

A Multiplicity of Interpretations on One Verse in Devarim
 Rabbi Eliot Malomet August 5, 2022 9 Av 5782

What's in a verse? Let's put this verse in context. It's the last verse in the opening preamble of the Book of

דברים א: א: הַעֲבֹר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה
 בָּאָר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת לְאָמֹר:
**Deut. 1:5 In [the country] across the Jordan,
 in the land of Moav, Moshe set about to
 explain this Instruction, saying...**

Deuteronomy, a book that is essentially a compilation of final speeches and teachings that Moses delivers prior to his death. The preamble gives us the geographical and temporal settings of the book. We are located *across the Jordan, in the land of Moav*, and it's *the first day of the eleventh month in the fortieth year* since the exodus from Egypt (v. 3). Let's examine

this more closely. **בַּעֲבֹר הַיַּרְדֵּן** - *across the Jordan* is a peculiar expression. If Moses is delivering these speeches in the Land of Moav, (ie. *the east side of the Jordan*) then, in order to refer to that area as *across the Jordan* the Torah must be speaking from *the other side of the Jordan*, namely, *the west side of the Jordan*, the Land of Israel proper. This interesting fact was not lost on Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) who wrote obliquely in his comment on the opening verses of Deuteronomy, that *if you understand the secret [of this and similar passages] you will recognize the truth*. And what is that *truth*? That perhaps some pieces of the Torah were not written by Moses. Why would Ibn Ezra conceal this? Because, to paraphrase Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*, *some people can't handle the truth!* This truth is in conflict with the article of faith that Moses wrote the entire Torah, and that's a problem. Where is **בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב** - *in the land*



of Moav? Moav is adjacent to the Dead Sea, on the southeast shore. If you have ever been to Masada you have looked at the land of Moav. What does **הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה** mean? Everett Fox renders it: *Moshe set out*. JPS: *Moses undertook to*. Robert Alter: *did Moses undertake*. Koren: *began to*. What do these different translations suggest? They suggest that what is about to happen is an embarkation, a challenging one at that. The word, **הוֹאִיל**, doesn't occur often in the Torah, but it is instructive that when Abraham argues with God about the fate of Sodom, the Torah uses it twice in this expression (Gen.

18:27-31) **הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאִילְתִּי לְדַבֵּר** - which means, *Here, I venture to speak* which suggests a degree of tentativeness and apprehension on Abraham's part because he is, after all, facing off against God. So here, when Moses is standing in front of the people and about to embark on his speech, the Torah is simultaneously trying to convey to us the anticipation of the audience and the trepidation of the speaker. Moses might be at the top of his game, but even the greatest orators take a moment when they get up to the podium to orient themselves, get focused, pause, breathe, and then, like a conductor beginning a symphony, begin...to speak...the first...few...words. If you want to see a good example of **הוֹאִיל**, *embarkation, venturing to speak* - I urge you to watch the first few seconds of Martin Luther King's iconic *I Have a Dream* speech from the moment he is introduced to the moment he is finally in front of the throngs of people in front of the Lincoln Memorial, (19 seconds) to the moment he utters his opening line. He starts out...slowly...sonorously...mellifluously. *I am happy to join with you today (pause) in what will go down in history (pause) as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation (pause, applause)* (16 seconds). No audio recording or video, can adequately convey the dramatic tension of those opening words, and what **הוֹאִיל** *embarking, venturing to speak* truly entails. What does **בָּאָר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה** mean? Interestingly, the word **בָּאָר** occurs only three times in the entire Tanakh, and in the two other locations it has something to do with *inscription*. In Deut. 27:8 Moses instructs the people to construct a monument of stones and *inscribe all the words of this teaching on the stones clearly*. **וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל הָאֲבָנִים אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה**. God instructs Habakuk to *write the prophecy down, inscribe it clearly on tablets, so that it can be read easily*: **הַזֹּאת בָּאָר הֵיטֵב** (Hab. 2:2). **כָּתַב הַזֹּוֹן וּבָאָר** *עַל־הַלְהוֹת לְמַעַן יִרְוִץ קוֹרְאָ בּוֹ. Clearly, the word **בָּאָר** has something to do with *clarity*. But it also has a *clear* connection to the process of *inscription*. In stating here that Moses set out to *explain this Instruction clearly* we get the impression that Moses is trying to explain the teaching so well, *it is as if he were inscribing it upon their minds*. Which brings us to Sinai, because Sinai was where God tried to *inscribe* the words of the Ten Utterances on the minds of the people. There are multiple*

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ways to interpret the Sinai event. The plain reading is that the stone tablets were the written record of God's Ten Utterances. But consider this allegorical reading: after Moses shatters the first set of tablets God instructs him to carve out a second set of **blank tablets** and bring them up to him on the top of the mountain and there God *will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered* (Exod. 34:1-2). The **blank tablets** represent the mind. God wants to inscribe the Ten Utterances on stone, but also **upon their minds**. Bringing the human-formed blank tablets (*tabula rasa*) up the mountain is a metaphor for bringing the un-inscribed human mind of the people up to God to be inscribed by God. With a sense of urgency because of his impending death, Moses wants to do his utmost to leave an indelible impression of his teaching on the people's mind. This is one of the great themes of Deuteronomy. He's only got a few chances left to speak to the people and impart his teachings. And all he has are his words. Hence, he wants to explain this instruction to them as clearly as possible. The plains of Moav are to Moses what Mount Sinai was to God, the place where he could inscribe his teachings on their mind. With his words.

But wait, there are still other ways to interpret this text. Rashi comments: **בְּשִׁבְעִים לְשׁוֹן פִּרְשָׁה לָהֶם** - *he explained this teaching to them in 70 languages*. What does that mean? 70 is the symbolic number of the nations of the world. This means that when Moses was delivering his final speeches, he was simultaneously speaking to the people of Israel and to the rest of humanity. To use our own parlance, he was simultaneously imparting a particular **and** a universal message. Or, another interpretation: because every language is different, he was conveying every possible nuance of his message. Or, another interpretation: because in the future Israel will be dispersed to the four corners of the earth and they will need to justify learning these teachings, orally or in writing, in their own languages (like English!). But to one commentator, Rabbi Yakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (Koenigsburg, Germany, 1785-1865) Rashi's comment requires further clarification. He explains that the word לשון-*language* also means כוונה-*intention* or *meaning*, and that when Rashi says that Moses **translated his teaching into 70 languages**, what he really means is that **Moses gave "70 interpretations" to his teaching**. **וכן כאן בשבועים לשונות ר"ל בשבועים כוונות**, מסכים עם מאמרם במקום אחר **שבועים**. **פנים לתורה**, - *here (when Rashi says that Moses spoke) in 70 languages, what he means is that he spoke with 70 intentions (interpretations)*. *This agrees with what the Rabbis say elsewhere that there are 70 faces to the Torah. These are the innermost meanings of the Torah aside from its first meaning, which is the plain sense.* This is a fascinating comment! The idea of "70 faces to the Torah" **שבועים פנים לתורה** is found only once in the midrash. Interestingly, it is derived from the description of the gifts of the tribal chieftains in Numbers 7. Recall that they each presented a *silver goblet weighing 70 shekels*. The purpose of the goblet was to hold *wine*. Why did the goblet weigh 70 shekels? Because the numerical equivalent of the word *wine* is 70! ($(\cdot-10 + \cdot-10 + \cdot-50=70!)$). And behold! The Book of Proverbs (9:5) compares Torah to *wine*! Therefore, just as *wine* has 70 constituent elements based on the numerical value of its letters, so too does Torah have 70 "faces" based on its similarity to wine! Admittedly, that is a difficult quaff to imbibe. But the point is that the Torah contains within it multiple layers of meaning, and endless possibilities for interpretation. That's what makes the study of Torah so joyful. As we would expect, this idea gets more currency in biblical commentaries and kabbalistic literature. And it also resonates with us very deeply because each of us interprets the Torah in our own unique way based on our own unique life experiences, imaginations, and souls. The idea that "there are 70 faces of Torah" validates a multiplicity of perspectives and gives license to endless creative possibilities for interpretation which, at least according to the tradition, were already present when Moses **set about to explain this Instruction**. And today we would add that there are so many new "faces" to the Torah based on new approaches to the study of Torah that have developed over the last two centuries. History, archeology, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, literary analysis, and so many more disciplines, have yielded new and exciting perspectives on Torah. Even technology has provided new tools and new approaches to the study of Torah in the way that we can now analyze literary patterns and deep grammatical structures in the text that we have never been able to observe before. But let's take a moment to go back to the land of Moav as Moses **embarked on this oration**. What was going through his mind? What did he feel knowing that he was soon about to die and not go into the land with his people? How did he see his past and how did he perceive their future? What did he want to impart to them as he walked up to speak?

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