



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

דברים תשע"ט
Devarim 5779

The
Teacher
as Hero

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779*. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT DEVARIM IN A NUTSHELL

The entire book of Devarim is structured like a covenant. It represents Moses' renewal of the Sinai covenant with the next generation, who would soon enter the Promised Land and there create a covenant-based society.

Accordingly, the parsha of Devarim opens with the first two elements of a covenant document: an introduction pinpointing the speaker and context (Devarim 1:1–5) and a historical overview of the events that led to the covenant and its renewal (beginning at 1:6).

The introduction identifies time and place: the last weeks of Moses' life, with the people encamped by the banks of the Jordan. Moses recalls his appointment of leaders, the sending of the spies, and the people's crisis of faith that led to the forty-year stay in the wilderness. Moving to more recent episodes, he reminds the people of their victories over Moab and Ammon and the settlement of their land by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of Menashe. The parsha ends with Moses' description of his appointment of, and encouragement to, Joshua as his successor.



THE CORE IDEA

Imagine you are 119 years and 11 months old. The end of your life is in sight. Your hopes and dreams have received devastating blows. You have been told by God that you will not enter the land to which you have been leading your people for forty years. You have been repeatedly criticised by the people you have led. Your sister and brother, with whom you shared the burdens of leadership, have died. And you know that neither of your children, Gershom and Eliezer, will succeed you. Your life seems to be coming to a tragic end, your destination unreached, your hopes unfulfilled. What do you do?

You could sink into sadness, reflecting on what might-have-been, had the past taken a different direction. You could continue to plead with God to change His mind and let you cross the Jordan. You could retreat into memories of the good times: when the people sang a song at the Red Sea, when they accepted the covenant at Sinai, when they built the Tabernacle. These would be the normal human reactions. Moses did none of these things – and what he did instead helped change the course of Jewish history.

Moses gathered the people on the far side of the Jordan and spoke to them for a month. Those speeches became the book of Devarim. The topics are extremely diverse, covering a history of the past, prophecies and warnings about the future, laws, stories, a song, and a set of blessings. Together they form a profound vision of what it is to be a holy people, dedicated to God, and instructions of how to construct a society that would be a model for humanity in combining freedom and order, justice and compassion, individual dignity and collective responsibility.

Let us now look beyond what Moses said in the last month of his life, and examine what Moses *did*. He changed career. He shifted his relationship with the people. No longer defined as Moses the great and powerful leader who set them free, the lawgiver, the worker of miracles, the intermediary between the Israelites and God, he now became the figure known to Jewish memory: Moshe Rabbeinu, "Moses, our teacher."

That is how Devarim begins – “Moses began to explain this Law” (1:5). The Torah uses the verb *be'er* (to explain), that we have not seen used in this way before. Moses wanted to explain, expand on, make clear. He wanted the people to realise that Judaism is not a religion of mysteries that makes sense only to a few special people. It is – as he would say in his very last speech – an “inheritance of the entire congregation of Jacob” (33:4).

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Moses made this career change at the end of his life?
2. Why do you think Moses is nowadays known to us as *Moshe Rabbeinu*, “Moses, our teacher” rather than as any of the other roles he played?
3. Do teachers play an important role in your life?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Nechama Leibowitz, the famous Jerusalem Torah scholar, writer and teacher who died in 1997, requested that the only words that appear on her gravestone should be her name and the single word *Morah* – teacher. For her, this was her greatest achievement, her life's work, and the ultimate honour and title. The following story was written by a teacher who read this about Nechama Leibowitz, and thought, “I feel the same way!”

When I was training to be a secondary school teacher (for pupils aged 11-18) at the very beginning of my career, the university course required that the first week be spent in a primary school (for pupils aged 4-11) so that we could gain an understanding of where our high school students would be coming from. Without a moment's hesitation I knew which school and which teacher I would choose to shadow.

Rabbi B. was my favorite teacher from primary school. That I knew. But to be honest, I had no idea why. I do not particularly remember any of the lessons he taught or information that I left his classes with, and I am sure that over the years as I continued my Jewish education I relearned that information many times

since. So what was it about this particular teacher that had had such a lasting impact on me? I was excited to find out.

It didn't take long. As soon as I entered his classroom and perched my oversized body on one of the tiny chairs, it was obvious to me that his classroom was filled with love and respect for his students. And their respect for him in return. He connected to the soul of each of his students individually, and taught them using his own soul. I knew then I wanted to model my teaching on his. Some twenty-five years later, I pray I have lived up to this wish.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you have any teachers like this, who you can imagine you will remember for many years to come?
2. What do you think is the key to being a teacher who can make an impact like this?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Moses became, in the last month of his life, the master educator. In these addresses recorded in the book of Devarim, he does more than just tell the people *what* the law is. He explains to them *why* the law is. There is nothing arbitrary about it. The law is as it is because of the people's experience of slavery and persecution in Egypt, which was their tutorial in why we need freedom and law-governed liberty. Time and again he says: *You shall do this because you were once slaves in Egypt. They must remember and never forget* – two verbs that appear repeatedly in the book – where they came from and what it felt like to be exiled, persecuted, and powerless.

Throughout Devarim, Moses reaches a new level of authority and wisdom. For the first time we hear him speak extensively in his own voice, rather than merely as the transmitter of God's words to him. His grasp of vision and detail is flawless. He wants the people to understand that the laws God has commanded them are for their good, not just God's.

At this defining moment of his life, Moses understood that, though he would not be *physically* with the people when they entered the Promised Land, he could still be with them intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally if he gave them the teachings to take with them into the future. Moses became the

pioneer of perhaps the single greatest contribution of Judaism to the concept of leadership: the idea of the teacher as hero.

Heroes are people who demonstrate courage in the field of battle. What Moses knew was that the most important battles are not military. They are spiritual, moral, cultural. A military victory shifts the pieces on the chessboard of history. A spiritual victory changes lives. A military victory is almost always short-lived. Either the enemy attacks again or a new and more dangerous opponent appears. But spiritual victories can – if their lesson is not forgotten – last forever. Even quite ordinary people, Yiftah, for example, or Shimshon, can be military heroes. But those who teach people to see, feel, and act differently, who enlarge the moral horizons of humankind, are rare indeed. Of these, Moses was the greatest.

Not only does *he* become the teacher in Devarim. In words engraved on Jewish hearts ever since, he tells the entire people that *they* must become a nation of educators: "*Teach [these words] repeatedly to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise.*" (Devarim 6:7)

In Devarim, a new word enters the biblical vocabulary: the verb **l-m-d**, meaning to learn or teach. The verb does not appear

even once in Bereishit, Shemot, Vayikra, or Bamidbar. In Devarim it appears seventeen times.

There was nothing like this concern for universal education elsewhere in the ancient world. Jews became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind.

Moses' end-of-life transformation is one of the most inspiring in all of religious history. In that one act, he redeemed his career from tragedy. He became a leader not only for his time but for all time. His body did not accompany his people as they entered the land, but his teachings did. His sons did not succeed him, but his disciples did. He may have felt that he had not changed his people in his lifetime, but in the full perspective of history, he changed them more than any leader has ever changed any people, turning them into the people of the book and the nation who built not pyramids but schools and houses of study.

The poet Shelley famously said, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." In truth, though, it is not poets but teachers who shape society, handing on the legacy of the past to those who build the future. That insight sustained Judaism for longer than any other civilisation, and it began with Moses in the last month of his life.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

"The greatest leader we ever had was Moses. And what fascinates me is the title we gave him. Moses was a liberator, a law-giver, a military commander and a prophet. But we call him none of these things. Instead we call him Moshe Rabbeinu, 'Moses our teacher', because that, for us, is the highest honour ...

Teachers open our eyes to the world. They give us curiosity and confidence. They teach us to ask questions. They connect us to our past and future. They're the guardians of our social heritage. We have lots of heroes today, and they are often celebrities – athletes, supermodels, media personalities. They come, they have their fifteen minutes of

fame, and they go. But the influence of good teachers stays with us. They are the people who really shape our life."

From Optimism to Hope, p. 132

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is being a teacher "the highest honour" for Judaism? Do you think this is reflected in the wider society?
2. Who are your heroes? Can a teacher be a hero?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think Moses made this career change at the end of his life?
2. Why do you think Moses is nowadays known to us as Moshe Rabbeinu, "Moses, our teacher" rather than as any of the other roles he played?
3. How can a teacher make an impact that will last long after they have stopped teaching the student? How did Moses do this?
4. How do you define a hero? Do you agree that a teacher can be a hero?
5. How and why did the Jewish people become a "nation of educators"?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. Moses realised that soon he would no longer be a physical presence to the people, with the ability to personally lead them through the upcoming challenges, and so he changed the focus of his role to make an impact that would last beyond his life, becoming a teacher, and leaving a message to guide his people, and all subsequent generations of the people (even today).
2. While Moses played many important roles as the greatest leader of the Jewish people, his role as a teacher is the one that has had the longest impact on every future generation. Perhaps this is because the role of the teacher is the most respected and honoured in Judaism. What we are taught, and what we pass on to others throughout our lives, has the most powerful impact, and can span across all the generations. Moses began this process.
3. Hopefully the younger generation discussing this can see the importance of teachers in their lives and the lasting impact they can make (although not all teachers have a long lasting or positive impact on the lives of their students, it is important to acknowledge the potential for this in the role of teacher).

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. In all likelihood, we will each have only a handful of teachers (at the most) that leave a lasting impact like this. And it may be hard for a child to identify them while they are still a student. They may need the help of an adult to identify the qualities in a teacher that will leave a lasting impact like this.
2. There are pedagogic skills that can be learned, and improved with experience, such as classroom management and curriculum writing. But the essence of good teaching is love and respect, and that is what Rabbi B. based his teaching on, and what made him beloved as a teacher then and now.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Because education is one of the highest values in Judaism (see *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition: Parshat Matot*), being a teacher is one of the highest honours in Judaism, and is a highly-valued and respected profession. Perhaps this is not reflected in wider society, where other principles (such as wealth and power) have a higher value. Some argue this can be seen by the salaries that are commanded by various professions.
2. A hero is a person who is admired or idealised for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities. The greatest teachers leave a real, positive impact on their students, and their actions and values could allow us to respect them as heroic figures who make a lasting on us.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
3. A teacher can still have an impact on his or her students long after ceasing to teach them by giving them teachings and values they can take with them into the future. Moses realised this and so dedicated the remaining time he had with his people to teaching them everything he felt they needed to know in their hearts to go on without him.
4. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 2.
5. The value of education has been central to the Jewish people since the beginning of their history. Love of learning in general and Torah specifically is a core value found in Jewish text and Jewish tradition. Placing education as a central and core Jewish value has meant that Jewish literacy levels are often high, and many Jewish people reach adulthood with a great love for learning. Many Jewish children grow up to be Rabbis, teachers, leaders, writers, educators, academics, and teachers to their own children. Ensuring that all Jews are fully versed in their own traditions and laws has also contributed to the strength of Jewish identity and continuity throughout the period of exile, being one of the factors explaining the miracle of Jewish survival and continuity against the odds.