeavor of my life — raising seven delightful children: Moshe, Shalva, Avigail, Shana, Yael, Ariella, and Avichai. All have helped shape this book in ways great and small, for they, together with my four sons-in-law, Yosef, Boruch, Moshe, and Chaim Dovid, along with my daughter-in-law, Elisheva, really are *my* "*parsha* companions." Many of the ideas contained in these pages were born, shaped, or refined in animated discussions with them around the Shabbos table. I treasure those moments: Learning Torah with my family is a constant opportunity to talk about things that matter deeply with people I care about the most — and what could be better than that?

Rabbi David Fohrman
Woodmere, NY
January 2026

Introduction

A Song for the Journey Ahead

THE ANCIENT RABBIS HAD a deceptively simple name for the book of Deuteronomy: *Mishneh Torah*. The phrase has its origin in the Torah itself, in the command the text gives to the king to write for himself a "*Mishneh Torah*" (Deut. 17:18). Rashi interprets this to mean "a double copy" of the Torah; however, the phrase has come, in rabbinic literature, to signify Moses' own contribution to the Torah in the form of his farewell speech — which, at least in part, revisits precepts that appear in the prior books of the Pentateuch.[1]

Ramban reflects at length on the idea of *Mishneh Torah*. He suggests that in *Devarim*, his final address, Moses isn't really innovating new laws; he is taking the teachings that had been previously given to the Israelites at Sinai and in the wilderness and weaving them all together in a new way. In the end, he delivers his blessing. *Devarim* is the way Moses chooses to say goodbye. And in that goodbye, he prepares his people for the next chapter of their lives.

The people were about to enter the Promised Land. But doing so wouldn't be just a matter of crossing a river. The people were about to face something entirely new. Until now, they had been a family, a clan, a loose consortium of brutally oppressed slaves. But now they would be a nation, living with autonomy over territory. Little in their experience could prepare them for what was coming.

To confront the challenge, they would need to figure out how to translate what they'd learned in the wilderness into something that would let them achieve their transcendent destiny. They would need to take God's values and live them in the real world. They would need to become a

1 Indeed, it would seem that the English term we use for *Sefer Devarim*, Deuteronomy, is really just a Latin reformulation of the phrase *Mishneh Torah*. Deuteronomy is Latin for copy of the law, or second law.

people that could bear a precious light not just for themselves, but for others.

Moses gave them a head start with this document, this *Mishneh Torah*. It was his lens, his way of taking what might seem like an overwhelming trove of narratives and laws, and making it into… a song.

A *song*?

613 Notes, One Song

According to the Rambam (see *Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 7:1), Moses, near the end of his farewell speech in Deuteronomy, actually *does* call the Torah a song:

Deuteronomy 31:19

וְעַתָּה כִּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלַמְּדָהּ אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׂימָהּ בְּפִיהֶם

Now therefore write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel; put it in their mouths…

Why would "a song" be important? Well, think about it. Six hundred and thirteen commandments. If anything can feel overwhelming, that sure could do it. But a song evokes a certain lightness, a certain sense of delight. It's the opposite of overwhelming. Indeed, there's something fascinating about thinking of the Torah as if it were a song.

Songs have a power all their own. Imagine helping a child learn to sing, starting with a simple song, like: "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." But the child refuses to try, saying, "I don't think I can do it — that song is so complicated."

"What do you mean?" you inquire.

"Well, *it has so many notes,"* he says. "I counted, and there are seventy-three notes in that song. There was an E-sharp, a C-flat, and there was a diminished chord. It is impossible to remember all of that!"

You'd laugh, of course. You'd tell him: "Relax; it's just a song." A song has a kind of internal flow and integrity. You see where it's going. You don't view it as seventy-three random things you need to memorize separately. You think of it as one thing that flows. It is more than its parts, even though that *something-moreness* is not something you can put in words.

Maybe that's what Moses is doing for us in Deuteronomy. Part of the power of a song is its ability to organize information wordlessly, through the magic of melody. Moses is organizing commandments into something more; something uniquely suited for the next stage of Israel's journey. As a nation in its land, Israel would need to live in relation to other nations in the world, in relation to its Creator — and its individuals would all need to live in relation to one another. To help us out, Moses gave us a lens through which we could see the Torah this way. He fashioned it into a song.

Standing at the Threshold

Well, dear reader, I am no Moses; that much is clear. I offer you something not nearly as grand or earth-shattering as the Five Books our great teacher offered to all of us. But in at least the smallest of ways, there is a similarity. I, too, am offering you, in this volume, the last of a series of five books. It is the final volume of a journey that has, admittedly, not taken me forty years — but look, who's counting? It took me seven; seven years of writing these *Parsha Companions*. And as I stand on the cusp of delivering this last volume to you, I see this as my own chance to leave you with some songs of my own.

This final volume is a little longer than the others in this series, mostly because of… five "songs" that you will find therein: Five deep-dive essays that each offer a certain kind of lens on…well, almost the entirety of the Torah. These five essays each try to give a sense of the mysterious whole of Torah, a way of seeing that whole through the magic of their own unique melody. Or, to be just a bit more accurate about it: Through each essays' *two* melodies….

Fugues

One of the special kinds of songs we humans have learned to sing is called a fugue. Fugues are a fusion of two melodies, and they can be absolutely delightful (just ask any fan of Bach). The melodies intertwine, forming a kind of harmony to one another — a kind of meta-melody, where very different strands of music come together in the most shocking, but pleasing, kinds of ways.

In these essays, I'm trying to offer you something like that. Hopefully you'll find them more pleasing than shocking, but I suppose you'll be the judge of that.

Let me introduce you to these five "songs."

Five Songs, Five Lenses

The Hidden Structure of the Ten Commandments

The first of the fugues you'll encounter in this volume is in **Parshat Va'etchanan**. The Ten Commandments have often been seen as a kind of index for the entire Torah; almost as if our Creator were saying to us: *If you could boil everything down to ten fundamental commands, it would be these.*

But that is more easily said than done. If you gave fifty readers of the Torah the assignment of identifying ten commands among the 613 that might somehow summarize the whole, I'd venture to say you'd get fifty different answers. So what rationale did the Torah use for coming up with the precise ten that it does, in the exact order that it does?

This essay looks at the ten through two lenses — *respect* on the one hand, *love* on the other — and in that "fugue," attempts to find an answer to that question. Along the way, it gives you a way of seeing the Ten Commandments as a true manual for living, a document we can and should forge a relationship with, day in and day out.

The Synergy of the Written and Oral Laws

Another essay that has this kind of reach — an ambition to somehow provide a lens through which to view the whole of Torah — appears in **Parshat Re'eh**. It crafts a different kind of fugue, a way of thinking about how the Oral Law and the Written Law come together, making something more magnificent than either could alone.

The synergy between the Oral and Written Law provides a way of understanding, I think, what a mitzvah really is, what a divine command really means. It offers a way of thinking about how spirituality spins out of mundane things — ordinary parts of life like car pools and board meetings. These things that hardly seem "spiritual" at all can indeed allow us a proximity to transcendence.

What Does God Really Want from Us?

The essay on **Parshat Eikev** also offers two ways of looking at the entire Torah, but this time, the dual perspective comes from two different *people*: Moses, on the one hand, and the prophet Micah, on the other. Both grappled with a basic question: *What, really, does God want out of us?* And each offered their synthesis in a single sentence. Moses speaks of human emotions: fear, awe, and love — cathartic drivers that can animate our spiritual lives. Micah on the other hand, speaks of divine values: justice, kindness, humility — moral beacons that we can marshal to guide our actions. The essay explores how those values and emotions intertwine in what becomes an intriguing and unexpected Venn diagram — another lens through which to see how spirituality emerges from our very human endeavors.

How Our Stories Become Our Laws

A fourth panoramic lens appears in the essay on **Parshat Ki Teitzei**, which takes on the question of how the *stories* of the Torah are meant to interact with its *laws*.

Curiously, the Torah refuses to separate these genres. For indeed, the Five Books of Moses weaves laws and narratives together as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do so. Why does it do that? When was the last time you met a law code full of stories? Or a history book chockfull of laws?

This essay explores how these two elements of the Torah are engaged in an elegant dance, each illuminating and deepening the other in startling ways. To borrow the central metaphor I've been working with, laws and stories are two melodies that take turns playing the lead. It's another kind of fugue: the melody of history intertwining with the melody of law, creating a song that's simultaneously about our past even as it is also about how we are meant to live in the unknowable future.

The Ladder and the Mountain: A Meditation on Moses' Death

The three final essays of this book are really one long meditation meant to be read together. They focus on the death of Moses, and explore what is maybe the most vexing dichotomy of all: the fraught relationship between

two divine values — the Almighty's justice on the one hand, and His compassion on the other.

When it comes to compassion and justice — never have the two seemed in sharper conflict than at one of the most visceral and painful moments in all of Torah: the death of Moses. Here is a man the Torah itself presents as, arguably, the greatest person who ever lived. He gave everything to us. He split seas, taught us the Torah, interceded to save us from destruction in the wake of the Golden Calf, and led us through an unforgiving wilderness for forty years. And then, at the end of his life, the one thing he truly longed for — to lead his people into the Promised Land — was denied to him.

Why? Because he hit a rock.

It seems impossibly unfair. Where is the justice in that? Where is the compassion?

Like all the dichotomies explored in the other essays, the answer here, too, lies in the magic of a fugue — in discovering how divine justice and compassion are not really two opposing values, but are two melodies that, impossibly, create a single song. These three essays attempt to hear that song in the heartbreak of Moses' death, and perhaps, to discern its echo in some of our own difficult moments, too.

Songs That Linger

These five collections of essays — these five "songs," as it were — I hope they will linger in your imagination. I hope they will help you hear the Torah not as 613 disconnected laws or as a random jumble of laws and stories — but as something with its own integrity, with its own beguiling melody. I hope it will help you see Torah as something you might comprehend not just intellectually, but in the deeper way that we experience songs — where, through the act of our listening, the whole becomes, enchantingly, more than the sum of its parts.

These essays are my humble attempt to hear some of those melodies and share them with you. May they accompany you as you forge your own journey in Torah in the years ahead.

A Teacher's Final Gift

I want to close by sharing with you something on a personal note. Just as Moses trusted his people with his song… I find myself reflecting on a teacher who did the same for me.

As I complete this final volume, I find myself thinking about one of my own dear teachers, a man who just recently passed away. I am speaking about my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Ezra Neuberger *zt"l*. He was someone I first met as a teenager, in camp, after I had just moved from California to New York. He ultimately became one of the people who most profoundly influenced my way of thinking and experiencing Judaism.

In one of his last publicly available talks, R' Ezra reflected on the structure of the Five Books of Moses. He spoke of something fugue-like: a fundamental dichotomy in the Torah, expressed in the breakup of its books. The first book, Genesis, he explained, is really the story of our parents — our patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. These narratives help us understand where we come from, who we are at our deepest roots. They ground our identity.

The remaining four books, on the other hand — Exodus through Deuteronomy — tell another story. They tell the story of one man: Moses. He is not our parent, but our teacher. And his story doesn't tell us where we came from. It shows us where we're going. It teaches us how to live, going forward into the great beyond.

Like with any fugue, of course, sometimes the two roles beautifully overlap. Our parents become our teachers. And our teachers — the very best of them — become like parents to us. But the two roles are distinct nonetheless. Parents root us in our past and define our identity. Teachers show us who we can become.

A Time to Say Goodbye

I think about this when I read the end of *Sefer Devarim*, as we encounter Moses in the moments just before he will leave the people he shepherded for forty years. Moses was a teacher. But was he *only* a teacher? It is hard to shake the feeling, as we watch him go, that he was more than

that — an honorary parent to us all, of sorts. Someone who both rooted us, and who showed us our future.

I think about it too when I think of R' Ezra, a man who came into my life after I had just lost my own father. Was R' Ezra really only a teacher to me? In some ways that seem hard to define, it felt like he gave me the kind of grounding that a parent provides, too.

One of the deepest things R' Ezra taught me about that dual role came years ago, in a moment I mourned terribly as a teenager. At the time, I just couldn't wrap my mind around it.

When I was in high school at Yeshivas Ner Yisrael, R' Ezra had acceded to a request of mine to run a small study group — a *chaburah* — with me and a handful of my friends. That *chaburah* was one of the great formative experiences of my life. It gave me a way of viewing text and the world that would stay with me for years, a way of wrestling with questions, a vision of what it meant to arrive, finally, at a moment of understanding. For a year and a half, those two hours a week meant everything to me.

And then, one day, R' Ezra … dissolved the group.

It wasn't that we had finished learning, or that anything had gone wrong. Quite the opposite. That night, R' Ezra went around the room and spoke of the sharply divergent personalities in the room, the unique potential he saw in each and every one of us. He spoke of future greatness, of the kinds of people we could aspire to become years in the future. And then he told us he was stopping the *chaburah*. He explained that the time had come for each of us to go forth on our own, to take what we had learned and to forge our own paths in Torah. It was time for us to depart the nest, to become independent learners, and who knows, maybe one day, teachers ourselves. It was the final act of a great mentor: to let go, and to trust the student to continue the journey.

I cried bitter tears that night. I didn't want to let go. But R' Ezra was adamant. It was time.

In a way, it is what Moses himself did at the end of *Sefer Devarim*. After forty years of guiding the people through the wilderness, the time came for Moses to leave. He would not be able to cross into the land with them. And so, in lieu of his presence, he gave a gift: his own reformulation of the Torah's song. It would be a song he would have to trust them to sing without him.

This is what great teachers do… and it is what parents must learn to do, also. You give your children everything you can — your values, your

wisdom, your love, your *all* — and then you trust them to write their own stories.

May These Songs Become Your Songs

And so, dear reader, I offer you these volumes in that same spirit. My hope is that you will take some things you deem important, or valuable, at least, away from your experience of reading these *Parsha Companions*. Maybe you will find yourself being able to hear what a verse says, even as you hear what it *doesn't* say. Maybe you'll surprise yourself with the patterns or connections you start noticing, or the way you delight in the multiple meanings of a Hebrew word. And maybe, as you marry these tools to the wisdom you cultivate inside you, what your own life experience teaches you — you'll encounter this magnificent spiritual guidebook we call the Torah in ways that feel uniquely your own. As you take these steps, I hope that the songs in these pages will become your songs, and that in the experience of singing them, you will bring to light some enchanting and beguiling melodies of your own.

Indeed: What melodies will *you* discover in *Devarim*?

With love and gratitude,
Rabbi David Fohrman

DEVARIM

Faith, Courage, and the Irrational Fruits of Doubt

וּבַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם
מַאֲמִינִם בַּיקוה אֱלֹקיכֶם׃

In this, you had no faith in
Hashem, your God.

DEUTERONOMY 1:32

DEVARIM

Faith, Courage, and the Irrational Fruits of Doubt

IN YOUR MIND'S EYE, picture a people who have witnessed divine miracles beyond imagination. They've seen plagues rain down upon their oppressors. They've walked through a sea split wide open, and had bread rain down for them from the heavens, daily. Now, picture this same people turning to their leader and declaring, with apparent sincerity, "It was in God's hatred of us that He took us out of Egypt."

But that's what happens. Here in **Parshat Devarim**, Moses, in his parting speech, tells the people about the catastrophic Sin of the Spies — the moment when Israel's spies returned with a report that struck fear into the hearts of their compatriots:

Deuteronomy 1:26–27

וַתַּמְרוּ אֶת פִּי יקוה אֱלֹקיכֶם. וַתִּרָגְנוּ בְאָהֳלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ בְּשִׂנְאַת יקוה אֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לָתֵת אֹתָנוּ בְּיַד הָאֱמֹרִי לְהַשְׁמִידֵנוּ׃

You rebelled against the word of Hashem, your God, and you murmured in your tents, saying: "It was in God's hatred of us that He took us out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Emorites, to destroy us."

God hated us, and *that's* why He brought us out of Egypt? That's a pretty strange accusation to make against God, no? The people claim that the very God who saved them actually secretly hated them, and what's more, that His very act of salvation was, in fact, an expression of that hatred. What, exactly, is going on here? Do the people truly believe that the God who took them out of Egypt is rubbing His metaphorical hands together in glee as He diabolically plots ever more elaborate ways to destroy His people? It seems like utter insanity. How could they say this with a straight face?

Moses ends his recap with this phrase:

Deuteronomy 1:32

וּבַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם מַאֲמִינִם בַּיקוָה אֱלקיכֶם׃

In this, you had no faith in Hashem, your God.

What is Moses adding by telling us these concluding words?

I wonder if these words are meant to help us understand the people's mystifying, infuriating attitude. To see why, let's ask: What, exactly, does Moses mean when he speaks of faith here?

That's what I want to focus on in this essay. And to figure out that little puzzle, we need to spend a moment or two thinking about one of life's big questions: What does the word "faith" mean in the context of our relationship with God?

What Really *Is* Faith?

In the popular imagination, one of the great challenges that faces the adherents of any religion is faith. But sometimes, we unthinkingly mischaracterize the nature of that challenge. We sometimes tend to assume that faith is more or less synonymous with believing in God, which is to say: believing that God is real and not merely a figment of our imagination. But here's the thing: The Torah uses *emuna*, the word classically translated as "faith," in a way that almost certainly does not mean that.

Consider, for example: After the Splitting of the Sea, the Torah tells us that the people had faith in God:

Exodus 14:31

וַיַּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יקוה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירְאוּ הָעָם אֶת יקוה **וַיַּאֲמִינוּ** בַּיקוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ׃

Israel saw the great hand that God had wrought against Egypt, and the people feared God **and they believed** in God and Moses, His servant.

Let's ponder what *emuna*, in this context, could possibly mean. I translated it above as "believed," but let me ask you: Was this, conceivably, the first time the people *believed* that God existed? Remember, these are the

folks who had seen the Nile turn to blood; the very same ones who had witnessed, with their own eyes, each of the ten plagues. Did those earlier events fail to make an impression on them? During all those plagues, were the Israelites walking around with their eyes closed, hands over their ears, oblivious to everything going on around them — only to wake up, with the Splitting of the Sea, and suddenly exclaim: "*Oh, look! God did that; I finally believe God exists!*"

It doesn't seem very likely. If faith means belief in the existence of God, this is certainly a belief the people would have accepted long before their experience at the sea.

And consider the verse we looked at earlier here in **Parshat Devarim**.

וּבַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם **מַאֲמִינִם** בַּיקוָק אֱלֹקֵיכֶם׃

In this, you had no **faith** in Hashem, your God.

Deuteronomy 1:32

What does Moses mean by that? Does Moses seriously mean to say that, in the Sin of the Spies, the Israelites finally gave up on the notion of God's existence? Consider what that would mean. These were people who received manna from heaven, not once or twice, but every day (except on the Sabbath) without fail. They experienced a national Revelation at Sinai. They saw the sea split. It is virtually impossible to believe that, in the story of the spies, they suddenly turned their backs on the empirical things they experienced, and came to doubt whether there was a God in Heaven after all.

But If Faith Doesn't Mean Believing God Exists… What *Does* It Mean?

Clearly, when the Torah talks about faith or *emuna*, it doesn't mean a belief that God exists. The Israelites in the desert didn't "believe" God exists. They *knew* God exists. They experienced His presence in their lives in ways that simply could not be doubted. The question is: What happens after you believe that God exists? *That's* the real journey of faith.

So what exactly does this journey look like? What are the milestones we pass in getting to a position of faith? How do we, in the end, come to achieve this thing called faith? Let's try to define our terms.