

# Torah

# Weekly



## Parshas Devarim

For the week ending 4 Av 5759  
16 & 17 July 1999

### Overview

This Parsha begins the last of the Five Books of the Torah, *Sefer Devarim*. This Book is also called *Mishneh Torah*, “the Repetition of the Torah” (hence the Greek/English title Deuteronomy). *Sefer Devarim* relates what Moshe told the *Bnei Yisrael* during the last five weeks of his life, as they prepared to cross the Jordan into *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe reviews the *mitzvos*, stressing the change of lifestyle they are about to undergo: From the supernatural existence of the desert under Moshe’s guidance to the apparently natural way of life they will experience under Yehoshua’s leadership in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The central theme this week is the sin of the spies, the *meraglim*. The Parsha opens with Moshe hinting to the sins of the previous generation who died in the desert. He describes what would have happened if they hadn’t sinned by sending spies into *Eretz Yisrael*. Hashem would have given them all of the land from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates including the lands of Ammon, Moav, and Edom without a fight. He details the subtle sins that culminate in the sin of the spies, and reviews at length the sin of the spies, and its results: The entire generation would die in the desert, Moshe would not enter *Eretz Yisrael*. He reminds them that their immediate reaction to Hashem’s decree was to want to “go up and fight” to redress the sin; he recounts how they wouldn’t listen when he told them not to go, that they no longer merited vanquishing their enemies miraculously. They ignored him and suffered a massive defeat. They were not allowed to fight with the kingdoms of Esav, Moav or Ammon — these lands were not to be part of the map of *Eretz Yisrael* in the meantime. When the conquest of Canaan will begin with Sichon and Og, it will be via natural warfare.

### Insights

#### A WORLD OF WORDS

#### “These are the words...” (1:1)

In Hebrew, the word for “word” and the word for “thing” come from the same root — *davar*. When G-d created the world, He used speech to call each thing into being. “And G-d said ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light.”

It is not just that G-d called things into being and from then on they have an independent existence. Rather, everything in this world is no more than G-d “speaking.” Things are no more than G-d’s words. “Things” are “words” because something can only exist in this world while G-d is still “speaking” it. G-d is speaking you. He’s speaking me. Right now.

Nothing has a reality outside of the Creator. When the Torah says “There is nothing else except Him,” it doesn’t mean that there are no other gods except Him. It means that there is nothing outside Him at all.

Idol worship isn’t necessarily bowing down to over-sized dollies. For even if a person admits that G-d created an object but claims that now it has an independent existence — that’s idol worship.

How did idol worship start? The first generations had no doubt that G-d created the world and everything in it. However, in the generation of Enosh, the third generation from Creation, people made a simple but fundamental error: Even though they understood that the sun, the moon and the stars were no more than G-d’s vassals, yet they thought that as G-d’s “representatives,” the heavenly bodies too were due respect. Not for themselves, of course, but merely as servants of the King. They imagined that the Will of G-d was that His representatives be honored. By doing so, they felt they were honoring the King Himself.

This was the root of idol worship, its essence; seeing the sun, the moon or the stars as independent agents, something separate from G-d. For nothing in this world is more than an ax in the hands of the Woodchopper. A mere tool. Powerless without the Hand that wields it. Nothing is more than the words which G-d is speaking. That’s what things are.

(Maharal, *Drash L’Shabbat HaGadol*; Rambam *Hilchot Avodot Kochavim 1*)

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## Haftorah: Yishayahu 1:1-27

This is the final haftorah of “Three of Affliction.” It is always read on the Shabbos before Tisha B’Av.

The ninth of Av wasn’t always a day of tragedy. During the days of the Second Temple, it was turned into a day of great joy at the celebration of rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash*. When the Second Temple was destroyed, Tisha B’Av reverted to its former sadness.

Every generation in which the Holy Temple is not rebuilt, it is as though we ourselves destroyed it. The Prophet Yirmiyahu laments not for the Temple’s destruction, but rather for those evils that caused its destruction. For it is not enough for us to bemoan what was. We must realize that it is within our power to bring the Redemption and the rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash*. We must use this time of national mourning to analyze our mistakes and correct them.

It’s up to us.

### HORSE SENSE

*“The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s trough. Israel does not know, My people do not perceive.” (1:3)*

Rabbi Yochanan ben Taurisa once sold an ox to a non-Jew. When Shabbos came, the non-Jew tried to plough his field, but the ox refused to budge.

He beat the animal vigorously until Rabbi Yochanan came and whispered in the animal’s ear “*You are no longer under my jurisdiction. You are now under the domain of the non-Jew. You must work now as he desires.*”

Immediately, the ox started pulling the plough. Seeing this, the non-Jew went and converted. And that’s how Rabbi Yochanan got his name “ben Taurisa” — *son of an ox (Taurus)*.

Similarly, our Sages relate the incident of the ox which Eliyahu *HaNavi* gave to the false prophets of the *baal*. The ox refused to be slaughtered in the name of the idol *baal* until Eliyahu told it that by letting itself be offered as part of the contest which would ultimately discredit the *baal*, it too would be sanctifying G-d’s Name. Only then, the ox gave in and allowed itself to be slaughtered.

Our Sages also tell of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair’s donkey which refused to eat food from which *maaser* (tithes) had not been taken.

All of this is hinted in this verse: “*The ox knows its owner*” — there is an ox that knows its master — the ox of Eliyahu *HaNavi* who submitted to being sacrificed to idolatry, and the ox of Rabbi Yochanan ben Taurisa who wouldn’t work on Shabbos; “*And the donkey, the feeding trough of its master*” — the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair who wouldn’t eat un-tithed food. However, you, My people, says Hashem, you have sunk lower than the ox and the donkey, for “*Israel does not know, My people do not perceive.*”

*Horse Sense - Tzoare Shalal in Mayana shel Torah*