

Parashah One Hundred Twenty-Nine
Deuteronomy 4:1–49; Jeremiah 20:4–11; Hebrews 3:7–19

notes by Tim Hegg

The Gift of the Torah

Deuteronomy 4 begins with the Hebrew word “now” (הַנּוֹעַ) to signal that these instructions are given with a view to Israel’s entrance into the promised Land. The desert wanderings are over, and now it is time to recognize the goal of the exodus itself: that Israel might dwell safely in her own Land in order to demonstrate the dwelling of Adonai in her midst by centering her entire existence around Him. For Israel, worship was not simply one more thing in a long list, but encompassed all of life. She existed as the redeemed people from Egypt for the singular purpose of worshipping HaShem.

The Torah—God’s own teaching and instruction, was therefore to be her guide for all of life; how one related to the Almighty, and how one related to his fellow man. The Torah was not some kind of chain around the neck of Israel to keep them from being who they wanted to be. Far from it! The Torah consisted of the wisdom and love of God, given to His chosen children, in order to help them live their lives to the fullest. After all, who knows better what we need than the One Who not only created us, but Who also loves us and brought us into His family? And so, understanding us perfectly, He has revealed His loving instructions for life and called us to live by them.

It is clear in the structure of the book of Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) that chapter four is the very heart of Moshe’s message. It is also clear that Moshe presents the Torah as a great gift given to Israel, a gift that sets her apart from all the other nations characterized by idolatry. The main themes of this chapter are monotheism and the prohibition of idolatry. Thus, the primary function of the Torah is to establish the close relationship between Israel and her Redeemer, Who is the one and only true God.

It is obvious that these words of Moshe apply to the whole nation, a people made up of the tribes of Jacob and those who had joined them from the nations. The exhortations regarding the Torah come to all: male, female, native born, foreigner, wealthy, and poor. There is one Torah for the one people of Israel. What is more, it is an exacting Torah. Note v. 2: “You shall not add to it... nor take away from it...” The Sages were somewhat troubled by this verse. Since Deuteronomy does not spell out in every detail (particularly in areas of commerce, civil damages, issues of marriage, etc.) what would be necessary for a nation living in her own Land, the Sages were hard pressed to know how to proceed in areas where the Torah was silent. As such, they gave a very narrow interpretation to this verse, understanding it to be speaking specifically to the prophets who would come after Moshe. They were not allowed to claim that a law they were speaking had actually been spoken by Moshe if it could not be found in the Torah. This gave rise to the injunction that *halachah* could not be based upon the prophets, or to put it another way, the prophets could not introduce new *halachah* which did not find its roots in the Torah.

Tigay (*JPS Commentary*) has suggested that this prohibition is specific to the immediate context, that is, dealing specifically with the prohibition against idolatry. No one was later to add elements of idolatrous worship and then to claim that such innovations were actually in the words of Moshe. Nor was anyone to attempt to expunge a law in the Torah in order to allow idolatrous elements into the worship and life of Israel. Interestingly, this was precisely what the emerging Christian Church did when it introduced statues and iconography as essential elements in her wor-

ship. She first set aside the Torah, then introduced these things as part of the “new way.”

Whether we like Tigay’s explanation or not, it does seem clear that there were many details of “how” to obey the commandments of the Torah which the Torah itself does not include. But I would like to suggest an additional thought on this matter of “not adding” and “not taking away.” It seems to me that the primary emphasis is upon the absolute nature of God’s divine revelation in the Torah. In other words, it stands as supreme in terms of its divine *authority*. It is the standard against which all subsequent revelation must be measured. There is therefore nothing wrong with formulated *halachah* to describe *how* the laws of the Torah should be obeyed, but such *halachah* does not have equal *authority* with the written revelation of the Torah itself. In short, the Oral Torah, the traditions of the Sages passed down through the generations of Israel about *how* to keep the mitzvot of the Torah, may be wise and even helpful, but they do not possess the same authority as do the inspired words of Moshe in the Written Torah itself. Thus, to “add to” the Torah would be to formulate new commandments not based upon the Torah and ascribe to them equal authority with the Torah. Likewise, to “take away from” the Torah would be to nullify commandments contained therein and teach that such commandments no longer have divine authority.

This foundational and enduring authority of the Torah is precisely what Yeshua teaches in Matthew 5:17–21. In these words of our Master, He makes it clear that even the smallest stroke of the Torah has enduring authority for all who are members of the Kingdom of Heaven.

To illustrate, consider the commandment to wear *tzitzit* clearly given in Num 15:37–41. No one can dispute that wearing *tzitzit* is a commandment of the Torah. But how is one to wear them? And what exactly are they? How can one know if one is fulfilling the commandment? There must be some uniformity, since looking at them is to result in remembering the commandments. If each person developed his or her own idea of what *tzitzit* looked like and how to wear them, how would the *tzitzit* function as a community-wide symbol by which the commandments were to be remembered and obeyed? So the ancient leaders of Israel determined what constituted *tzitzit* and how to wear them. As the people complied with their leaders’ instructions, the commandment of *tzitzit* functioned within its divinely intended purpose, to be a reminder of the commandments so that the people would live them out. Thus, formulating *how* to obey the commandment neither replaced nor added to it as long as the man-made *halachah* was not accorded universal, divine authority. If, however, the man-made *halachah* was accorded universal, divine authority, this would be “adding to” the inspired record of the Written Torah, and this is what is prohibited by our current *parashah*.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened over time with the Oral Torah, but it was not the intention of the early sages that this would be the case. In fact, the prohibition against writing down the Oral traditions was made to insure that the *halachah* of the Sages would never be given equal authority with the Written Torah of Moses (cf. b. *Temurah* 14b; b. *Gittin* 60b). Yet already, in the 1st Century, the “traditions of the elders” were not only being given universal authority, they were even displacing the commandments of God, as Yeshua Himself makes clear (cf. Mk 7:6–13).

How, then, were the *halachot* of the Sages to be utilized if they were not written and therefore were not codified as a universal, authoritative body of law? It would appear that they were to be administered on a local, community level. This may be what Yeshua is teaching in Matt 23 when He accords authority to those who sit “in the seat of Moshe.” That is, the *halachot* established by recognized leaders within a given community, so far as such *halachot* were not at variance with the Written Torah, were to be followed by members of that community. Yet even in this scenario, the supremacy of the Written Torah’s authority was not to be diminished. Thus, to disregard com-

munity *halachah* may not have been viewed as failure to obey a particular Torah commandment as much as a failure to submit to the authorities established by the community itself.

In this pivotal chapter of Deuteronomy, Moshe uses a number of different terms to describe the various laws of the covenant. The Sages make clear distinctions between the terms. Modern scholars, however, have suggested that the terms are essentially synonyms, and are used somewhat interchangeably. Five different terms are employed in our text:

חֻקִּים, *chukim*, usually translated “statutes.” It is derived from the Hebrew verb חָקַק, “to engrave,” “to inscribe.” These would be laws “chiselled in stone.” (The idea that comes from this is that a letter chiselled in stone has clear “boundaries” or “edges.”) Thus, חֻקִּים may have the sense of “boundary,” i.e., the line set between what is right and wrong. To “transgress” is to cross the line from what is commanded (righteous) to that which is forbidden (unrighteous). Note, for example, the use of חָקַק in Jer 5:22.

מִשְׁפָּטִים, *mishpatim*, usually translated “judgments.” These would be the rulings determined by a שׁוֹפֵט, *shofet*, “a judge,” (from the verb שָׁפַט, “to judge”).

מִצְוָה / מִצְוֹת, *mitzvot / mitzvah*, usually translated “commandment(s).” This word derives from the verb צָוָה, “to command” and emphasizes the authority invested in the one who issues the command.

עֵדוּת, *'edot*, usually translated “testimonies.” It derives from the עֵדוּת, *'edut* which describes the terms or stipulations of a treaty. The “testimonies” are those clear stipulations of the covenant (both positive and negative) which are envisioned as the essence of the covenant, witnessed at the covenant enactment.

תּוֹרָה, *torah*, usually translated “law” in the Christian translations (no doubt influenced by the Lxx which used νόμος, *nomos* to translate תּוֹרָה). This word derives from the verb יָרָה, “to point out,” “to instruct,” “to teach.” Thus תּוֹרָה means “teaching” or “instruction.”

The Sages distinguished between חֻקִּים, *chukim* and מִשְׁפָּטִים, *mishpatim*. The *chukim* (“statutes”) are those commandments which offer no clear rationale for their obedience, such as the dietary laws or circumcision. *Mishpatim* are those commandments for which the reason is obvious, such as the prohibition against murder and theft. It is not clear, however, that such rigid distinctions can be made for the terms in every case. Most likely, the various terms are used to reveal the multifaceted nature of the commandments. *Chukim* (“statutes”) emphasize the eternal and enduring nature of the commandments, and the “boundary” between what is right and wrong; *mishpatim* (“judgments”) remind us that there are consequences attached to the commandments; *mitzvot* (“commandments”) puts the emphasis upon the need to submit to God as the Sovereign; *'edot* (“testimonies”) indicates that the commandments are in the context of covenant, and that obedience to the commandments should be motivated by the sense of privilege to be the witnesses for the King and His character; and *torah* (“teaching”) emphasizes the wisdom aspects of the commandments in that they are God’s instruction for life to those who are members of His covenant.

Thus, the Torah is presented by Moshe, not as a legal code of “do’s and don’ts,” but as a covenant between God and His people: its primary purpose is to establish and mature the relationship brought about by the act of redemption at the exodus. What is more, the Torah, given as a gift from God to His covenant partner, is described as the source of wisdom and understanding as Israel would enter the Land the Almighty was giving to them. Note v. 6: guarding and doing of the commandments is promised to be the source of “wisdom and understanding in the sight of all the peoples.” Israel was entering the Land which would bring physical as well as spiritual battles. The Torah, lived out in their daily lives, would provide the wisdom and understanding to maintain their covenant relationship with God. Indeed, when the nations would see Israel living in accordance with Torah, they would realize that Israel’s God dwelt with them—in their midst (v. 7). The keeping of the Torah was therefore not so much a “pat on the back” for Israel as much as it was a testimony to their God. Ultimately, as we are taught by Paul (Rom 10:4), the witness of the Torah pointed in a direct way to the Messiah, the “Immanuel”—God with us.

But the life of Torah not only signalled the presence of God dwelling in the midst of His people, it also separated His people from the pagan nations. Note v. 7. When Israel lived out the Torah, the nations would recognize that Israel was different than the other nations, and this difference was the close communion they had with their God as opposed to the other nations whose gods were remote and distant, and generally malevolent.

Was this borne out by Israel’s history? Did the Torah function for them as wisdom for life? It did when Israel actually guarded and kept the Torah. When Israel obeyed, they subdued their enemies; when Israel disobeyed, they were defeated by their enemies. What is more, there is good historical evidence to show that when non-Israelites came into contact with communities that practised the precepts of the Torah, they often were attracted to join Israel and their faith. Of course, the opposite was also true. When Israel refused to obey God’s instructions, they did not merely remain neutral. They inevitably copied the nations around them and engaged in spiritual adultery, going after the “ways of the nations” and following the pagan precepts of their gods.

Why does Moshe often use the doublet “keep and do” in relationship to the Torah (23x in Deut, 4:6; 5:1,32; 6:3,25; 7:12; 8:1; 11:32-12:1; 13:1; 15:5; 16:12; 17:10; 23:24; 24:8; 26:16; 28:1,13,15,58; 31:12; 32:46)? It is clear that the two words formed a kind of technical expression in the Torah. The word “keep” or “guard” (שָׁמַר, *shamar*) puts the emphasis upon preparation, especially in terms of knowing the Torah, and preparing the necessary things to obey God. “Doing” or “performing” the commandment emphasizes the actual incorporation of the Torah into the life of the individual and the community. These two concepts are important, for a desire to obey God must precede the actual “doing” of the Torah. For instance, if one does not prepare for keeping the Shabbat, one finds it impossible to keep it. The preparation, then, is all part of the “doing.” In this way, “doing” the Torah becomes a lifestyle, not merely a “religious” event.

This concept of “guarding” in the sense of “preparation” to live out the Torah, is applied as well to one’s own personal life. Note v. 9: “Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently” (רַק הִשְׁמַר לְךָ וּשְׁמַר נַפְשְׁךָ מֵאֵד). Here the English translation does not capture the full meaning of the words, for the phrase “Only give heed to yourself” incorporates the *nifil* of שָׁמַר “to guard,” which emphasizes the requirement to allow one’s self “to be guarded” (the passive or reflexive sense of the *nifil*). This may suggest not only one’s own personal activity in self preparation, but also the role of the community in this preparation. “To allow oneself to be guarded” means recognizing that in many cases, the preparation for doing the mitzvot necessarily involves the whole community. The

specific personal obligations within this community setting is emphasized by the second phrase, “keep your soul diligently” (here שָׁמַר is in the *qal* or active sense). The point is that one must see himself as part of the community, and must realize that the community plays a vital role in the keeping of the Torah. In one very real sense, it is impossible to keep and obey the Torah apart from one’s involvement in the community.

This combination of corporate and individual responsibility in light of the Torah commandments is also emphasized by the interchange of the plural and singular pronouns used throughout the section. While the English translations often cannot mark the difference, when reading the Hebrew it is obvious. As an example, note v. 23: “So watch yourselves (plural), that you (plural) do not forget the covenant of the LORD your (plural) God which He made with you (plural), and make for yourselves (plural) a graven image in the form of anything against which the LORD your (singular) God has commanded you (singular).” Indeed, throughout the passage the combination of the singular and plural pronouns emphasizes both the corporate as well as individual responsibilities of Torah life. Both are necessary for obedience as God envisions it.

This corporate/individual interchange is also highlighted in the generational aspects of Torah life. Verse nine commands the Torah to be taught not only to one’s children, but also to one’s grandchildren. While it is the direct responsibility of parents to teach their children the ways of HaShem, it is also the responsibility of one generation to teach the next generation as well. One might rightly say that Torah life gains its greatest impact in the witness of generations. This also requires both “preparation” and “doing.”

This passing of the Torah from one generation to the next is emphasized in the fact that only one generation stood at Mt. Sinai and actually heard the voice of God and witnessed the magnificent events that accompanied the giving of the Torah. Yet, as the Pesach Haggadah enjoins, each generation is to view itself as though it likewise stood at Sinai. The story of the events, passed on from that first generation to each subsequent generation, allows all to see themselves as equally witnesses of the divine nature of the Torah. We know that the Torah is the direct word of God to us because we have the witness of the former generations. If the chain of witness is broken, the Torah ceases to have its impact as the divine and eternal revelation of the Almighty to His people. Many of us have dearly felt this “break” in the chain of witness. Once the Christian Church took the position that the Torah was no longer of value, she despised the essential role of passing the witness of Torah to the next generation. In attempting to recover Torah as valuable and essential for walking as God intends us to walk, we are likewise attempting to “fill in the gap” of generational witness that has been bequeathed to us. In restoring this generational aspect of Torah life, we are hopeful that, with greater confidence, our childrens’ children will be able to say to their children, “So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone” (v. 13).

The danger that Moshe sees for the coming generation is that they might succumb to the idolatry of the nations—that they would come to the erroneous conclusion that God, Who spoke at Sinai, could be represented by an image and that such an image would become a revelation of His essential character (vv. 15-20). The need that mankind feels, to represent his “gods” by fashioning them after the image (תְּמוּנָה, *temunah*) of created things, flows from the inability to accept the revelation of God as He has given it. Unable to control an “invisible” God, mankind attempts to bring God down to his level, to something he can control. Since mankind was given authority to rule over the created world, his attempts to fashion God as one of the animals, or even as one of the

created bodies (such as the sun, moon, and stars) is a way to bring God to be equal or less than man himself. For mankind knows that he has been created—that he did not “make himself.” To fashion God as also created is to bring Him to one’s own level, and thus to forego the need to submit to God as the sovereign Creator to whom allegiance and obedience is due. In the fallen nature of mankind, it is inevitable that we will attempt to “create God in our image.”

This dovetails with the experience of Sinai passed on from generation to generation. For mankind naturally wants to fashion his gods as speculative ideas, but the faith of Israel is based primarily on historical events. As Heschel writes: “The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination of His presence. Israel is not a people of definers but a people of witnesses” (*God in Search of Man*, p. 140). This is the real reason for recovering the “Hebrew roots of our faith.” In the so-called “Hebrew roots movement,” in which believers are attempting to recover the “Jewishness of the Christian faith,” this crucial aspect of generational witness is not often understood and appreciated. The essence of the movement should not be an attempt to mimic modern Judaism, but to receive from the Jewish communities the generational witness of Sinai. But rather than receiving this witness as a call to also accept rabbinic Judaism, we should appreciate our renewed connection to the Scriptures, the people and Land of Israel, as reconnecting the chain of witness to the divine revelation at Sinai, and thus to the witness of Yeshua our Messiah to whom the Torah has always pointed. Of course, at the heart of this witness is the fact that the very words of God (the Torah) have been faithfully passed from generation to generation so that we might have them as our own possession.

The fact that God chose Israel as a nation distinct from the other nations is also centered upon the life of Torah that she received from God. Note v. 19:

“And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which Adonai your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”

This verse appears to teach that God allotted the worship of the sun, moon and stars as appropriate for the pagan nations. But we should connect the teaching of Paul in Romans 1 as a commentary on this passage. Since the creation itself manifests the existence and attributes of the One true God, the nations’ refusal to accept this witness resulted in God’s having given them up to the worship of false gods. Granted, in the mystery of His divine providence, He gave Israel the ability to believe what she could not see, but nonetheless, the Scriptures lay the responsibility of disobedience and idolatry on the shoulders of mankind, not on the purposes of God.

God is said to be “a consuming fire and a jealous God” (v. 24, cf. Heb 12:29). There are two aspects to this awesome description. On one hand, the utter holiness of God means that He will always punish evil, and cannot allow evil to exist in His presence. The picture of Daniel and his friends in the “iron furnace” of Nebuchadnezer illustrates this picture. Daniel and his companions had acted righteously, and were therefore not consumed. But the idolaters who attended the fire, were themselves consumed when they opened the door to add fuel.

On the other hand, then, the fact that God is a consuming fire also is shown in His jealousy for His people. The same fire that consumes the evil doer also protects the righteous. The salvation of Israel, however, is not based upon her righteousness, but upon God’s determined purpose to bring the covenant to fruition (vv. 25-31). Since God will have His way, He is committed to change the heart and to work righteousness into the lives of His chosen ones. Their returning to Him after be-

coming disobedient is the direct result of His faithfulness to them. Thus, He is described as: “For Adonai your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (v. 31). His attributes of compassion and loyalty to the covenant are not incongruent with His being a “consuming fire” and a “jealous God.” His mercy and His justice are one in Yeshua.

From Moshe’s perspective (and thus from God’s), the life of Torah produces wisdom, understanding, and a generational communion with God in the context of His covenant. Note the summary words of v. 40:

“So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which Adonai your God is giving you for all time.”

Here, the eternal possession of the Land, given to Israel by God Himself, is once again reiterated. It should be noted that the word translated “land” is *הָאָדָמָה*, *ha’adamah*, not *הָאָרֶץ* *ha’aretz*. The emphasis of *ha’adamah* is that of the actual “soil” or “real estate.” The “Land” is not some ethereal, spiritual entity, but the actual Land as noted in the Abrahamic covenant. This Land is given “for all time” (*כָּל־הַיָּמִים*, *kol hayamim*), literally, “for all days.” The purpose of the covenant is that Israel should dwell in her Land, observe the Torah of God, and by so doing, be a witness to the world of the presence of the Almighty God. In Israel’s dispersion from the Land because of her unfaithfulness, she profanes the Name and is unable to fulfill this divine purpose. But God will bring us back, and in so doing, show Himself faithful to the covenant, and restore our ability to magnify His name to the nations (cf. Ezek 36:19ff).

Our *parashah* ends with the designation of three cities of refuge on the east of the Jordan. When the people entered the Land, Joshua also designated three cities on the West of the Jordan. Why did Moshe designate cities on the east of the Jordan? Most likely this is prophetic of the time when the Land, as designated in the Abrahamic covenant (which apparently include land as far east as the Euphrates, cf. Gen 5:18) is restored to Israel. This, of course, will only happen under the reign of the Messiah, Yeshua.

The cities east of the Jordan were designated by Moshe, and those west of the Jordan by Joshua (Joshua 20:7).

Thus, the Land is inevitably connected to the fulfillment of the covenant. Not only because God has promised the Land to Israel, but also because the possession of the Land goes hand in hand with living according to the Torah. As our Apostolic reading reminds us, the inability to possess the Land is the result of unbelief. Likewise, belief, demonstrated by obedience, will bring Israel back to the Land of her inheritance.

