

Parshat Devarim
The Beauty of Transformation
Karolyn Bengner - Class of 2026

As a young girl, I was always saddened when reading *parshat Devarim*. In my eyes, it never seemed fair that Moshe was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel. After so much devotion to Hashem, leading the people through the wilderness, and enduring the constant strain of authority; how could it be that his merits did not outweigh his sin, enabling him to cross the border? There wasn't one little exemption that could be made for *Moshe Rabbenu*, the greatest prophet we will ever know?! As a small child, this screamed to me of injustice and I struggled to understand how a compassionate God could act this way toward His most beloved servant.

As I've grown, I've come to appreciate this *parsha* in a different way. One of my favorite quotes is: "The mark of your ignorance is the depth of your belief in injustice and tragedy. What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls the butterfly" (Richard Bach, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*). And so, too, with *parshat Devarim* as it recalls the leadership of Moshe and the formation of our nation Israel, I have come to see a more complete picture, one that illuminates how an ending is simply the beginning of something new.

Parshat Devarim stands out from the other books in the Torah for several reasons. First, it is a repetition of laws that had been given previously at *Har Sinai*. In fact, it is often called *Mishneh Torah*, "repetition of the Torah," for this reason. Moshe is reminding the people of these laws now, when they are about to enter the land and must live in accordance with them, as previously many of the laws did not yet apply. Second, Rambam states that since the incident with the spies, Moshe lost his prophecy and the Jewish people have been without prophecy for 38 years. According to Rambam, this communication is coming from Moshe directly, not from Hashem through him, as was the case in the past. "The Book of Deuteronomy was heard from the mouth of Moses himself" (quoted in *Ohe! Yaakov* to Deut. 1:1, translated in *The Stone Chumash*). Finally, in Moshe's expounding on the meaning of the laws, he emerges as more than a prophet, obtaining his ultimate status as our teacher, *Moshe Rabbenu*. (See Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation, Teacher as Hero.*)



Parshat Devarim marks the beginning of profound changes for our people too. We are no longer wandering in the desert; we are about to claim our homeland. We are not reliant on God to provide our daily bread; we will soon work the land for our sustenance. *Devarim* marks the end of our living with a constant, miraculous presence of God. From this point on, our relationship with God is less directly observable, God's actions are less visible to our eyes. *Parshat Devarim* is thus the end of what we have known and become familiar with and is the birth of something new and beautiful—an independent, self-sustaining people living within our land and in accordance with our law.

Juxtaposed to this image of an independent, self-sustaining people, this coming week we will mark Tisha B'Av, a day that commemorates the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash* and our loss of political sovereignty and independence. Yet, even from the depths of this anguish, injustice, and tragedy, viewed from a different lens, we can see it as the beginning of a beautiful transformation of our people.

Certainly, we faced tremendous grief and suffering with the loss of our Temple. It would be impossible to enumerate all of the persecutions we endured as a result of our exile and any attempt to do so would only diminish this trauma. Yet, even in the face of this suffering, we can step back and appreciate that it also ushered in a new hope for our people.

Losing the Temple was emotionally and psychologically traumatic. It eradicated Judaism as we knew it. No longer could we bring sacrifices to atone for our sins or mark holidays with pilgrimages to Jerusalem. And yet Judaism itself was not eradicated; rather, it transformed. Rabbinic Judaism and exilic Judaism were born out of the ashes of the *Beit Hamikdash*.

Utilizing incredible knowledge of the Torah, lessons of their teachers, and intellectual acumen, our Rabbis reframed our worship from a sacrifice-based approach to one based on prayer, learning, and *chesed* (good deeds). Analyzing each verse, every word, and even vowels, these great leaders built an edifice of religious practice from the framework of the Torah. Our Rabbis established a form of Judaism that allowed its people to remain a distinct nation and continue serving God across disparate countries without a temple. This system that they established has endured for over 2,000 years.



As the smoke settled over Jerusalem, we saw the end of Biblical Judaism and independent sovereignty. Some saw the end of the world. But this, I believe, is what the Master calls a butterfly.



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