



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

52 VaYelekh — Failing to Succeed

Text

דברים לא

י ויצו מ'שה אותם לאמר מקץ שבע שנים במ'עד שנת השמטה בחג הסכות. יא בבוא כל-
ישראל לראות את-פני יהוה אל היך במקום אשר יבחר תקרא את-התורה הזאת נגד כל-ישראל
באזניהם. יב הקהל את-העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשערך למען ישמעו ולמען
ילמדו ויראו את-יהוה אל היכם ושמרו לעשות את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת. יג ובניהם אשר
ל'א-ידעו ישמעו ולמדו ליראה את-יהוה אל היכם כל-הימים אשר אתם חיים על-האדמה אשר
אתם ע'ברים את-הירדן שמה לרשתה.

יד וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה הן קרבו ימיך למות קרא את-יהושע והתיצבו בא'הל מועד ואצננו וילך
מ'שה ויהושע ויתיצבו בא'הל מועד. טו וירא יהוה בא'הל בעמוד ענן ויעמד עמוד הענן על-פתח
הא'הל. טז וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה הנך שכב עם-אב'תך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אל'הי נכר-הארץ
אשר הוא בא-שמה בקרבו ועזבני והפר את-בריתי אשר כרתי אתו. יז וחרה אפי בו ביום-ההוא
ועזבתים והסתרתני פני מהם והיה לאכ'ל ומצאהו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הל'א על כ'י-אין
אל'הי בקרבי מצאוני הרעות האלה. יח ואנ'כי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא על כל-הרעה אשר עשה
כ'י פנה אל-אל'הים אחרים. יט ועתה כתבו לכם את-השירה הזאת ולמדה את-בני-ישראל שימה
בפיהם למען תהיה-לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל. כ כ'י-אביאנו אל-האדמה אשר-נשבעתי
לאב'תיו זבת חלב ודבש ואכל ושבע ודשן ופנה אל-אל'הים אחרים ועבדום ונאצונו והפר את-בריתי.
כא והיה כ'י-תמצאן אתו רעות רבות וצרות ועתה השירה הזאת לפניו לעד כ'י ל'א תשכח מפי זרעו
כ'י ידעתי את-יצרו אשר הוא ע'שה היום בטרם אביאנו אל-הארץ אשר נשבעתי. כב ויכתב מ'שה את-
השירה הזאת ביום ההוא וילמדה את-בני ישראל. כג ויצו את-יהושע בן-נון וי'אמר חזק ואמץ כ'י אתה
תביא את-בני ישראל אל-הארץ אשר-נשבעתי להם ואנ'כי אהיה עמך. כד ויהי ככלות מ'שה לכתב
את-דברי התורה-הזאת על-ספר עד תמם. כה ויצו מ'שה את-הלויים נשאי ארון ברית-יהוה לאמר.
כו לק'ח את ספר התורה הזה ושמעתם אתו מצד ארון ברית-יהוה אל היכם והיה-שם בך לעד. כז כ'י
אנ'כי ידעתי את-מריך ואת-ערפך הקשה הן בעודני חי עמכם היום ממרים היתם עם-יהוה ואף כ'י-
אחרי מותי. כח הקהילו אלי את-כל-זקני שבטיכם וש'טריכם ואדברה באזניהם את הדברים האלה
ואעידה בם את-השמים ואת-הארץ. כט כ'י ידעתי אחרי מותי כ'י-השחת תשחתון וסרתם מן-הדרך אשר
צויתי אתכם וקראת אתכם הרעה באחרית הימים כ'י-תעשו את-הרע בעיני יהוה להכעיסו במעשה
ידיכם.

Devarim 31

10 Moshe instructed them as follows: Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, 11 when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. 12 Gather the people — men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities — that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Torah. 13 Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere the Lord your God as long as they live in the land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

14 The Lord said to Moshe: The time is drawing near for you to die. Call Joshua and present



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yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may instruct him. Moshe and Joshua went and presented themselves in the Tent of Meeting. 15 The Lord appeared in the Tent, in a pillar of cloud, the pillar of cloud having come to rest at the entrance of the tent.

16 The Lord said to Moshe: You are soon to lie with your ancestors. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them. 17 Then My anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My countenance from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, "Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us." 18 Yet I will keep My countenance hidden on that day, because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods. 19 Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness among the people of Israel. 20 When I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey that I promised on oath to their fathers, and they eat their fill and grow fat and turn to other gods and serve them, spurning Me and breaking My covenant, 21 and the many evils and troubles befall them — then this poem shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. For I know what plans they are devising even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath.

22 That day, Moshe wrote down this poem and taught it to the Israelites.

23 And He charged Joshua son of Nun: "Be strong and resolute: for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them on oath, and I will be with you."

24 When Moshe had put down in writing the words of this Teaching to the very end, 25 Moshe charged the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, saying: 26 Take this book of Teaching and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, and let it remain there as a witness among you. 27 Well I know how defiant and stiff-necked you are: even now, while I am still alive in your midst, you have been defiant toward the Lord; how much more, then, when I am dead! 28 Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, that I may speak all these words to them and that I may call heaven and earth to witness among them. 29 For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the path that I enjoined upon you, and that in time to come misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the Lord and vexed Her/Him by your deeds.

Context

In the shortest parasha in the Torah, VaYelekh, Moshe approaches his final hours. He gathers all of the People together to deliver his last instructions. Moshe promises divine help in the conquest of the Promised Land. Yehoshua will lead. The Torah is to be written down and read before the entire assembly in order that everyone should feel part of the process of Jewish experience, and learn to respect and practice the teachings. Through Moshe, God warns that the People will stray, and they will reap the consequences. The Written Torah, to be kept by the sacred Ark, bears witness to the covenant with the divine.



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Explorations

After these five books of the Torah the period of the Prophets will follow – a tumultuous time in Israelite history when God speaks directly through the mouths of divinely-chosen messengers. The People negotiate ongoing revelation during social, political and military as well as spiritual trials. Anguishing about the People's misdeeds and their suffering, the prophets contribute enduring inspiration to Jewish life and thought.

Among the Jewish People, Moshe is held to be the greatest of our prophets. In another few chapters, the Torah concludes with the following verse:

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe — whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moshe displayed before all Israel. (Devarim 34:11-12)

Before a closing poem and farewell blessings, in our parsha, Moshe speaks his final words to all of the People in the community - the women, men, and children. According to midrashim and Ramban, the title of the parasha instructs about Moshe's way of leaving this world,

Va Yeleh Moshe-MOSHE WENT (Devarim 31.1) When Moshe finished speaking [the words of the previous parasha, Nitzavim], all of the People who had stood facing him would have dispersed - the children, the women and men, each to her tent. The Torah did not need to mention [that Moshe went] because the gathering intended to bring you into a covenant with the divine your God (Devarim 29:9-11), so after he [Moshe] had brought them into the covenant, they could all leave his presence. The Torah says that, afterwards, [in order to indicate that] *Moshe left* the Levite camp and went to the Israelite camp to honor them, as a person who wishes to depart from her/his friend, and comes to ask permission.

This midrash indicates a very human, caring, and gentle side of Moshe's leadership that contrasts with the frank and terse way God speaks through Moshe who delivers the message of a bleak future to unfold after he dies -

The Children of Israel will become fat and complacent;

They will forsake their commitments, turn from the covenant, and commit evil acts;

God will respond in anger and hide from them;

The People will endure hardship; they will suffer, and feel alone.

This sequence is a basic outline of the plot for many ensuing Israelite adventures; it is a recurring trope. Often, a prophet speaks of the People's transgressions, of their failures, and the dreadful consequences of their actions –

4 Ah, sinful nation! People laden with iniquity!

Brood of evildoers! Depraved children!

They have forsaken the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel,

Turned their backs [on Her/Him].

5 Why do you seek further beatings, that you continue to offend?

Every head is ailing, and every heart is sick.



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6 From head to foot no spot is sound:
All bruises, and welts, and festering sores —
Not pressed out, not bound up, not softened with oil.
7 Your land is a waste, your cities burnt down;
Before your eyes, the yield of your soil is consumed by strangers —
A wasteland as overthrown by strangers!
//
14 Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing;
They are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them.
15 And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length, I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with crime —
16 Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings
away from My sight. Cease to do evil;
17 Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.
18 "Come, let us reach an understanding --declares the Lord--
Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white;
Be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece."
19 If, then, you agree and give heed, you will eat the good things of the earth (Isaiah 1)

When people do evil, their rituals and prayers are empty and pointless. After leveling a biting critique, the prophet Isaiah turns to inspire a better option – wholesome sustenance from the land to be achieved by restoring justice and caring in society.

Frequently, people expect prophets to predict what will happen. As we see in this passage, Isaiah does not foresee the future, for this would imply that the future is determined. Often, the Hebrew prophets seek to enable people to understand causes of our suffering and/or consequences of our poor behavior. They aim for us to make better-informed choices that will lead us together to a brighter tomorrow. They support and empower us to choose freely to improve our destiny.

In Abraham Joshua Heschel's view, the Hebrew prophets are people “whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our fate.” (*The Prophets*, 1).

Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profane riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words. (*The Prophets Ch. 1*)

Heschel brings the Hebrew prophets to vivid life in their complex contexts, and conveys their powerful drive to justice and good.

By contrast with many prophetic passages, in VaYelekh, the conclusion of Moshe's prophecy is not an inspiring vision or a bright future. At the conclusion of his remarks, Moshe speaks with bitterness about the inevitability of transgression and resulting suffering,

Well I know how defiant and stiff-necked you are: even now, while I am still alive in your midst, you have been defiant toward the Lord; how much more, then, when I am dead! . . . For I know that, when I am dead, you will act wickedly and turn away from the



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path that I enjoined upon you, and that in time to come misfortune will befall you for having done evil in the sight of the Lord and vexed Her/Him by your deeds. (Devarim 27 & 31:29)

Along with the searing disappointment that Moshe expresses, he nonetheless offers a twofold proposal to ward off the failure he expects. Two strategies that might help the People are,

- Taking recourse to the Written Torah - the text serves as a witness to the covenant with the divine,

Take this book of Teaching and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, and let it remain there as a witness among you (Devarim 31:23).

The Written Torah is to be in the midst of the People, constantly offering a possibility to find the divine, even when God hides. When we become truly desperate as a result of our hardships, we might reason about our failure, discover our folly, and thereby return to our covenant, "Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us" (Devarim 31:18). We have the capability to connect with and honor the divine presence among us.

- Entry into the Land – fulfilling the promise of entering into the Land might itself bring an appreciation for the divine in our midst,

Then Moshe called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them. And the Lord Him/Herself will go before you. S/He will be with you; S/He will not fail you or forsake you. Fear not and be not dismayed!" (Devarim 31:7-8)

Moshe seeks to prepare the People for the upcoming challenges. These verses reassure and encourage them by promising divine support after Moshe's passing. Entering the Land with the Torah in hand, the Children of Israel face an extraordinary task to build a just and sustaining Jewish society - similar challenges to those the Jewish People face in our day.

As the Jewish People faces challenges today, the urgency of women taking a responsible part grows. Innovative, feminist study and teaching of Torah, decision-making and leadership in the historic project of living again in our Land are key areas where women's full contribution toward the covenantal process of Jewish life has yet to come to fruition.

Questions for Discussion

- Discuss your understanding of prophesy. Did you believe previously that events can and/or ought to be foretold? Putting aside predicting the future, discuss the role of the prophet based on the ideas about prophesy we discuss above.
- Moshe lives with heartbreaking tension between losing hope on account of the People's rebelliousness and defiance and his commitment to represent them and lead them on a divine path. The quality of leadership in our societies is lacking.



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What suggestions might you offer people who might resist taking on leadership roles due to concerns such as those Moshe expresses in our parasha?

- Do you think that transgression is inevitable, as Moshe seems to suggest? Discuss how transgression is or is not desirable - in order for people to discover their capability to make choices, perhaps to fail, and, hopefully, to learn from our mistakes?
- To what extent do you believe that you can change your life? How much control do you have over your own behavior, and the behavior of the people close to you? Who or what exercises the control over your life, and the lives of those around you, that you do not feel is in your hands?
- To what positive influences can and do you turn for strength when you feel that your life is not as you would like it to be?
- Do you/we need to fail and/or suffer hardship in order to appreciate the (divine) gift of our life and the opportunities available to us to serve joyously and experience the sacred – in our home, work, and in society? How do/might Torah study and the State/Land of Israel – Moshe's suggestions - contribute to that process?
- As Moshe's life comes to an end, he focuses on commitment to covenant. Does Moshe model a healthy example of a life committed to the covenant? How do you or do you not think that there are significant gender considerations in the way Moshe serves God?
- Why is covenant such an important part of Jewish life, and how do you understand it in your life? How does your living situation nurture or hinder your experience of Jewish covenant, and how might you take active steps to improve your experience?
- Discuss whether and how the exclusion of women from the Jewish public domain might or might not equip women to intervene in the purportedly inevitable cycle of complacency, transgression, suffering, and remorse. Where are we in that cycle, if at all? What might women and men do in order to improve the current exclusions of women from important public Jewish roles?

Study Links

See this helpful Jewish Encyclopedia entry on [Prophets and Prophecy](#).

Read and study Avraham Yehoshua Heschel's monumental work, *The Prophets*. [Here](#) is a helpful summary and introduction.

In his book, [Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People](#), Mosheh Lichtenstein discusses some of the difficulties Moshe faces as a leader, particularly the transition from the



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Exodus from Egypt through the trials of desert wandering toward the Land, and the bitterness of the trials he endures.

Rabbi David Hartman innovated about of the nature of Jewish covenant in his teachings and in his book, *A Living Covenant*. These are some accessible resources about his ideas – not a substitute for reading a highly recommended book:

- [Covenant and Moral Sensibility: An Interview with David Hartman](#)
- [A passionate exchange between Daniel Landes and David Hartman](#) in *Tikkun* magazine about Jewish covenant
- Avi Sagi's eulogy “[The living covenant of David Hartman](#)”

Entry into the covenant at Sinai is the root experience of Judaism, the central event that established the Jewish people. (J Plaskow, *Standing Again*, 25)

Judith Plaskow published her Jewish feminist theology, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* in 1991. She reformulates the Jewish covenant at Sinai which she argues is rooted in patriarchy. Read the book, and see [Debra Nussbaum Cohen's retrospect](#) after twenty years since publication.

Unfortunately, the link to the main page about the Covenant Foundation's “[Jewish Women's Learning Consultation](#)” is broken. Perhaps you might contact the foundation to express your interest in the initiative, and offer your support.

Summary of Issues

As Moshe, the greatest prophet of the Jewish People, prepares to leave this world, his last words reflect his passion – loving concern and bitterness about the People he led and who will survive him. He offers us the Torah and the Land as means to experience the imminence of the divine presence among us, and to invoke in us commitment to our ongoing covenant. Today, women need **to fulfill** a more substantial role in the leadership of the Jewish People as covenantal partners.

Methods & Observations

Concepts that are universally important and common to many cultures often have different meanings in their respective contexts. Among other meanings they attribute to prophecy, some Christians claim that Jesus' life fulfilled hundreds of prophetic scriptures. In Islam, the Qur'an's prediction of future events demonstrates the authenticity of its divine source, and Muhammad is the greatest and last prophet. The Hebrew prophets are not clairvoyants; they do not predict the future. It is important to study Hebrew prophecy in Jewish (con)texts in order to understand the unique Jewish meanings of prophecy and other core Jewish concepts.

Contact

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