

Torah Table Talk – The Observant Life

Tradition or Change: Deuteronomy

and the Reinvention of Judaism

Preface & Prolegomenon, by Arnold Eisen and Rabbi Julie Schonfeld

Parshat Devarim, Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22

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I. Introduction

If you have been keeping up with the readings in The Observant Life over the past year, then you know that Judaism has something practical and profound to say about almost every aspect of life. We have covered the majority of topics in this book during the past year, relating each subject to a *Torah* topic. As we begin the final book of the Torah, it might be helpful to explore what this means for those who are Conservative Jews (and also for those who aren't). Chancellor Arnie Eisen and Rabbi Julie Schonfeld are among the brightest minds of the Conservative movement today – and among our most influential leaders. They see this book as an important milestone in the evolution of Conservative Judaism. In their introductions to The Observant Life, they challenge the reader to think about what it means to apply the lessons of Torah to a world that is constantly changing. We hallow tradition but we are also deeply aware that the world in which that tradition must be applied is a different place today than it was a generation ago. Judaism, both claim, has a tradition not only of conservation but also a tradition of change and interpretation.

This brings us to Deuteronomy. This book is often referred to as the *Mishneh Torah*, literally ‘the second Torah’ (Deut. 17:18). It contains a recap of Israel’s wilderness experience as well as a code of law that is both similar to and different from the other legal sections of the Torah. Deuteronomy stands alone both in style and in content from the other books of the Torah. Moses speaks to the people in the first person at the end of his career, exhorting the people to remain faithful to God’s teachings and to follow all of God’s laws. One way of reading this book is as a reinvention of biblical religion, yet another interpretation of the teachings of God through the eyes of Moses or the Deuteronomist. It challenges us to see Judaism as a series of interpretations, generation after generation, in an attempt to rediscover God’s voice in our lives. It leaves us wondering if The Observant Life isn’t yet another attempt to accomplish what Moses set out to do: “To expound this teaching (*Torah*).”

Deuteronomy 1:1, 6 - These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan... On the other side of the Jordan, in the Land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this teaching (*Torah*), saying...

II. Sources, Resources & Reflections

- a) Deuteronomy was not written in a vacuum. Written and oral sources about Israel’s history, law, and religion already existed, and Deuteronomy makes use of them in its own unique ways. It draws particularly on the narratives in the source that scholars call “JE” and on laws from a collection that must have resembled the “Book of the Covenant” of Exodus 21-23, though not identical with it. (*Jeffrey H. Tigay, The JPS Torah Commentary, Deuteronomy*)
 1. *According to the Book of Kings, Deuteronomy was discovered (or rediscovered) in the temple during the reign of King Josiah (641-609 BCE). It led to a revolution that centralized Jewish worship in Jerusalem during his reign. Why would someone attribute the book to Moses if it was written at a later date?*
- b) **To expound this teaching:** the verb *be'er*, “to expound,” or “to explain” provides a central rationale for the whole book. The teaching, *torah*, that has already been announced is represented as requiring further exposition or explaining, and hence the need for “the repetition of this teaching.” (*Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses*)

1. *What does it mean to expound the teachings? What was Moses trying to accomplish by expounding on the teachings he had received? To what extent do you think he was faithful to the teachings and to what extent was he innovative?*
 2. *Did Moses (or some other author) reinvent the religion of the Bible when he wrote the book of Deuteronomy?*
- c) Rabbi Simlai expounded: **613 commandments were revealed to Moses**: 365 negative commandments, corresponding to the days in the solar year, and 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the parts of the body. **When David came**, he summed up the 613 commandments in 11 principles, for he said, "Lord, who shall abide in Thy Tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? [1] He that walks uprightly, and [2] does righteousness, and [3] speaks the truth from his heart; [4] he that has used no deceit in his tongue, [5] nor does evil to his neighbor, and [6] has not endured a reproach against his kinsman; [7] in whose eyes a vile person is despised; [8] but he honors them that fear the Lord; [9] he swears to his own hurt, and changes not; [10] he that has not given out his money upon usury, [11] nor taken reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved" (Ps.15)... **When Isaiah came**, he summed up the 613 commandments in 6 principles, for Isaiah said, "[1] He that walks in righteousness and [2] speaks peaceably; [3] he that despises profit from fraudulent dealings, [4] refuses a bribe instead of grasping it, [5] stops his ears from hearing of infamy, and [6] shuts his eyes from looking upon evil. Such a one shall dwell in lofty security" (Isa. 33:15-16). **When Micah came**, he summed up the 613 commandments in 3 principles, for he said, "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: [1] only to do justly, and [2] to love mercy, and [3] to walk modestly with thy God" (Mic. 6:8). "To do justly" refers to the maintaining of justice; "to love mercy" refers to the doing of deeds of mercy; and "to walk modestly with thy God" applies even to dowering a bride or providing shrouds for the dead... Upon further consideration, **Isaiah summed up the 613 commandments** in 2 principles when he said, "Thus says the Lord: [1] keep justice and [2] do righteousness" (Isa. 56:1). When **Habakkuk came**, he summed up the 613 commandments in 1 principle, for he said, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). (*BT Makkot 23b-24a*)
1. *Moses offers something of a synopsis of God's teachings in Deuteronomy; he turns four books into one. What does he include and what does he leave out?*
 2. *If you had to summarize the teachings of Torah succinctly how would you do so? What were the rabbis trying to accomplish by summing up Torah from 613 to only one commandment?*
- d) Every Jewish Community in every generation invents itself anew. Conservative Judaism is one such brilliant reinvention, one which now finds itself in a phase of dynamic reinvention. With roots in European Jewish Emancipation of the nineteenth century, Conservative Judaism provides an approach to Jewish thinking and practice that allows us to engage with the broader world and live our lives fully as Jews in that world. (*Julie Schonfeld, Prolegomenon, The Observant Life*)
- e) Law and tradition has long been the watchword of...Conservative Judaism. Solomon Schechter repeatedly put the case at the start of the twentieth century for a kind of Judaism that conserves tradition in part by changing it when change is required. He wrote provocatively in 1894, for example, that, contrary to popular opinion – "it is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jews but the Bible as it repeats itself in history, in other words, as it is interpreted by tradition." (*Arnold M. Eisen, Forward, The Observant Life*)
1. *According to Eisen and Schonfeld, what role does tradition play in Judaism and what role does change play? How can you have both and remain faithful to the past while reflecting the contemporary world?*

III. Reflections

There are different ways of viewing the structure of Deuteronomy. On the one hand, the book is a series of speeches or discourses that Moses delivers at the end of his career. Following these sermons, we learn about the final days of Moses' life and his final blessing exhortation for the nation of Israel. Others view the book as a code of law (chapters 12-26) around which a literary structure has been built. The opening chapters then contain a retrospective of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab. Moses begins by exhorting the people to remain faithful to God's laws. Then, having reminded them of the dramatic events at Sinai, he reviews

the terms of their covenant with God. Finally, having presented the laws of God's covenant, Moses ends with a warning to remain faithful to these teachings. The consequence of failing to obey God's teachings will be immediate and devastating.

The book of Deuteronomy stands by itself. It introduces ideas we have not seen before in the other four books. It is more unequivocal in its monotheism. And it is only there that we learn that Israel is to worship God in one place: "The place where I have chosen to make My Name dwell." Surely our ancestors were aware of the similarities between this book and the rest of the *Torah* as well as the differences. Even if one sought to reconcile the differences between Deuteronomy and the other books, the existence of more than one code had to suggest that there was an element of pluralism in Judaism. It also allowed for a more dynamic understanding of law in which God's law had to be interpreted by the teacher.

The tension of tradition and change, then, is not just a modern take on Judaism; it is present in the *Torah* itself. There is no simple equation here. There is a constant tension between the Law as it was given and the Law as we interpret it. This tension began in the generation of Moses. Moses is presented here not just as the intermediary who brings the *Torah* to the people of Israel but as the rabbi who expounds on and interprets the *Torah* for his community.

So where does tradition end and where does change begin? Chancellor Eisen suggests that Solomon Schechter and Zacharias Frankel would be pleased with the publication of The Observant Life. I am not quite so sure. I believe that they would be pleased to know that more than a century later Jews are still wrestling with the place of Judaism in their lives. But I suspect that they would be shocked by some of the pronouncements and teachings of our scholars and teachers today. In a Talmudic story, Moses is transported from Mount Sinai to the *Beit Midrash* of Rabbi Akiva. He is distressed when Akiva teaches *Torah* in a way he could never have imagined; he is comforted when Akiva attributes his interpretations to Moses. (*BT Menachot 29b*) We cannot live in the past but we must remain faithful to tradition while making *Torah* timely and relevant to our generation. That is no easy task. We must go places in our interpretation that Rabbi Akiva could not imagine just as Rabbi Akiva went places that Moses could never have imagined. That is the paradox of tradition and change.

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***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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Have you been keeping up? As we begin the final book of the Torah, we also are completing the remaining chapters of The Observant Life!

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