

Some Comments on Devarim

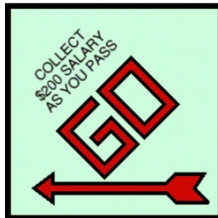
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July 22, 2023 4 Av 5783

Welcome to Deuteronomy! The people are assembled near the banks of the Jordan, and they are about to enter the land. Moses will regretfully, not lead them there. The moment calls for a speech or a series of speeches that will include a recapitulation of some of the key moments over the last 40 years, a restatement of some legislation, some new legislation directly pertaining to the land, and some final exhortations, poems, and blessings. Moses starts his farewell speech not with the plagues, the exodus, nor the splitting of the Red Sea but with this opening:

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ דָּבַר אֵלֵינוּ בְּהָרֵב לֵאמֹר רַב לָכֶם שָׁבֹת בְּהָר הַזֶּה. דְּבָרִים א:ו	The Lord our God <i>spoke to us at Horev, saying:</i> Enough for you, staying at this mountain! Deut. 1:6
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Why? Because that is where the real journey began. Everything up until this point was prelude. Mount Sinai is the point of embarkation for the desert trek. Analogy: In our experience of air-travel there is often great stress and tumult before the trip begins. Organizing, packing, loading the car, and getting to the airport are intense activities, not to mention checking in, going through security, and finally boarding the plane. We could claim that the trip began when we bought the tickets, or when we made the decision to travel, but we all know that the trip officially begins when the plane leaves the gate and takes off. Here, Moses is not interested in telling us the prelude.



We have a whole holiday devoted to that story. Here, he is just interested in telling us the story from the point of embarkation: the mountain of Horev (Mount Sinai). And notice what he says: רַב לָכֶם שָׁבֹת בְּהָר הַזֶּה - **Enough for you, staying at this mountain!** How should we intone this statement? As a rebuke? Here is the Malbim:

הֲנֵה יֹשְׁבֵתִים וְהִתְעַכְבְּתֶם פֶּה זְמַן רַב יֹתֵר מְדַאֵי כִּי אֲנִי רָצִיתִי שֶׁתִּסְעוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ תִּכְפֹּף אַחַר מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה.	You've been sitting and dillydallying here for a long time, too long, because I wanted for you to travel to the land already after the giving of the Torah.
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Rashi, quoting from the midrash, reads it as a cheerful prod:

הַרְבֵּה לָכֶם גְּדֻלָּה וְשִׂכָר עַל וְשִׁיבְתֶם בְּהָר הַזֶּה עָשִׂיתֶם מִשְׁכָּן, מְנוֹרָה, וְכֵלִים. קִבַּלְתֶּם תּוֹרָה. מִיָּתֶם לָכֶם סַנְהֶדְרִין, שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים, וְשָׂרֵי מֵאוֹת...	that God heaped upon you glory and reward for your stay at this mountain - you made the mishkan, the menorah, the vessels. You received the Torah, you appointed the Sanhedrin, and officers of thousands and hundreds, etc.
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In other words, **You've been able to accomplish so much while staying at this mountain. Now it's time to move on to other challenges.** And we might be tempted to read this a third way: as a recognition of the overwhelming nature of this brief period of history. All the things that happened here

at the mountain, the giving of the Ten Commandments, with its thunder and volcanic intensity, the Golden Calf, the skirmish with the Levites, the second set of the Ten Commandments, were too much to comprehend. **Oy, it's been so much! Vey, it's been so intense! It's time to leave this place that is drenched in holiness.** רַב לָכֶם-There has to be a coda to this period of intensity.

פָּנּוּ וּסְעוּ... בָּאוּ וּרְשׁוּ דְּבָרִים א:ז-ח	Face about, march on; Go in, take possession Deut. 1:7-8
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When a verb is doubled, we sense urgency. **URGENCY!** But as we've seen many times, doubling is also a common literary technique in biblical Hebrew that conveys to us how each verb is insufficient on its own. **פָּנּוּ-face about** is incomplete without **וּסְעוּ-march on**. You can't **face about** if you have nowhere to **march on** to. In the next verse, **בָּאוּ-Go in** is incomplete without **וּרְשׁוּ-take possession**. You can't **take possession** of the land until you **go** there. (Some other examples of verb doubling in the Bible: **פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ-be fruitful** is incomplete without **וּרְבוּ-and multiply**. (Gen. 1:28) **וְאִמְצוּ-be strong** is incomplete with **וְאִמְצוּ-be courageous** (Deut. 31:6).

A Taxonomy of Troublesomeness

וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר לֹא אוּכַל לְבַדִּי שָׂאת אֶתְכֶם... אֵיכָה אֶשָּׂא לְבַדִּי טְרַחְתֶּם וּמִשְׁאָכֶם וּרִיבְכֶם. דְּבָרִים א:ט, יב	And I said to you at that time, saying: I am not able, I alone, to carry you; How can I carry, I alone, your trouble, your burden, your quarreling? Deut. 1:9, 12
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On the one hand, we have to give Moses credit for knowing his own limitations. On the other hand, this statement, sounds quite harsh and critical. He could have just said, **How can I carry them alone, they are so difficult?** But instead, he lists three distinct

categories of difficulty **טְרַחְתֶּם וּמִשְׁאָכֶם וּרִיבְכֶם-your troubles, your burdens, and your quareling** as if to claim that the people are exceptionally difficult. Let's compare some classic commentaries on these terms.

1. טְרַחְתֶּם-Your Trouble.

Rashi: If one of them perceived that his opponent in a law suit was about to be the victor in the case he would say: I have witnesses to bring, I have further proof to adduce, I will add more judges to the ones who are sitting

Comment: In legal terminology this is a **litigation abuser** or a **vexatious litigant**. The people are so troublesome that when they are facing a loss of a case, they want to stack the courts in their favor. But in more colloquial terms, they are a nation of egotistical narcissists. Always arguing, always having to be right. **Trouble=Vexatiousness**

Ibn Ezra: Your trouble refers to teaching the commandments to the simple.

Comment: The people lack the intellectual sophistication to understand the meaning and intricacies of the commandments. **Trouble=Unsophisticatedness.**

Ramban: **Trouble** here corresponds to, "and I make known to them the statutes of God and His laws" (Exod. 18:16), for it was a lot of **trouble** to teach those who had come forth from Egypt, the statutes and the laws of God, their meanings, interpretations, and secrets.

Comment: It's not that the people are *simple*, as Ibn Ezra suggested, it's that they lack a framework for understanding law in the first place. As slaves who have just been freed, they lack the spiritual and emotional fortitude to serve God freely without the burden of their trauma. **Trouble=Traumatized.**

Sforno: Your **petty** arguments which did not even involve financial claims.

Comment: The people are so petty as to be constantly bringing their petty complaints to Moses and driving him crazy.

Trouble=Pettiness.

He'amek Davar: Everyone is **troubled** by their over-whelming personal needs to allay their misfortune (tzurres) and each one solicits Moses to pray on their behalf to bring their requests to God.

Comment: Moses has to carry is the spiritual load of the people. Moses is portrayed here like a *hasidic rebbe* the people are always overwhelming him with their requests for divine intervention. **Trouble=Neediness.**

2. וימשאכם - Your Burden

Rashi: this teaches that they were *Epicorsim* (that they treated the judges with scant respect): if Moses went forth early from his tent they said, Why does the son of Amram leave so early? Perhaps he is not at ease at home? If he left late, they said, What do you think? He is sitting and devising evil schemes against you and is plotting against you.

Comment: A fascinating portrayal of the nastiness of the people. They gossip about his personal life, invent rumors, and engage in conspiratorial thinking which in turn, is a symptom of deep anxiety and alienation. **Burden=Anxiety-ridden**

Ibn Ezra: They demanded bread, water, and meat. Compare, **משא את כל העם הנה עלי** - that you lay the burden of all this people upon me (Num. 11:11).

Comment: In addition to being prophet, law-giver, intercessor, judge and steward, Moses was the chief purveyor of food to the people, in the sense that they complained to him whenever they were hungry. **Burden=Dependency.**

Ramban: a reference to prayer, for he used to pray on their behalf.

Comment: Unlike the *rebbe* role, Moses acts as the *Shaliah Tzibbur* for the people to God. **Burden=Responsibility.**

Sforno: The needs of the many.

Comment: Moses was the provider. **Burden=Logistics.**

3. וריבכם - Your Quarreling

Rashi: this teaches that they were *incessantly complaining*.

Comment: There is only so much complaining even Moses can take! **Moses as overloaded Sounding Board.**

Ibn Ezra: They would fight with one another.

Comment: **Moses as overwhelmed Referee.**

Ramban: In matters of judgement.

Comment: **Moses as overburdened Judge.**

In the end, no matter how much casuistry we deploy to explain these terms, the point is that the people are **troublesome, burdensome, and quarrelsome**. But let's go back to our original question. Why does the text have to be

so explicit about their troublesomeness? Why wasn't it sufficient for Moses to say, *How can I carry your burden?* To answer this, let's compare two teachers of the same difficult class. One says: "This class is difficult." While the



other says: "This class asks challenging questions, fights with one another, and everyone is always looking to me for their own personal assistance." Which teacher has the deeper relationship with the class? Which teacher

cares more? The one who detailed their difficulties. By triply elaborating on the difficulty of the people by saying, **וריבכם ומשאכם וטרחכם** - your troubles, your burdens, and your quarreling, Moses is not showing his harshness, rather he is demonstrating the depth of his relationship with them and the extent to which he loved and cared for the people.

Theology from the Haftarah. **יִאמַר ה' יְהוָה לְכֹה נָא וְנִבְּחָהּ יִאמַר ה' Isa. 1:18**

JPS:	Come let us reason together.
German:	dass wir uns versöhnen - let's reconcile together.
Yiddish:	לאָמיר זיך דורכרעדן - Come, let's talk it through.

The root of **וְנִבְּחָהּ** is **נִבַּח** which means variously: *to judge, decide, appoint, prove, convince, reprove, rebuke*. Can we imagine this kind of encounter with God? First, there is the audacity of even participating in a dialogue with God! And second, could we possibly rebuke God? Therein lies the theology of a simple verse fragment. To Isaiah, the answer to both questions is, yes. God is so bound up with the people that God welcomes dialogue and even rebuke. This is so different from the idea that God only demands obedience, an idea which we find especially in Deuteronomy. Isaiah's idea that God wants to *talk it out* with Israel prompted this rabbinic midrash:

לְכֹה נָא וְנִבְּחָהּ יִאמַר ה' שְׂמַחוּ אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם. אָמְרוּ הֵיאָךְ יְכוּלִין לְהִתְנַחֵם עִם בּוֹרְאָן? וְיָמִי יוּכַל לְנַחֵם עִם בּוֹרְאָן? עֲבָשׁוּ הוּא מְכַלָּה אוֹתָם מִן הָעוֹלָם.

When the prophet said to them: "Let us go now and reason together [venivakhehah], says the Lord," (Isaiah 1:18) – the nations of the world rejoiced and said: How can they enter into a dispute with their Creator? Who can enter into a dispute with his Creator? Now He will eliminate them from the world.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 5:16

The nations of the world cannot fathom the fact that Jews have the audacity to argue incessantly with God. Because they understand God as Power, they believe that the argumentative, annoying Jews would be vulnerable to God's punitive wrath. But the nations of the world live with a deep misunderstanding of God. The contrary is true: God loves when Jews argue with him! God loves the engagement! From Abraham through the rabbis of the Talmud, and even down to our own time, God loves a good debate, disceptation, and rebuke from the Jewish people! God's relationship with Israel is not one-dimensional: It's not, Commander to obedient servant. On the contrary, it's the dialogue of partners. It's conversation and rebuke. It's *I and Thou*. It's, **לאָמיר זיך דורכרעדן** - **Come, let's talk it through**. Or, what we would call...love! **SHABBAT SHALOM!**