The idea of a goddess is interesting. After all, we are now in the seven weeks of consolation, including numerous haftarot that represent our God as having explicitly female features. While the God of the Tanakh is often represented as male, particularly in the Torah, the God of the Tanakh is not always represented as male. Does it make sense to have a particular polemic in Deuteronomy against a Canaanite goddess?

Once we actually enter the land, our bigger problem will be worshiping a different Canaanite god, Baal. His name also shows up frequently in the Tanakh. The Israelites desert God to worship him and they also practice syncretism, combining aspects of our religion with aspects of the Canaanite religion, to worship God alongside Baal. But Baal is never mentioned by name in the Torah.

Sometimes, Asherah shows up with Baal. In Elijah’s time, there were prophets for Baal and other prophets for Asherah. Where one worshiped one of them, the other was likely to appear. The concept of Asherah in the Tanakh seems to be a fusion of three Canaanite goddesses, Asherah, Anat, and Astarte, each playing a distinct role in the Canaanite pantheon. In the Tanakh, the three have fused into a consort of Baal who is a fertility goddess and perhaps also called the Queen of Heaven.

By the time that Josiah became King and set about reforming the syncretism that has seized our nation, Asherah had become firmly entrenched in our way of worship. King Mannasheh had placed an Asherah in our Temple which King Josiah had to take out and dispose
of. There were dedicated workspaces in the Temple for the women attending this Asherah. She was likely represented by a tree or an image of a tree. Later, Jeremiah will rail against women serving the “Queen of Heaven,” making food for her. She too, perhaps, is Asherah. There are three ancient inscriptions which have been discovered linking our God explicitly to Asherah. Each of them writes of “YHWH and his Asherah.” The Kuntillet Ajrud inscription then continues with words nearly identical to the priestly blessing, “may God bless you and keep you.” Some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that Asherah was the consort of our God.

In Deuteronomy, in our parashah, the Asherahs are simply something to be destroyed. Something from which we need to maintain our distance. We have a fear of their power in a way that we do not fear the power of the Baals. And indeed, Asherah winds up with a place in our very Temple while Baal does not. But perhaps the polemic against Asheah missed something. After all, we will go on to worship her anyway. Perhaps what is needed is an introduction to the female side of God, the side of God we meet in these haftarot. As Moses prepares to die, he has already lost Miriam and Zipporah. The women have disappeared from the story once again. When last we saw women, they were causing us to sin at Baal Peor. But when we find the feminine within our God, we fulfill a need. We don’t need to bake cakes for a foreign idol when our God can encompass everything.
This parashah is full of various topics that touch life as it will be conducted once we enter the land and have a central religious/cultic place of practice for both public and private events.

1. Moshe says that he puts before us the blessings, if we follow God’s Mitzvot, and the curses, if we ignore the Mitzvot. They will be presented in the land on the mountains of Grizim and Eibal near Sh’chem (11:26-30). Why do you think that such a ceremony should take place in the land and not now, before entering (and while Moshe is with us)?

2. We are instructed to destroy idol worshipping locations ‘on mountain tops and under leafy trees’ (12:2). Why do you think that those sort of places were chosen for worship?

3. If we wish to eat meat that is not part of a sacrifice, we may do so, as long as we do not eat the blood ‘for the blood is the life’ (12:23). What is the message that the Torah might want us to learn by forbidding us to eat blood?

4. Both laws pertaining to forbidden mourning practices and to forbidden (and permissible) animals to be eaten are concluded with the phrase ‘for you are a holy nation to the LORD your God’ (14:1-21). What do these laws have in common? How do you think that practicing them makes one ‘holy’? (What does it mean to be Kadosh – holy?)

5. When a slave is set free, the master is told to give him gifts from grain, wine, and livestock (15:13-14). What would be the logic of giving the slave gifts?! The master might argue that he is already granting the slave freedom and has paid for him when he was initially purchased! What would you answer the master?
Invisible Ink on Shabbat
Ilana Kurshan
Adventures in Mishnah with My Kids
Shabbat 12:3-5

My son Matan often asks me to buy extra lemons at the supermarket so that he can squeeze them to make lemonade, which he sells in our local park. But in the winter, when it was too cold to sell lemonade outside, he discovered another use for all our extra lemons: He could concoct invisible ink. He squeezed lemons, dipped a paintbrush in the juice, and “wrote” messages in lemon juice to each of his sisters. The messages were invisible until he showed his siblings that if they shone a flashlight under the page, the letters painted in lemon juice would appear as if miraculously.

Matan remembered his invisible ink trick when we came to the twelfth chapter of tractate Shabbat, which continues the Mishnah’s extended discussion of the various activities which are prohibited on Shabbat because they are considered “labor.” There are thirty-nine general categories of forbidden labor which would render the individual liable for violating Shabbat according to the Torah law, including activities related to baking bread, making clothes, and writing, which is the topic of the Mishnah. As the Mishnah explains, some kinds of writing are in fact biblically permitted, although still prohibited by rabbinic law – including writing in lemon juice.

The Mishnah explains that the biblical prohibition on writing applies only to permanent writing, and not to anything that will fade or wash away. The rabbis explicitly teach that writing in fruit juice does not transgress Biblical law, since the marks will not last. “That’s great,” says Matan. “There are so many kinds of writing that are not permanent. I could write with magnetic letters on our refrigerator. I could write in the sand on the beach. Oh, and Charlotte could write in her web, because it’s not going to stay in the barn forever. Though I guess she could do that anyway, because she’s saving Wilbur’s life, and that’s more important than keeping Shabbat.” I want to interrupt to remind him that these forms of less permanent writing are nonetheless prohibited rabbinically, but he’s still thinking of other examples. “What about when Liav wrote on her hot dog?” Just this past Shabbat, Liav took her knife and wrote her name on her hot dog. She ate it right away, leaving no doubt that her writing was impermanent. Even so, though biblically permissible, it’s still forbidden by rabbinic law to write on a hot dog on Shabbat, as Liav should have known.

“What about writing in magic marker on my skin? Can I write on the back of my hand the address of the friend I’m supposed to visit on Shabbat? Eventually it’s going to wash away.” But as the Mishnah teaches, writing on one’s flesh is prohibited, perhaps because, as Maimonides explains, it is similar to writing on animal skin, or parchment, which is how people often used to write.

As Matan and I learn, there are several other kinds of writing that are not biblically prohibited, even though they are permanent. In order to be liable for violating Shabbat on a biblical level, a person must write at least two letters. “What if I wrote the letter W?” Matan asks. “I’ve also written two V’s. Does that count?” I show him the Mishnah’s example of a person who intends to write the Hebrew letter Chet, but instead he writes the letter Zayin twice, which combine to look like the letter Chet. According to the Mishnah, it depends on the person’s
intention – if he intended to write just one letter, he is not liable by biblical law, though the rabbis would still forbid it. Matan thinks about the significance of a person's intention. “What if I write M to stand for Matan, because I know you'll understand that I'm referring to myself – does that count as just one letter, or as a full word?” In our family, everyone’s name starts with a different letter, and we often use abbreviations in writing messages to one another. The rabbis of the Mishnah disagree about this point, though the majority of the rabbis agree that one letter is not a full word, even if it refers to one.

The Mishnah teaches that a person is liable so long as she writes two letters that will leave a lasting mark – even if those two letters are written on two separate pieces of paper, and even if they are written on two different walls that meet at a corner, and even if she is only tracing over letters that are already written. “Basically I can’t write anything on Shabbat unless I can say it all in one letter, which means I need a really good code. But even if I do come up with a good code, the rabbis would still forbid it. Hmm.”

Matan wants to think this one over, but I remind him that it’s time to do his homework. I hand him a pencil, which, according to biblical law, would not constitute permanent writing on Shabbat, since pencil marks eventually fade. But according to rabbinic law, it certainly counts as writing. I encourage Matan to get to work, but he is still thinking about the Mishnah. “It’s too bad that no one can use a flashlight to read the secret messages I write on Shabbat,” he tells me, opening his math book reluctantly. “But I’m glad that I also can’t do any of my homework on Shabbat,” he smiles, looking on the bright side. Sounds like Matan is back to making lemonade out of lemons.