

COVENANT & CONVERSATION  
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE  
DEUTERONOMY: RENEWAL OF THE SINAI  
COVENANT



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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

**DEUTERONOMY: RENEWAL OF THE SINAI COVENANT**

The Goldstein Edition

Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union

*Covenant & Conversation*  
*Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant*  
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כִּי־קָרֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:  
(דברים ל, יד)

For this word is very close to you;  
it is within your mouth  
and your heart to complete it.  
(DEUT. 30:14)

*With profound gratitude to our parents*

**GLORIA and ARNOLD GOLDSTEIN**

and

**MIRA and SAUL KOSCHITZKY**

*for instilling in your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren a  
genuine love of Torah and learning.*

*And with enormous appreciation to*

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

*for inspiring the world with your scholarship.*

Tamar and Eric Goldstein

תמוז תשע"ט

July 2019

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## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

With the book of Deuteronomy, the entire biblical project becomes lucid and reaches its culmination. Deuteronomy is the last act of the Jewish people's drama before becoming a nation in its own land, and it forms the context of all that follows. It is the deepest and most remarkable statement of what Judaism is about, and it is no less relevant today than it was then. If anything, it is more so.

Among other things, the book tells us what Judaism is not. It is not a drama about the salvation of the soul and the rescue of humanity from the lingering effects of original sin. Indeed there is nothing in the Hebrew Bible about original sin, nor does the idea accord with its theology, according to which we are punished for our own sins and not for those of distant ancestors like Adam and Eve.<sup>1</sup> At the very most, the Bible talks about visiting the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation,<sup>2</sup> not about doing so for hundreds of generations. Deuteronomy is not Christianity.

Nor is it Islam. The term *Islam*, meaning “submission” or “surrender” to the will of God, does not exist as a concept in Judaism at all.

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1. Jer. 31:29–30; Ezek. 18:2.

2. For example, Ex. 20:15.

## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

Strikingly in a religion that contains 613 commands, there is no Hebrew word that means obedience. The closest equivalent – *shema* – means not obedience but rather hearing, listening, striving to understand, internalising, and responding in deed. The very tone and texture of Deuteronomy is directed not at blind obedience but at the contrary: it is a sustained attempt to help the people understand why it is that God wants them to behave in the way that He does, not for His sake, but for theirs.

Deuteronomy roots Jewish law less in the arbitrary will of the Creator than in the concrete history of the nation and its collective memory of what it felt like to be slaves, without rights, without rest, without dignity, and without hope. We see in Deuteronomy precisely why the events of the book of Exodus were necessary. The people had to remember what it felt like to live within a society that accorded minorities no rights and that treated much of humanity as a *corvée*, a conscripted labour force.

Why, though, should religion be involved in society at all? Maimonides tells us that Judaism is directed towards perfection of the body and of the soul. The latter is higher in value, but it cannot be achieved without the former – by which he means perfection of society. For, as he says, “the well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured.” It is absurd to suppose that people can reach spiritual heights if they lack the most basic material necessities. “A person suffering from great hunger, thirst, heat, or cold, cannot grasp an idea even if communicated by others, much less can he arrive at it by his own reasoning.” So a good society is a precondition of spirituality. This requires, first, “removing all violence from our midst,” and second, “teaching every one of us such good morals as must produce a good social state.”<sup>3</sup>

Hence the programme of Deuteronomy, which is fundamentally about the creation of *a good society based on collective responsibility*, or, as the opening phrase of the Preamble to the United States Constitution puts it, forming a group of “We, the people,” under the sovereignty of God. The good society is the essential precondition of spiritual individuals, “since man, as is well known, is by nature social.”<sup>4</sup>

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3. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:27.

4. *Ibid.*

Such a society is to be based on justice and *tzedaka*, meaning more than merely procedural justice, but in addition what we would call equity or fairness. Nor is that society to be based on abstract principles alone. Instead it is grounded in collective memory and active recall, in particular through celebrations at the Temple at various points of the year.

Underlying this thesis – that the life of faith requires a society dedicated to goodness as a whole – is the poignant story of Noah in the book of Genesis. Noah is the only person to be called righteous in the entire Hebrew Bible, but in the end Noah saved only his family, not his generation. He kept his own moral standards intact but failed to be an inspiration to others. Individual righteousness is not enough.

Likewise, it was not enough for Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be a family or clan in the midst of a larger social unit. We see this repeatedly in Genesis. Every time a member of the family has some form of engagement with the wider society, they face danger, most often in the form of sexual assault. This reaches a terrifying denouement in Genesis 34, where Jacob's daughter Dina is abducted and raped by the local prince, Shechem. No one emerges well in this story, which is there to tell us that in the long run, individual piety is unsustainable without collective moral responsibility.

Deuteronomy is in essence a programme for the creation of a moral society in which righteousness is the responsibility of all. The good society was to be, within the limits of the world as it was thirty-three centuries ago, an *inclusive* if not an entirely egalitarian one. Time and again we are told that social joy must embrace the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the Levite, people without independent status or means. It is to be *one nation under God*.

### *Freedom and Order: Can They Coexist?*

To understand the significance of the Torah's ending we have to go back to the beginning. That was when, in shaping the universe, God created order out of chaos, *tohu vavohu*. Then, in a gesture of love and faith, He created human beings, endowing each with His own image and likeness. This was the most fateful act in creation; gifted with freedom, humans misused it, so that where there was order, now there was chaos.

## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

The breakdown took two different forms. The first was *freedom without order*. First Adam and Eve sin and thereby lose paradise. Then Cain murders Abel and violence enters the human condition. Finally, with the generation of the Flood, “The Lord regretted that He had made human beings on the earth, and was pained to His very core” (Gen. 6:6). Freedom without order equals chaos.

The second form of breakdown is the opposite: *order without freedom*. This seems to be at least one of the themes of the story of the Tower of Babel. How we construe it depends on how we understand its opening sentence, “The whole world had one language and [thus] common speech” (Gen. 11:1). This might be a story about the beginning of human history, when everyone shared a single language and could freely communicate. On this reading, Babel is another story of paradise lost – the fragmentation of humanity into diverse cultures unable to communicate with one another.

However there is another possibility, based on the fact that in Genesis 10, the previous chapter, humanity had already been divided into seventy nations speaking seventy different languages. If Genesis 10 and 11 are in chronological sequence, then the story of Babel is not about some past golden age, but the opposite. Humanity had already developed into different cultures and languages. Babel represents the first empire and thus the first attempt by one culture to impose itself by force on others. That is what empires do: they force the countries they conquer – or at least their administrative elite – to speak the imperial language. That, for example, is why the languages of South America are Spanish and Portuguese. Empires stamp out local cultures, which they see as potential threats to their own hegemony. The Hebrew Bible is a sustained protest against empires and their attempt to impose a human unity on God’s created diversity.

If that is so, then the Babel story is a critique of empire which imposes order by denying freedom to the mass of humanity. There is a telling midrash on this that says that while the tower was being built, when a human being fell to his or her death, no one noticed, but when a brick fell, people lamented.<sup>5</sup>

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5. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 24.

Babel aside, Genesis is in any case a sustained critique of empire, and urban life as a whole. We see this in the story of Lot and his two visitors. We see it again in the story of Shechem and Dina. We see it yet another time in the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife. Most fundamentally, we see it in the unfolding story of Exodus in which the greatest empire of the ancient world enslaves an entire nation of Hebrews.

If freedom without order equals chaos, then order without freedom equals slavery. Hence the fundamental question to which the Hebrew Bible is the answer. How can you have order without slavery? How can you have freedom without chaos? *How can you have law-governed liberty?*

To put it more basically still: *How can we create structures of cooperation in a world of conflicting human wills?* Then, and still today, there are three ways in which we can get people to do what we want them to do. The first is to pay them to do so – the market economy. The second is to force them to do so – the world of power and the state. In both of these, individuals remain individuals in pursuit of their own private interests and desires.

There is a third way: to get individuals to come together in a pledge, a bond, of mutual fidelity and collective responsibility. This is no longer a world of separate "I"s in pursuit of self-interest. It is a world of a collective "We," in which we agreed to merge our identity into something larger than us, which defines who we are and which obligates us to a set of undertakings by which we freely choose to be bound. This is the world of *covenant*, and it is what the Torah is about.

## *The World of Covenant*

Covenants are an essentially secular phenomenon. They existed in the form of agreements between states in the ancient Near East. Fundamentally a covenant is a peace treaty. It can exist between states of roughly equivalent power, in which case it is a parity treaty. But it can also exist between states of radically different power, in which case it is called a suzerainty treaty. That is the story of Exodus and Deuteronomy, in which the Jewish people make a covenant with God.

This was revolutionary. Covenants were common in the ancient Near East. But covenants between God and a people were unknown,

indeed inconceivable. It was unimaginable that God would seek to constrain His own powers in the name of righteousness and justice. It was unfathomable that a supreme power would make a treaty with any people on earth, let alone the supremely powerless.

The key covenant was made at Mount Sinai, as described in Exodus 19–24. This in principle should have been where the Torah reached its culmination. But it turned out not to be so. Despite the fact that the Jewish people agreed three times to accept the terms on which God was to become their sovereign, it was not yet ready for such responsibility. That is the significance of the story of the Golden Calf.

Bereft of Moses, unsure what had become of him, the Israelites sought an oracle, something to tell them what to do and what to become. They were still in an age of magical thinking in which people do what the gods require and gods produce the outcome the people desire. That is not what the biblical covenant is about. It is about *the acceptance of responsibility*. It is about being guided by the experience of history, not about having responsibility for history taken from the people and assumed by God Himself. Covenant is supremely an *ethic of responsibility*.

That is why there is a long hiatus in the story of the Exodus. The people have to learn to fight their own battles. They must discover that God is a force within, giving them strength, rather than a force outside that fights their battles for them. They must discern the God who is close – within the camp – and not one who is distant, who performs miracles, liberates the Israelites, brings plagues against the Egyptians, sends the people water from a rock and food from heaven, and divides the sea for them. God has to be *in the midst of the camp*, not just at the top of the mountain. That is, in essence, what the biblical story from Exodus 25 to Numbers 10 is about. It tells us that to have the Divine Presence *within the camp*, close, not distant, a special ethic has to apply: the law of holiness. That demands a Sanctuary, with all its associated laws. Above all, there must be no confusion or conflation between the domain of the holy, which is beyond time and mortality, and the secular, the ordinary, the world of mortality, marked as it is by death, disease, disfigurement, and defilement. The holy must be a radical break with the merely human. That is the basis of the laws of sacrifice and sanctity that take up this long diversion, comprising the last third of Exodus, the whole of Leviticus, and the first third of the book of Numbers.

All of this was the consequence of the Israelites seeking not just God-as-King, but also God-as-Presence. The key words here – *Mishkan* (Sanctuary), שֶׁחֵן, the verb “to dwell within,” and the rabbinic Hebrew word *Shekhina*, “Divine Presence” – all have to do with the idea of closeness and intimacy. A *shakhen* is a next-door neighbour. The Israelites sought God in the midst of their collective life, in the town square, as it were. This too is part of what Deuteronomy is about: a society worthy of being a home for the Divine Presence.

What then is the significance of this *Mishneh Torah*, this repeated and renewed covenant, over and above the one made at Mount Sinai and described in Exodus 19 to 24? The short answer is: responsibility.

We have met covenants before. God makes one with Noah. He makes a further one with Abraham, and He makes a third with the Israelites at Sinai. But notice the difference. The covenant with Noah is entirely unilateral. God speaks, issuing certain rules, and nothing more is required from Noah himself. The covenant with Abraham is more demanding in the sense that Abraham himself has to perform an act – namely circumcision – for himself and the male members of his family. The covenant with the Israelites at Sinai is more demanding still in that God insists that Moses indicate the nature of the agreement to the Israelites, and only when they agree, which they do three times (Ex. 19:8; 24:3, 7), does the covenant have force.

But note that all three covenants begin with an act of divine initiative. The fourth, which comprises the whole of the book of Deuteronomy, is undertaken by human initiative. It is Moses who rehearses and recites the whole content and context of the covenant. That is why Deuteronomy is the turning point in Jewish history. It marks the move from divine initiative to human responsibility. Without Deuteronomy, the Israelites would not have made the necessary move to becoming not merely God’s subjects but also His partners in the work of redemption.

## *Covenantal Language*

Deuteronomy is a book about covenant and, in fact, the entire book is structured along those lines, as we will discuss below. Here, I want simply

## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

to show that Deuteronomy has a distinctive vocabulary, one that is key to the project of the covenant society. These are the distinctive words:

### **Listen**

This, *shema*, is the single most important word of the book; it occurs no less than ninety-two times. I have already indicated that the use of this word rather than any term that means to obey is a clear signal that the Torah expects us to understand why certain things are commanded or forbidden. God is not a tyrant who rules our lives according to His whim. He is, rather, a teacher who expects us to understand as well as keep the rules.

However there is something more at stake here. Let me quote from my own moral tutor, the late Sir Bernard Williams: “The most primitive experiences of shame are connected with sight and being seen, but it has been interestingly suggested that guilt is rooted in hearing, the sound in oneself of the voice of judgement; it is the moral sentiment of the word.”<sup>6</sup>

As Williams notes, our first desire on feeling shame is to be invisible. However, “with guilt, it is not like this; I am more dominated by the thought that even if I disappeared, it would come with me.” This I believe is the fundamental theme of the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. It is not a story, as is so often thought, about sexuality or even sinfulness as such. It is a story about the difference between seeing and hearing. Adam and Eve see something beautiful and want it, and allow their sense of sight to dominate their sense of listening to the divine word.

To use slightly different terminology, sight has to do with other-directedness, whereas hearing has to do with inner-directedness. This tells us that Deuteronomy is inviting the Israelites to follow their own inner voice, the voice of God within, rather than to see how others behave and seek to imitate them. So hearing is the fundamental verb of Deuteronomy.

### **Love**

The next, strikingly, is love. The verb appears fifteen times in Genesis, but always between human beings. It appears twice in Exodus, and twice in

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6. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 89.



Leviticus, in the famous chapter 19, the holiness code, where it speaks of love of the neighbour and of the stranger. In Numbers it does not appear at all. In Deuteronomy, however, it appears no less than twenty-three times, and almost invariably about the relationship between God's love of His people and His people's love for Him. Most famous is the command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might" (Deut. 6:5). But no less powerfully, other passages speak of God's love for His people.

The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you are the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your ancestors that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments. (Deut. 7:7-9)

And again with surpassing beauty:

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set His affection on your ancestors and loved them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations – as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favouritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. (Deut. 10:14-19)

There is nothing dull or dry about the religious life as conceived by Deuteronomy. It is a tightly interconnected fabric of love, loyalty, and liberty.

## **Joy**

The root ש-מ-ח, to rejoice, occurs once in each of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but no less than twelve times in Deuteronomy. The essence of life in the Promised Land is joy and thanksgiving. Indeed, the curses in Deuteronomy 28, unlike their counterparts in Leviticus 26, were prompted not by idolatry or wilful abandonment of the faith but simply “because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity” (Deut. 28:42). Émile Durkheim called this “collective effervescence,” and saw it as essential to the role of religion in bonding a society together as a moral unit.

## **Remembering, Not Forgetting**

Repeatedly, Deuteronomy tells us not to forget, always to remember. Christine Hayes in her book *What’s Divine about Divine Law?*<sup>7</sup> points out that there is a dispute throughout Jewish history as to whether the law has its source in divine will or divine wisdom. In Deuteronomy, however, it has its source in something else altogether, namely the shaping experiences of Jewish history, especially in the early years of the people, which we are to carry within us as memory and identity. We know what it feels like to be afflicted; therefore, we must not afflict others.

## **Handing On of Memory and Identity**

We are commanded to talk about the laws of the Torah to our children when we sit in our house, walk on the way, lie down, and rise up. Deuteronomy continues the programme begun in the book of Exodus, and even before that in the comment that God chose Abraham “so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Gen. 18: 19). It is not enough to keep the law. We must hand it on across the generations.

## *A Covenantal Literary Structure*

More perhaps than any other book in Torah, Deuteronomy is a highly structured work, blending together genres in a composite form that is

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7. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

both unique and inspiring. The sages recognised this explicitly. Elsewhere in the Torah some rabbis held that the juxtaposition of passages – *semikhut haparshiyot* – was deliberate, so that we can always uncover a principle or proposition from the mere fact that passage Y occurs immediately after passage X. Others, however, did not, holding that *ein mukdam ume'uhar baTorah*, meaning, the Torah does not always follow a strict chronological sequence, so there may be no significance to the fact that the passages are in the order they are. Yet everyone agrees that there is precise order and structure in the book of Deuteronomy (Berakhot 21b). But what is that order?

Additionally, the sages originally called this book *Mishneh Torah*, a “second law.” Hence the Greek, *Deuteronomy*, which means “second law.” But in what sense does the book constitute a second law? Some of the laws Moses states in the book have appeared before; others have not. Is it a repetition of the laws Moses received at Sinai and the Tent of Meeting? Is it something new? What exactly is the meaning of *Mishneh Torah*?

Moreover, the book represents the speeches Moses delivered in the last month of his life to the generation that would cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Why is it included in the Torah at all? If the Torah is a history book, then we should proceed directly from the end of Numbers, the arrival of the Israelites at the banks of the river Jordan, to the book of Joshua, when they crossed the river and began their conquest of the land. If the Torah is a book of law, then Deuteronomy should just be a collection of laws without all the historical reminiscence and prophecy it contains. What kind of book is Deuteronomy and what is its significance to the Torah as a whole?

A number of archaeological discoveries have thrown new light on these questions. They are the engraved records of ancient treaties between neighbouring powers. Among them are the “Stele of the Vultures” commemorating the victory of Eannatum, ruler of Lagash in southern Mesopotamia, over the people of Umma, and the stele of Naram-Sin, king of Kish and Akkad, a treaty with the ruler of Elam. Both date from the third millennium BCE, that is to say, before the time of Abraham.

## Deuteronomy: Covenant Society

What the treaties show is the precise form of ancient covenants. They had six parts:

1. They began with a *preamble*, establishing the identity of the person or power initiating the covenant.
2. This was followed by a *historical prologue*, reviewing the history of the relationship between the two parties to the covenant.
3. Then came the provisions of the covenant itself, the *stipulations*, which were often stated in two forms, (a) general principles and (b) detailed provisions.
4. There then followed a provision for the covenant to be *deposited* in a sacred place and *read on a regular basis*.
5. Next came the *sanctions* associated with the covenant, namely the blessings that would follow if it was adhered to, and the curses that would occur if it is broken.
6. Lastly there was a statement of the *witnesses* to the agreement – usually the gods of the nations involved.

It is remarkable to note that this structure is mirrored precisely in the book of Deuteronomy. The entire book is, in fact, structured as an extended covenant, on precisely these lines. This is how it works:

1. Preamble	1:1–1:5	Announces place, time, and person initiating the covenant that follows: Moses on behalf of God.
2. Historical prologue	1:6–4:49	Moses recapitulates the history that has brought the people to where they are, mostly recalling the events described in the book of Numbers.

3. Stipulations	(a) 5:1–11:32  (b) 12:1–26:19	(a) General provisions: Ten Commandments, <i>Shema</i> , etc. Recapitulation of events surrounding the making of the covenant at Sinai.  (b) Specific provisions: the details of the law, with special reference to how they are to be carried out by the people as a whole in the Land of Israel.
4. Deposition and regular reading	27:1–26; 31:1–30	The law is to be inscribed on stone (stele) at Mount Ebal; the Torah written by Moses will be placed in the Ark, to be read in public by the king at a national assembly held every seven years.
5. Sanctions: the blessings and the curses	28:1–69	Chapter 28 states the blessings and curses; 29–30 the actual covenant renewal, together with a statement that even if the people break the covenant and the curses come to pass, return, <i>teshuva</i> , is still possible.
6. Witnesses	30:19–32:1	“Heaven and earth” (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1) serve as witnesses, as does “This song” (31:19).

In other words, apart from Moses’ song and blessing of the tribes, with which the book and Moses’ life come to an end, the entire book of Deuteronomy is a covenant on a monumental scale.

## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

We now see the extraordinary nature of the book. It has taken an ancient political formula and used it for an entirely new purpose.

The structure of the book is now clear. It follows precisely the structure of an ancient suzerainty treaty between a strong power, God, and a weak one, the Israelites. Politically, such treaties were well known in the ancient world, but religiously this is unique. For it means that God has taken an entire nation to be His “partners in the work of creation” by showing all humanity what it is to construct a society that honours each individual as the image of God.

We now understand what *Mishneh Torah* means. It means that this book is a “copy” of the covenant between God and the people, made at Sinai, renewed on the bank of the Jordan, and renewed again at significant moments of Jewish history. It is the written record of the agreement, just as a *ketubba* is a written record of the obligations undertaken by a husband towards his wife.

We now also understand the place of Deuteronomy in Tanakh as a whole. It is the axis on which all Jewish history turns. Had the generation that left Egypt had the faith and courage to enter the Promised Land, all Jewish history would turn on the revelation at Sinai. In fact, though, the episode of the spies showed that that generation lacked the spirit to do so. Therefore the critical moment came for the next generation, when Moses at the end of his life renewed the covenant with them as the condition of their inheritance of the land. The four previous books of the Torah lead up to this moment, and all the other books of Tanakh are a commentary to it – an account of how it worked out in the course of time.

Deuteronomy is the book of the covenant, the centrepoint of Jewish theology, and the project it defines is unique. For it aims at nothing less than the construction of a society that would moralise its members, inspire others, and serve as a role model of what might be achieved were humanity as a whole to worship the one God who made us all in His image.

## *Deuteronomy: A Political Theory*

No book of the Hebrew Bible so fuses theology, spirituality, morality, and law. And the central emphasis is on society, rather than on the individual and his or her relationship with God. So, for example, in the first

account of the Ten Commandments, in the book of Exodus, the reason for keeping Shabbat is because God created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. In Deuteronomy, however, Shabbat is given a quite different logic, namely, the importance of freedom:

The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. (Deut. 5:14)

Likewise the festivals: elsewhere they are related to the historic events that brought them into existence, or the sacrifices to be offered on those days. However in Deuteronomy, the festivals are about collective celebration: “You, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maid-servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows living among you” (Deut. 16:11).

Equally remarkable is the very limited space devoted to two of the central institutions of the covenant society. The Temple is not directly referenced at all, neither the building nor its location, despite the strong insistence throughout Deuteronomy that there be a single central Sanctuary. Even more remarkably, the king, linchpin of the political system, is given no special powers of legislation. There is no metaphysical justification for there to be a political head of the nation – unlike those that existed in virtually every other ancient religious document. Uniquely, the king had no legislative role. He, like anyone else, was subject to the law, not its author.

What we have in Deuteronomy, in other words, is a political theory of immense depth and power. Nor was this confined to the biblical period alone. It became the inspiration of the modern movement in the direction of liberal democracy. This was due to the fact that there was not one form of protest against the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, but two. One, developed by Luther, focused on Paul and the New Testament. The other, developed by Calvin, drew its inspiration from the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Deuteronomy. That meant that Calvinist regions – such as Geneva, Holland, Scotland, and

## *Deuteronomy: Covenant Society*

England, as well as the Pilgrim Fathers of the United States – developed strong civil societies, whose basic understanding of morality was identical with that of the book of Deuteronomy.

Specifically, these societies emphasised the responsibilities, individual and collective, of each member of the society, and not the overarching responsibility of the head of state or of government.<sup>8</sup> Thus the political philosophy of Deuteronomy has direct and immediate relevance to the issues faced by the contemporary West. As Eric Nelson writes in his *The Hebrew Republic*, the roots of modern politics are indeed biblical rather than Greek – the philosophy that prevailed during the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup>

Deuteronomy tells us that freedom requires engagement by each of us; it cannot be delegated away or outsourced to governments alone. It tells us that we need to preserve our collective memories if we are to safeguard our identity and keep faith with the past for the sake of the future and for generations not yet born. It is a brilliant, beautiful fusion of high religious sentiment and detailed social legislation that has never been surpassed. It was and remains a political classic, reminding us of the fundamental truth that we are in danger of forgetting: that a free society is a moral achievement, and without active citizenship exercised for the common good, we will lose that freedom which is God's greatest gift to us.

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8. I have set out my account of this political philosophy in three books: *The Politics of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), *The Home We Build Together* (London: Continuum, 2007), and *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2003).

9. Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).