

Parshat Devarim
The Words and the Bees
Talia Weisberg - Class of 2024

This week's parsha, Devarim, has a curious connection to bees. Sefer Devarim comprises Moshe's farewell to Bnei Yisrael, where he recounts their shared experiences and exhorts them to behave in accordance with God's will as they enter Eretz Yisrael without him. Towards the beginning of his goodbye speech Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael of the incident with the *Meraglim* (spies), and how the nation of Emor attacked them in its aftermath: "Then the Emorim who lived in those hills came out against you like so many bees and chased you, and they crushed you at Hormah in Seir" (1:44).

The comparison of the Emorim to a swarm of bees is almost unique, as there are only two times in Chumash when the word for bee, *devorah*, is used. The second is here in Devarim, and the first is in Bereishit 35:8, as a name: the text says that a woman named Devorah, who was the wet nurse of Rivka Imenu, died.

Nach contains a few more references to bees. The more well-known Devorah is found in Sefer Shoftim (chapters 4-5), where she serves as a prophet and leader of Bnei Yisrael. Bees make another appearance in Shoftim 14, when Shimshon composes a riddle about bees and honey. The prophet Yeshaya compares Assyrians who will exile the Ten Tribes of Israel to bees (Isaiah 7:18). Finally, in a line from Tehillim that is said in Hallel, we read "They [my enemies] have beset me like bees; they shall be extinguished like burning thorns; by the name of God I will surely cut them down" (Psalms 118:12).

Although these instances are the only times that bees are mentioned in the text of Tanach, bees and bee-produced honey are also discussed numerous times throughout rabbinic literature. Interestingly, the Midrash in Devarim Rabbah 1:7 on our parsha contains several references to bees. One might assume that it builds off of the explicit comparison to the Emorim in the text, but actually, it presents alternate readings of the opening line of the parsha.

The parsha begins with "These are the *words* that Moshe addressed to all of Israel - *eleh ha-dev~~arim~~* asher diber Moshe el kol Yisrael" (1:1). The Midrash reinterprets the pasuk to mean *ha-dev~~arim~~*, the bees. It first expounds, "The Holy One Blessed Be He said: like bees do my children behave in this world, following righteous ones and prophets." The Etz Yosef, a commentary on Devarim Rabbah, explains that just as bees follow their hive's queen, so too do Bnei Yisrael follow in the holy steps of their leaders. In a second understanding of what "bees" mean in this context, the Midrash continues: "What is this bee? Its honey is sweet and its sting is bitter. So too are the words of Torah: everyone who violates them is punished...and everyone who fulfills them will merit life."

If we accept this Midrash at face value and translate the opening pasuk of Devarim as "These are the *bees* that Moshe addressed to all of Israel," we can see that Moshe was trying to impart a message to Bnei Yisrael beyond the plain meaning of his words.

In the first understanding of the Midrash, Moshe is grappling with the knowledge that he will not lead Bnei Yisrael to their final destination as a nation. Although he shepherded them out of slavery and through forty years of wandering, Yehoshua would be the one to bring them to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe knows from experience that leadership is a difficult and often thankless task, but that the Jewish people greatly benefit from having someone to follow, a role model to emulate, a leader to look towards for guidance. Bnei Yisrael are at their best when they can be compared to bees who follow their queen, and Moshe is starting his address to his nation by reminding them of this.

In the second understanding of the Midrash, we see that bees represent dualities. Devarim Rabbah points out that they produce both sweetness and stings; other dualities include that they are a non-kosher being that produces a kosher substance, and they are two distinctive contrasting colors of yellow and black. In the pshat of Parshat Devarim, the evil nation of the Emorim are negatively associated with bees, whereas in the drash, the Jewish people and Torah are either neutrally or positively associated with bees.

Bnei Yisrael knew from both pain and joy, having been enslaved and then freed. Although they were not strangers to this contrast, Moshe took the opportunity to remind them that their future in Eretz Yisrael would require the hard work of conquering the land and establishing a functional society, and not the easy life of God-provided sustenance and protection that they had enjoyed in the wilderness. By reminding them of the sweetness and the sting of the bee, a creature known for its industrious nature, Moshe is reassuring Bnei Yisrael that the work of nation building will prove to be difficult, but it will also be important and rewarding.

Historians throughout the millennia have pondered how it is possible that the Jews have survived and thrived despite all of the hardship that we have endured, but the answer is clear: like the bee, we follow in the path of our righteous leaders, and we observe the sweet precepts of Torah.



Talia Weisberg is a connector, passionate about facilitating rich Jewish experiences and introducing people to resources that will help them make informed Jewish decisions. She is currently serving as the Orthodox Educator at MIT Hillel and was a student chaplain at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. She is the founder and director of Shalom Camberville, a project that welcomes newcomers to the Jewish community of Cambridge and Somerville, MA. She has volunteered for several years as the Ritual Chair on the board of the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel, a minyan that caters to students, young professionals, and young families. Previously, she was the Director of Academic Affairs at the Consulate General of Israel to New England. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University and wrote a senior honors thesis about the Bais Yaakov girls' school movement, of which she is an alumna, and its role in the evolution of Orthodox women's formal religious education. She has learned Torah at Drisha and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership and participated in fellowships and courses

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