23 I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, 24 "O Lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! 25 Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." 26 But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! 27 Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you

Moses' First Discourse (continued)

ISRAEL OBEYS THE SECOND COMMAND TO PROCEED TO THE PROMISED LAND (continued)

VICTORY OVER OG (continued)

MOSES PLEADS WITH GOD (3:23–26a)

As related earlier in the chapter, God had allowed Moses to lead the conquest of Transjordan. This then encouraged his hope that God might no longer bar him from the Promised Land. Hence he turned to God with a plea that he be allowed to cross the Jordan.

24. Lord God. Literally, "my Lord YHWH," addressing God by title and name. This form of address is common in prayers and pleas.

25. the good land . . . that good hill country

These phrases express Moses' longing for the Promised Land. The first phrase is especially poignant. God used it not only when He banned the Exodus generation from the land (1:35) but also in His very first words to Moses promising to take Israel there (Exod. 3:8).

GOD'S RESPONSE TO MOSES' PLEA (vv. 26b–29)

27. God softens His decree by agreeing to part of Moses' request: He may see the land but not cross into it.
shall not go across yonder Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see.”

Meanwhile we stayed on in the valley near Beth-peor.

And now, O Israel, give heed to the laws and rules that I am instructing you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, entering into the river Jordan or the northeastern corner of the Dead Sea. Here Moses delivered his final addresses and was buried (4:46, 34:6). The nearby town of Beth-peor probably was the site of the scandalous idolatrous orgy (Num. 25:1–9).

**APPEALS TO OBSERVE GOD’S LAWS (4:1–40)**

This chapter, the theological heart of Deuteronomy, contains its most fundamental precepts: monotheism and the prohibition of idolatry.

**BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE AT PEOR (vv. 1–4)**

1. **give heed** Hebrew: שמע, literally, “hear.” The focus on “hearing” is a key aspect of the theology of Deuteronomy. Like “see” in verse 5, “hear” is employed frequently in urging Israel to consider Moses’ words.

2. **instructing** Hebrew: מלאד (often rendered “impart,” as in v. 5), illustrating Moses’ role as teacher of the laws. This is the calling for which he is best remembered in Jewish tradition, which still refers to him as Moshe Rabbeinu, “Moses our teacher.”

**laws...rules** Hebrew: הוקים...mithpatim.

Moses employs the terms indiscriminately here, like the English phrases “rules and regulations” and “laws and ordinances.” According to the Talmud, mishpatim are laws whose purpose is evident, such as prohibitions against murder and theft. People would have devised them even if God had not commanded them. Hukkim are commandments for which the reason is not obvious, such as the dietary laws; they must be obeyed as expressions of divine sovereignty.

**to observe** The laws are to be fulfilled, not just learned.

**so that you may live** Life itself depends on one’s observance of the commandments (see v. 4).

2. **You shall not add** Similar injunctions against adding or removing items appear in many ancient laws and treaties and are attested in prophetic literature. Although this seems...
but keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you. 3 You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the LORD your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor; 4 while you, who held fast to the LORD your God, are all alive today.

5 See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the LORD my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to be an all-encompassing prohibition, it could not have been meant that way. The Torah is not a complete code covering all areas of life. Important subjects such as commerce, civil damages, and marriage are covered incompletely or not at all, and further laws obviously were needed. Actually, here and in 13:1 Moses seems to have but a single issue in mind, which is not to adopt pagan practices or worship their gods.

3. in the matter of Baal-peor This refers to the god of Beth-peor, near the place where the Israelites are still encamped (3:29). A total of 24,000 Israelites who joined in the worship of Baal-peor died in a plague there (see Num. 25:1–9).

followed Baal-peor Following (literally, “walking after”) a god is a biblical idiom for apostasy, forsaking God. The idiom is based on ancient Near Eastern political terminology, in which “walking after” a king means giving him one’s allegiance. Hence, “walking after” a god means departing from the Lord. There clearly is a link between the prohibition of idolatry and the Baal-peor apostasy.

BASED ON THE COMMANDMENTS' QUALITY AND EFFECT (vv. 5–8)

Moses appeals for observance of the commandments because they are just and because observing them brings about a unique closeness with God.

5. the LORD . . . has commanded At Mount Sinai.

for you to abide by in the land God’s laws are to be the basis of the society the Israelites are about to establish in the land. This clause does not imply that the laws are inapplicable outside the land of Israel. Indeed, many have been in force since Israel left Egypt, such as for Shabbat and the prohibition of idolatry. There are, however, specific laws (e.g., those based on agriculture) that cannot be followed outside the land.

modern Conservative perspective would see the Torah as a living organism, constantly shedding dead cells and growing new ones, changing and adapting to new and unprecedented circumstances. Extending the implications of a law to meet today’s needs is not a case of “adding or subtracting.”

or take anything away Sometimes adding leads to diminishing. If we demand too much, people may be driven to stop observing even what they currently do (Maggid of Dubno).

4. in synagogues, this verse is chanted by the congregation just before the reading of the Torah.

held fast Literally, “are clinging”; this verb describes the closeness of husband and wife in Gen. 2:24. It is not enough to believe in God intellectually—to conclude that there is a God and that it would be prudent and proper to follow God’s teachings. We must cleave to God as one cleaves to a spouse, to a lover, in response to our soul’s deepest needs. Only then will our relationship to God be a source of life.

are all alive today The life promised by the Torah is not the opposite of physical death, but the alternative to mere vegetative existence that does not deserve to be called life (Kook).

5. “Every other nation becomes a nation by virtue of the fact that it has a land of its own; only after that does it establish the laws to be lived by in that land. You, by contrast, became a nation by virtue of your laws, and you will be given a land of your own solely for the purpose of living by those laws” (Hirsch). After the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion
to enter and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people." For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?

But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children.

6 great Meant spiritually. Numerically, Israel will be the smallest of nations (7:7).

7. One effect of observing God's laws is that He is near whenever Israel calls upon Him, providing guidance (through prophecy), and deliverance in times of trouble.

8. perfect Literally, "just." The other benefit of observing God's laws is enjoying their justice. We have no information from biblical times about what impression Israel's laws made on other nations. Modern scholars have compared biblical law to other legal systems of the ancient Near East. The comparison has shown that a number of principles in biblical law are unique in the ancient Near East, such as laws to ameliorate the treatment of aliens and bondservants, the prohibition of collective and vicarious punishment, and the absence of capital punishment for economic crimes.

BASED ON EXPERIENCES AT HOREB (vv. 9–31)

Moses speaks to the present generation as if it came out of Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai. Although most of those he is addressing were born after those events, about one-third of the adults probably experienced them as youngsters. The younger ones undoubtedly heard about the events from their parents or others who were there. Future generations, of course, constitute the real audience.

9. make them known to your children and your children's children This obligation is the most pervasive expression of the biblical conviction that religion not only is a personal, individual

from the Land, it was the Torah that enabled us to remain a people. The re-establishment of modern Israel in 1948 raises a question: If Israel with the Torah could survive without the Land, can Israel with the Land survive without the Torah?

7. a god so close at hand Idols are physically close to their worshipers but emotionally distant, incapable of responding. God, though physically removed, is emotionally close (Deut. R. 2:10). The idea that God cares about the people, that Israel's relationship to God is based not merely on obedience but on reciprocal love and commitment, is a constant theme of the Torah and of Deuteronomy in particular.

9. watch yourselves scrupulously Understood by the Sages as, "guard your soul
greatly." That is, "Be as careful with the health of your soul as you are with the health of your body" (Jacob Isaac of Lublin). This verse has been used in contemporary times to declare smoking and unhealthy eating and drinking to be practices that violate the Torah.

the things that you saw with your own eyes Jewish faith is based primarily on experience rather than on speculative thought. "The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by God's presence. Israel is not a people of definers but a people of witnesses" (Heschel).

make them known to your children Only when one becomes a parent and begins to teach
dren and to your children's children: 10 The day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when the LORD said to Me, “Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.” 11 You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. 12 The LORD spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice. 13 He declared to you the covenant that He commanded you to observe, the Ten Commandments; and He inscribed them on two tablets of stone.

concern but must be transmitted by parents to their children and grandchildren. Thus they too will share in the experiences, learn their responsibilities, and gain the benefits of faith and observance.

10–13. These verses seek to impress on the people the awesome nature of the revelation that took place at Horeb. One of Moses' goals in Deuteronomy is to imbue the Israelites with reverence for God as a guiding principle in their lives. Reverence is a mortal's response to God—respect and awe at His grandeur, dread at His power—that deters disobedience to Him.

11. The mountain was ablaze. The majestic, awesome Presence of God is expressed by the natural phenomena that accompany His appearance.

12. The LORD spoke to you. During the course of His communication with Israel at Horeb the Lord was invisible; He spoke from the midst of fire and only His voice was heard. In the present address this aspect of the experience is emphasized over the content of what God said.

shape. Hebrew: t’monah; literally, “visage.” It has the sense of “appearance” or “aspect.” Here, it is not to be taken in the sense of “picture,” as in modern Hebrew, but as the visible aspect of a being. In most of the biblical traditions, God was thought to have a visual aspect (e.g., see Exod. 24:10), but it was believed to be highly dangerous for humans to see God. Here, according to Deuteronomy, God revealed Himself in spoken words alone. The belief that God has no physical form developed in postbiblical times, especially in the philosophical literature of the Middle Ages.

13. covenant. The Hebrew term (b’rit) has three meanings, all based on the idea of obligation: a promise (an obligation imposed on oneself), a stipulation (an obligation imposed on another), or a compact (reciprocal obligations accepted by two parties). Here, it refers to the Decalogue (5:6–18) as stipulations imposed by God on Israel; that is, as the obligation to which Israel must commit itself in its covenant with God. The term can also refer to the essence of all the laws. For the other senses see v. 31 (promise) and 5:2–3 and 29:11 (compact).

two tablets of stone. Stone normally was used only for texts that were intended to be permanent, such as royal and ceremonial inscriptions, boundary inscriptions, and treaties. An Aramaic decree of the 7th century B.C.E. was written on a stone tablet about 11 inches square. It is inscribed on one side, with 32 words covering eight lines. Two such tablets inscribed on both sides (Exod. 32:15), 15 or 16 inches square, could have held the Decalogue's 189 words (172 according to Exodus). A rectangular shape is consistent with Jewish tradition and early Christian art. The familiar image of tablets with curved tops was introduced in Christian art around the 11th century C.E.

the ideals of Judaism to one's children does one become aware of one's role as a link in the chain of generations, doing for our children what our ancestors did for their children so that we could be Jews today [Hirsch].

and to your children's children. "When a child is taught Torah by a grandparent, it is as if that child received it at Sinai" [BT Ber. 21b].
At the same time the Lord commanded me to impart to you laws and rules for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy.

For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God has borne by hybrid creatures with the faces of men and animals (Ezek. 1), people might have thought it possible to attract His Presence with an image of one or more of those animals.

since you saw no shape In idolatry, the purpose of an idol was to draw the presence of a deity to the place where the statue stood. Worshippers assumed that a god would enter and reside in the idol that represented it. Here Moses forbids Israel to use idols to attract God. No form was seen in the original contact with God; therefore, none is to be made for future contacts.

The verse does not rule out statues that are not idols. Nonidolatrous statues of certain creatures, such as the cherubim, were clearly not considered violations of this commandment and were used both in the wilderness Tabernacle and in Solomon’s temple.

The form of any beast These figures probably would not have been intended as representations of the Lord, who was thought to have a human appearance (Gen. 1:26). Rather, they might have represented God’s chariot or mount. Because God was thought to travel on a chariot of nature as divine, why does God not destroy them to remove the temptation? Because the world needs some of them, such as the sun. Then why does God not destroy the superfluous ones and let the necessary ones survive? Because that would strengthen the conviction of the idolaters that the sun was indeed a mighty god, because it survived the purge in which the other idols perished.
allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; 20 but you the LORD took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case.

21 Now the LORD was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that the LORD your God is assigning you as a heritage. 22 For I must die in this land; I shall not cross the Jordan. But you will cross and take possession of that good land. 23 Take care, then, not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God concluded with you, and not to make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, against which the LORD your God has enjoined you. 24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God.

25 When you have begotten children and children’s children and are long established in the land, should you act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing the LORD your God displeasure and vexation, 26 I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish

20. iron blast furnace | A metaphor for the severity of the Egyptian bondage (iron was smelted in ancient times at a temperature of about 2000°F).

His very own people | Literally, “a people that is His inheritance.” The Hebrew word for “inheritance” (nabalah) expresses not only God’s sovereignty over the Israelites but also His attachment to them. Inherited land was precious because it was received from one’s ancestors and passed on to one’s descendants; it was regarded as inalienable.

24. consuming fire | God’s fiery destructive power had struck the Exodus generation several times.

21. on your account | Is Moses taking out his frustrations on the people, blaming them for his own mistakes? It would be a very human thing to do, however unjustified in a leader.

25. long established | Biblical Hebrew has two words for “old”: zaken, which is the opposite of “young”; and yashan (used here with the connotation of growing stale), which is the opposite of “fresh” [Hirsch].

26. I call heaven and earth . . . to witness | Heaven and earth do indeed witness against us when we make improper use of that with which God has blessed us. Poisoning the air and water, despoiling the environment do threaten to cause us to “perish from the land.”
27. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a scant few of you shall be left among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. 28. There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone, that cannot see or hear or eat or smell.

But if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul—when you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, return to the Lord your God and obey Him. 31. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish; He will not forget your work among Egypt.

shall be utterly wiped out This is a hyperbole, meaning, “be ruined.” As verse 27 indicates, there will be survivors.

Exile will bring an additional punishment: worshipping gods that can do nothing. Despite the fact that the Bible regards the Lord as accessible anywhere (see v. 29), it considers only the land of Israel as the “Holy Land” (Zech. 2:16), and other lands as impure. Therefore, it is not permissible to conduct normal, sacrificial worship of God outside the land. (An exception was the wilderness period when a portable sanctuary accompanied Israel in its wanderings.)

cannot see or hear or eat or smell The Bible considers the worship of statues to be the most preposterous aspect of non-Israelite religion and the most telling argument against it (cf. 27:15, 28:36, 64, 29:16). Polytheism held that special ceremonies imparted to the statues all the powers that this verse denies them: sight, hearing, eating, smelling. The more educated idolaters certainly did not believe that the statue actually was the deity but that the god was absent from the statue before the special ceremony and might abandon it at will. The distinction between statue and deity, however, was easily overlooked, and many idolaters sometimes considered images to be the deity or fetishes possessing powers of their own.

in the end That is, afterward, ultimately.

return Hebrew: shuv, the verb from which the term for “repentance” (s'huvah) is derived.

compassionate God The Lord is not only impassioned (v. 24), but also compassionate. These are two aspects of God’s personality in the Bible: He both punishes and forgives.

nor will He let you perish; He will not forget the covenant God’s actions are thus contrasted with those of the Israelites. God will not act as they acted.

27. only a scant few of you shall be left Indeed in Jewish history, whenever disaster has befallen a major Jewish community, a saving remnant has survived to carry on.

28. There you will serve man-made gods Losing their relationship with God and attaching themselves to false gods who cannot see or hear (in contrast to God who saw their plight and heard their cry in Egypt) will not be just

their sin but also their punishment. Abravanel, who lived at the time of the Inquisition and the expulsion from Spain, applied this verse to the Marranos of his time: “Many Jews will be brought to forced conversion, worshipping idols but knowing full well that they are made of wood and stone. Unable to practice the observance of Judaism, their seeking of God will be in their hearts and minds alone” (v. 29).
the covenant which He made on oath with your fathers.

32. You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? 33. Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have, and survived? 34. Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty hand and outstretched arm and awesome power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? 35. It has been clearly demonstrated to you that the Lord alone is God; there is none beside Him. 36. From the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire; and from amidst that fire you heard His words. 37. And because He loved your fathers, He chose their heirs after them; He Himself, in His great power, thereby showing the powerlessness of the gods of Egypt and that the Lord is the only true God (see Exod. 12:12).

**BASED ON MONOTHEISM (vv. 32–40)**

Following the warning of exile, Moses concludes with a final appeal to observe the commandments so that the Israelites may prosper and remain in the Land forever.

**32. ever since God created man on earth** As far back as human memory goes.

**from one end of heaven to the other** That is, from one end of earth to another. Heaven was pictured as a dome standing atop pillars situated at the ends of the earth.

**33.** A direct, visual encounter with God was thought to be too awesome to endure. This passage and 5:21–23 imply that hearing God was regarded as equally dangerous.

**34. take ... one nation from the midst of another** This is the most telling point of Moses' argument: The Lord took Israel out of Egypt, thereby showing the powerlessness of the gods of Egypt and that the Lord is the only true God (see Exod. 12:12).

**by prodigious acts** The signs Moses and Aaron performed before Pharaoh, including the Ten Plagues and the defeat of Egypt at the Sea of Reeds.

**35.** The events just described, witnessed by the entire nation, established that the Lord alone is God. This demonstration goes beyond the practical concern of the 2nd commandment, which prohibits worshiping other gods. Here Moses states clearly that there are no others.

**36.** Deuteronomy never describes God as descending to earth or as dwelling in the sanctuary. Unlike the previous books of the Torah, it avoids allusions to the physical or human nature of God. Divine transcendence is central to Deuteronomy.

**37. He Himself** Literally, “with His face.”

**35.** Because this verse refers to the revelation at Mount Sinai, it is the first in a collection of verses recited when the Torah scrolls are taken from the Ark on Simhat Torah, among Ashk'natzim. Among S'fardim, it is recited every Shabbat at that point in the service.
might, led you out of Egypt, to drive from your path nations greater and more populous than you, to take you into their land and assign it to you as a heritage, as is still the case. Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Observe His laws and commandments, which I enjoin upon you this day, that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may long remain in the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you for all time.

Then Moses set aside three cities on the east side of the Jordan to which a manslayer could escape, one who unwittingly slew a fellow man without having been hostile to him in the past; he could flee to one of these cities and live: Bezer, in the wilderness in the Tableland, belonging to the Reubenites; Rameoth, in Gilead, belonging to the Gadites; and Golan, in Bashan, belonging to the Manassites.

This is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israelites: these are the decrees, laws, and a narrative appendix, relating that Moses designated three cities in Transjordan to provide asylum for accidental malakers. The law establishing these cities appears in 19:1–13 (19:5–5 is abridged here) and Num. 35:9–34. According to Num. 35:14, six such cities were to be chosen, three of them in Transjordan.

This could refer to any time after the conquest of Transjordan, which took place shortly before Moses' address. It is possible that Moses selected the cities after the actions described in 3:18–29. Because verses 41–43 are by the narrator, and not Moses, they were placed here to avoid interrupting his address.

The cities are listed in order from south to north.

Bezer In Moab.

Gilead That is, upper Gilead.

Why was the institution of cities of refuge so important to Moses? Because he himself was once a manslayer (Exod. 2:11–15) and had to flee (Deut. R. 2:27).
rules that Moses addressed to the people of Israel, after they had left Egypt, beyond the Jordan, in the valley of Beth-peor, in the land of King Sihon of the Amorites, who dwelt in Heshbon, whom Moses and the Israelites defeated after they had left Egypt. They had taken possession of his country and that of King Og of Bashan—the two kings of the Amorites—which were on the east side of the Jordan from Aror on the banks of the wadi Arnon, as far as Mount Sion, that is, Hermon; also the whole Arabah on the east side of the Jordan, as far as the Sea of the Arabah, at the foot of the slopes of Pisgah.

5 Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the laws and rules that

Moses’ Second Discourse, Part 1: Background to the Covenant Made in Moab (4:44–5:30)

CONTENTS AND SETTING OF THE COVENANT (4:44–49)

The main subject of Moses’ second, and longest, discourse is the laws that he communicates to the people in Moab, in preparation for Israel’s entry into the Promised Land.

45. after they had left Egypt Literally, “when they left Egypt.” Like the victories mentioned in verse 46, these laws were given to the people 40 years after the Exodus. Deuteronomy, however, refers to the entire period between the Exodus and arrival in the Promised Land as “after they you had left Egypt” (see 23:5, 24:9, 25:17).

48–49. Transjordan is described in terms of its two topographic regions: the highlands (v. 48) and the Jordan Valley (v. 49).

Mount Sion A third name, along with Sirion and Senir, for Mount Hermon, which lies north of the Jordan Valley.

THE REVELATION AND COVENANT AT HOREB (5:1–30)

Moses tells the people how and why God gave the laws to him. The belief that God is the author of the laws is a distinctive feature of Israelite law. Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the laws of society were believed to be the products of human minds, with their promulgation sponsored by the deity, as in the case of the Code of Hammurabi. In Deuteronomy the validity of the laws rests firmly on their divine authorship and on Moses’ legitimacy as the intermediary conveying them to the people. As a result, obedience to the law—civil no less than ritual and moral—was seen as a religious duty, not only as an act of good citizenship.

THE SCENE AT HOREB (vv. 1–5)

1. laws and rules These are the laws that Moses received from God after the people heard

HALAKAH L’MA’ASEH
5:1. Study them According to the Talmud (BT Kid. 29b), even if parents fail to fulfill their obligation to teach Torah to their children (Deut. 6:7), the children, as adults, have the obligation to seek instruction for themselves. Indeed, as the Sages make clear in many places, Jewish learning is a life-long process.
The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today. Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire—I stood between the Lord and you at that time to convey the Lord’s words to you, for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain—saying: 6 I the Lord am your God who brought you

2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today. Face to face the Lord spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire—I stood between the Lord and you at that time to convey the Lord’s words to you, for you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain—saying:

3 made a covenant Hebrew: kārat b’rit; literally, “cut a covenant.” The idiom apparently derives from a ceremony in which parties to a covenant would cut up an animal to signify their acceptance of a similar fate if they violated the agreement (see Gen. 15). The phrase was used even when a covenant was ratified by other ceremonies, as in the present case (see Exod. 24:1–8). Here “covenant” does not refer to the Decalogue alone (as in 4:13) but to the relationship that God established with Israel at Horeb, where Israel agreed to do all that the Lord commanded, including the laws that Moses would later give Israel in Moab (vv. 24, 28).

3. our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Deuteronomy, “our/your fathers” always refers to the patriarchs.

4. Face to face That is, in person, without intermediation. “Face” is used in the same sense in 4:37. The idiom does not mean that they literally saw God’s face. This is ruled out by statements that God spoke from within fire and clouds and that the Israelites saw no visual image (see vv. 20, 21, 4:12).

5. In their fright the people had sent Moses ahead to hear God for them. According to the previous verse, however, God insisted on their hearing Him directly.

THE DECALOGUE (vv. 6–18)

Moses repeats the Decalogue first presented in Exodus 20. Most of the differences from the

CHAPTER 5

1. Note that observance of the law is seen as the purpose of its study (see BT Yev. 109b).

2–5. Moses recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Perhaps because he is speaking to the children of those who actually experienced the event, he notes that the covenant is binding even on later generations of Israelites. And he summons up the overwhelming, dramatic impact of the Revelation.

5. I stood between the Lord and you Unmediated, direct experience of God is overwhelming for the ordinary person. Moses is in the great tradition of religious leaders who can endure that intense encounter and mediate its effect and power so that every person feels he or she has been in the presence of the Divine.

This clause can also be read: “I” [that is, your ego] stand between God and you [Menahem Mendel of Kotzk].

you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain Early Hasidim in eastern Europe were criticized by their opponents for the highly emotional, enthusiastic manner in which they prayed and celebrated. They responded to the criticism by citing this verse; thus they accused their opponents of discomfort with emotion in religion—that is, of keeping Jewish observance on an intellectual level and, therefore, not rising to a higher spiritual level.
out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 7You shall have no other gods beside Me. 8You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens

wording in Exodus are minor. Some, however, especially in the Shabbat commandment, are substantial. The Decalogue is arranged in two groups of laws. The first group deals with conduct toward God, the second toward fellow humans. Within each group, the commandments are arranged in descending order, according to the gravity of the prohibited offense. Duties to God come first, because the commandments presuppose His authority and their very purpose is to serve as the terms of Israel’s covenant with Him. The first 4 commandments are uniquely Israelite duties. Because the reasons for the first 5 are not well known or self-evident, or perhaps because they are easy to violate, explanatory comments and exhortations to encourage observance accompany them. The remaining 5 commandments are universally recognized ethical requirements and need no such support.

There are different views about how these 10 commandments are to be divided; see Comment to Exod. 20:2. Here we follow the view of Philo and Josephus and some talmudic sources, which seems closest to the sense of the text. It divides the first two commandments differently from the traditional enumeration found on tablets in synagogues and in art.

Traditionally the Decalogue has two systems of cantillation. The version known as the “lower notes” is presented here; for the “upper notes,” which are used in many synagogues on certain occasions, see p. 1509.

6. This verse is a self-presentation formula that substantiates the divine proclamation that follows. As such, it is not the 1st commandment, but serves as its motive clause. Such self-presentations are common in the openings of royal inscriptions in the ancient Near East and serve as introductions to treaties. The concept of a covenant between God and Israel is modeled on ancient treaties in which a weaker king accepted a more powerful one as his superior and on royal covenants in which a population accepted a king. Such covenants established relationships that were inherently exclusive: A subject population or

king could have only one sovereign ruler, and ancient oaths of allegiance and treaties explicitly prohibit subjects and vassals from accepting another. Subjects entered into such relationships on the basis of past benefits realized through the king or ruler, often his having delivered them from enemies. The covenant was thus an apt metaphor for Israel’s exclusive relationship with YHWH because of the Exodus.


THE FIRST COMMANDMENT (v. 7)

In practical terms, the Israelites may not build altars or sanctuaries for other gods, nor make images of them, present offerings to them, consult them, prophesy or take oaths in their names, or even mention their names. This prohibition, banning the worship of all but one deity, is unique in the history of religion. Polytheism was inherently tolerant of the worship of many gods, because no single god was thought to control all the phenomena that are vital for human life. The gods were believed to tolerate this pluralism, and several could be worshiped in the same sanctuary or addressed in the same prayer. The biblical demand was based on the premise of exclusivity, because God alone liberated the Israelites and provided for all their needs.

7. other gods 7. The Hebrew terms for “god” (el and elohnim) can be used for angels, spirits, idols, pagan deities, and even spirits of the dead (1 Sam. 28:13), as well as God Himself. All but the last are “other gods,” and their worship is prohibited.

beside me 7. Hebrew: al pana; literally, “in addition to Me” or “in opposition to Me.” This commandment recognizes that Israelites would not abandon YHWH but might be tempted to worship others in addition to Him. Polytheists do not choose one god to the exclusion of others, but worship many gods. Note that this prohibition is not quite the same as the affirmation of monotheism (in 4:35, 39), because by itself it does not deny the existence of other gods.

6. I the Lord am your God 6. These words precede “you shall have no other gods.” Faith in the true God protects us from being attracted to false gods (Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin).
above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth. 9 You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, 10 but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

9. visiting the guilt of the parents  We are learning how strongly patterns of behavior are passed on from parents to children. Abused children too often become abusive parents.

12. Observe Hebrew: shamar; here Exod. 20:8 reads “remember” (zakhor). Regarding Shabbat, some spiritually gifted souls are able to appreciate its sublime beauty and truth immediately and need only to remember that the day is Shabbat to be cast into its mood. The average person, however, has to begin with the prohibition of labor, the requirement of rest—the restrictive side of Shabbat—to come to appreciate it.
11. You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

12. Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle.

12. **Observe** That is, celebrate the day by following its prescribed procedures. The earlier version of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:8) uses the verb "remember" (zakhor), meaning "remember to observe Shabbat."

**Sabbath day** The seventh day of each week. The Bible understands the Hebrew word shabbat as a derivative of the verb meaning "cease" or "desist" (Exod. 23:12; Lev. 23:3). "The sabbath day" thus means "the day of desisting [from labor]."

**Holy** Withdrawn from common use and reserved for a special purpose associated with God. Shabbat was withdrawn from common use by desisting from labor. And its dedication to God was expressed by: visits to sanctuaries and prophets (2 Kings 4:23; Isa. 1:13, 66:23); special sacrifices and other temple activities (Lev. 24:8; Num. 28:9–10); recitation of a special psalm (Ps. 92); and a joyous atmosphere (Hos. 2:13; Isa. 58:13; Lam. 2:6).

14. **Sabbath of the Lord** The day belongs to the Lord and must, therefore, be used for the Lord's purposes, not one's own (cf. Isa. 58:13). This explains why certain activities that may not be performed for human benefit on Shabbat are permitted in the Temple, such as burning the sacrifices and kindling the lamps (Exod. 27:20–21, 29:38–42; Num. 28:9–10).

You Includes both males and females, because both are specified in the following list of those covered by the law. In general, biblical laws address men and women alike.

**Work** Examples, such as agricultural labor, gathering food and firewood, kindling fire, and business activities, are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

**Slave** Includes both slave and bondservant. No distinction is made here between Israelite and foreign slaves.

**Ox . . . Ass . . . Cattle** Kindness to animals is also the theme of several other laws in the Torah.
or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

16 Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may long endure, and that you may fare well, in the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you.

stranger The ger, the resident alien. This reminder to include resident aliens in Shabbat rest is comparable to Deuteronomy’s exhortations to include them in religious celebrations (16:11, 14, 26:11). Such reminders are necessary because of the aliens’ vulnerability and the likelihood that their needs would be overlooked.

so that your . . . slave may rest The law assumes that the householders will find time for themselves and their families to rest, but may neglect their servants’ need to do so. Thus the law mandates that one day in each week the servants are to be treated as the master’s equal. The entire household is required to rest, so that there can be no occasion to make the servants work.

15. The experiences of servitude and redemption are recalled to motivate observance of several humanitarian laws in Deuteronomy (see 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 22). Commentators are divided over what this motive emphasizes. Some believe that it is the memory of the servitude, to create empathy for the servant’s need to rest. Others believe it is God’s redeeming them from Egypt, to remind the people of His kindness and of His authority to establish such a command. Contrast the reason for observing Shabbat offered here with that in Exod. 20:11.

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT (v. 16)
Honoring parents is first among duties toward other human beings, just as it is first among the laws of holiness in Lev. 19:3. One aspect of this duty is respect, which includes obedience to parents and adherence to their teachings and forbids hitting, insulting, and behaving disrespectfully toward them and misappropriating their property. Another aspect is caring for parents when they are aged or infirm (this commandment, like the Decalogue as a whole, is not addressed merely to youngsters; see v. 14). The fact that honoring parents appears among the first five commandments, all of which deal with honoring God and mention His name, indicates how important this commandment was considered to be. Other ancient societies, too, ranked the honor of parents second only to the honor of the gods.

16. father and . . . mother See Comment to Lev. 19:3.

that you may long endure . . . in the land This is the only commandment in the Decalogue for which a reward is promised, although the promise can be read as a veiled threat (”otherwise your days will be shortened”). Some ancient legal documents make children’s right to inherit their parents’ property contingent on their honoring

14. so that your male and female slave may rest as you do This clause does not appear in Exod. 20. It may represent a later stage of Israelite society, which thought of the slave as a fellow human being, halfway between a hired hand and a member of the family. Similarly, Deut. 15:12 refers to the slave as “your brother”; no such appellation occurs in the earlier, parallel source (Exod. 21:2).

15. The Exodus version of the 4th commandment explains Shabbat in terms of what scholars of religion call imitatio dei [i.e., as God rested on the seventh day, so should you]. But the wording here, addressed to the children and grandchildren of the Israelites who had actually experienced slavery, bases Shabbat observance on the memory of Egyptian bondage and God’s liberation. Both reasons are mentioned in Shabbat evening’s Kiddush.
17. **false witness** Literally, “worthless witness”—a different term than in Exod. 20:13. Here the wording forbids testimony that is misleading though not technically untrue [Ramban].

18. **covet** . . . **crave** Both Hebrew verbs describe desires wrongly directed at objects that belong to others.

19. **those words** Those commandments.
mountain, with a mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds, which He inscribed them on two tablets of stone, which He gave to me. 20When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was abaze with fire, you came up to me, all your tribal heads and elders, 21and said, "The LORD our God has just shown us His majestic Presence, and we have heard His voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that man may live though God has spoken to him. 22Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, we shall die. 23For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? 24You go closer and hear all that the LORD our God says, and then you tell us everything that the LORD our God tells you, and we will willingly do it."

The LORD heard the plea that you made to me, and the LORD said to me, "I have heard the plea that this people made to you; they did well to speak thus. 26May they always be of such mind, to revere Me and follow all My commandments, that it may go well with them

which He gave to me That is, 40 days later (9:9).

21. though God has spoken to him Out of a fire.

22. Let us not die Humans can survive hearing God speak. The people fear that their constant exposure to the unprecedented fire may prove fatal to them.

23. the living God The demonstration of God’s power has made the people cognizant of His nature as "the living God," i.e., as the effective God, in contrast to the lifelessness of false gods.

24. we will willingly do it Literally, "we will hear what you tell us and do it." This is a crucial moment: The people pledge to accept Moses’ reports of what God commands and to fulfill whatever laws Moses transmits to them. Thus they have voluntarily relinquished receiving the remaining laws from God personally, and they may not in the future disobey Moses or challenge what he reports to them (see Exod. 24:7).

26. God appreciates the reverence that leads the people to make their request. He hopes that this reverence will remain with them and motivate them to observe the commandments. Implicit in His words is the concern that their reverence will diminish as the experience recedes from the people’s memory.

as here, some commentators interpret the phrase differently: It did not end, unlike normal utterances that fade away after a few seconds [BT Sanh. 17a].
and with their children forever! 27Go, say to them, 'Return to your tents.' 28But you remain here with Me, and I will give you the whole Instruction—the laws and the rules—that you shall impart to them, for them to observe in the land that I am giving them to possess.”

29Be careful, then, to do as the LORD your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left: 30follow only the path that the LORD your God has enjoined upon you, so that you may thrive and that it may go well with you, and that you may long endure in the land you are to possess.

6 And this is the Instruction—the laws and the rules—that the LORD your God has commanded [me] to impart to you, to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, 28 so that you, your children, and your children’s children may revere the LORD your God and follow, as long as you live, all His laws and commandments that I enjoin upon you, to the end that you may long endure. 30Obey, O Israel, willingly and faithfully, that it may go well with you. 31For if you carefully observe all that I command you today and do them, then I will certainly set you in this high, holy land that I swore to give your ancestors.

Moses’ Second Discourse, Part 2: Preamble to the Laws Given in Moab (6:1–11:30)

1. this is the Instruction—the laws and the rules  By using the identical terms that God used in 5:28, Moses indicates that the commands he is transmitting to Israel are precisely those given to him by God.

2. Moses has a twofold purpose in teaching the laws: He wishes to ensure their performance and to inculcate reverence for God. Thus the laws were not only an expression of reverence for God but also a means of teaching reverence.

revere . . . and follow  Literally, “revere . . . by following.” Following God’s laws is the means of revering Him, the expression of reverence.

28. I will give you the whole Instruction  God revealed the entire Torah to Moses, but Moses, being a mortal, wrote down only what he could understand and absorb. Later generations would discover moral truths and expand the notion of Torah to include them. If Truth (Emet) is one of the names of God, then there must be room in our understanding of Torah for all that is true.
with you and that you may increase greatly [in]
aland flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord,
the God of your fathers, spoke to you.

4. Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the

3. Obey... willingly and faithfully
“obey... and faithfully do.” Moses urges Israel
do as it promised in 5:24, which states, literally,
“We will obey and do.”

A SERMON ON THE FIRST COMMANDMENT (6:4–25)

UNDIVIDED LOYALTY AND
CONSTANT AWARENESS (vv. 4–9)

This passage states the major themes of Deuteronomy and the core demands of the Covenant. It has become, with the passage of time, the centerpiece of Jewish daily worship: K'ri at Sh'ma (Recitation of the Sh'ma).

4. Hear, O Israel! Focus your attention and heed the following teaching.

the Lord is our God, the Lord alone
Hebrew: YHWH Eloheinu, YHWH ehad; literally, “YHWH [is] our God, YHWH [is] one.” Another possible translation for the last word is “unique.” For all of its familiarity, the precise meaning of the Sh'ma is uncertain. The translation here renders it as describing a relationship: YHWH alone is Israel’s God. This is not a declaration of monotheism, meaning that there is only one God; that point was made in 4:35 and 39, which state that “YHWH alone is God.” This verse, by adding the possessive “our,” focuses on the way Israel is to apply that truth: Although other peoples worship various beings and things they consider divine, Israel is to recognize YHWH alone.

CHAPTER 6

4–9. How did the Sh'ma (vv. 4–9) become the quintessential Jewish prayer, when technically it is not a prayer at all? [Prayers are addressed to God; the Sh'ma is addressed to the Israelites.] Probably because it contains in just a few lines the basic theological commitments of Judaism: That there is a God; that there is only one God; that God is not only singular but also unique—no other being is like God; that the Jewish people have a specially intimate relationship with God; and that we are commanded as Jews to love God wholeheartedly, to study God's word, and to teach God's word to our children. More prosaically, it may be that, because this passage commands us to study words of Torah each morning and evening, we fulfill that obligation by reciting this passage.

The Sh'ma may be recited in any language the worshiper understands, because it is crucial that the worshiper understand what he or she is affirming [S'fat Emet, based on BT Ber. 13a]. Yet there is value in saying it in the language of the original revelation, as a link to the Torah and to Jews around the world. For that reason, these words are typically among the first Hebrew words a Jewish child learns.

4. A midrash traces the origin of this verse to the last moments of the patriarch Jacob’s life. He was concerned that his children and grandchildren, living in Egypt, would depart from the traditions of Abraham and serve the local gods. They put his mind at ease, assuring him, “Hear, O Israel [i.e., Jacob]: We accept the one God as our god” (Deut. R. 2:35).

In Torah scrolls and many prayer books, the letter ayin at the end of “sh'ma” and the letter dalet at the end of “ehad” are written larger than the other letters, spelling “ed” (witness). That is, to recite Sh'ma Yisra-el is to testify to the unity and uniqueness of God. To live by the precepts of the Sh'ma is to bear witness to the truths of God's Torah; it must be true if it can bring ordinary people to lead such extraordinary lives.

Hear This emphasizes the need to listen. Prayer is not only talking to God; it also includes listening to what God has to say to us. “When I pray, I speak to God. When I study Torah, God speaks to me” [Finkelstein]. In a world filled with noise and superficial conversation, we need to be reminded of the sacred duty to pause and listen. “Jewish prayer is an act of listening. We do not bring forth our own words. The self is silent; the spirit of the people Israel speaks. In prayer, we listen to what the words convey” [Heschel].
5. You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Israel’s duty to love God is inseparable from action and is regularly connected with the observance of His commandments (see 10:12–13, 11:1–13, 19:9, 30:16). In ancient Near Eastern political terminology, “love” refers to the loyalty of subjects, vassals, and allies. One of the striking parallels between political treaties and the covenant between God and Israel is the requirement that vassals “love” the suzerain—i.e., act loyally to him—with all their heart. The command to love God accordingly may be understood as requiring one to act loyally toward Him, though an emotional response is also called for.

the LORD alone Literally, “YHWH is one.” What do we mean when we proclaim that God is one? First, we reject the claim that God is none, that there is no God and the world is the product of random chance. Second, we reject the claim that God is two, a god of good and a god of evil. Jewish theology does not explain evil by positing a devil, a force of wickedness as powerful as God. Human misuse of our power to choose causes most of the evil in the world. And third, we reject the claim that God is many, that there are many deities, each specializing in one aspect of life or another. Only when God is one can we speak of a single moral law, of behavior being right or wrong in the sight of God (Steinberg).

5. You shall love Love is more than an emotion. It is a commitment to another, a demand for absolute faithfulness to God and to no other god. How can one command love? The *Sfat Emet* teaches that every human soul instinctively desires to love God, its Creator; but distractions and obstacles intervene. By performing the mitzvot we remove those obstacles and let our souls fulfill their natural inclination. “One who serves a master out of fear will always seek ways of escaping his obligations. But for one who serves out of love, obedience is a source of joy” (Sifrei).

The commandment to love our neighbor is found in Lev. 19:18. The commandment to love the stranger is found in Lev. 19:34. The commandment to love God comes later, in Deuteronomy. We learn to love God by practicing loving God’s creatures, our fellow human beings. “Love the LORD your God” commands not belief but behavior. Act in such a way as to make God beloved in the eyes of those who know you (Mid. Ha-Gadol).

with all your heart Learn to serve God not only with our noble impulses but even with the base, selfish desires of our hearts (M Ber. 9:5). Learn to turn to God’s service our appetites, our physical lusts, and our egocentricity; we do so by sanctifying the way we eat, the way we act sexually, and the way we earn and spend money.

It can also be thought of as “wholeheartedly.” The opposite of wholehearted love is not hatred but apathy—going through the motions with no passion, no real caring (whether one is describing one’s attitude toward God or toward family members). As Aaron Zeitlin wrote, “Praise Me, says God, and I will know that you love Me. / Curse Me, says God, and I will know that you love Me . . . / But if you look at the stars and shyn, / If you don’t praise and you don’t curse, / then I created you in vain, says God.”

with all your soul Even at the cost of your life. The account of Akiva’s death by torture at the hands of the Romans (BT Ber. 61b) describes him as reciting Sh’mi Yisra-El with his dying breath, so that his death would bear witness to his undying faith in the one true God. (“Martyr” is derived from the Greek word for “witness.”) Jewish law limits the requirement to undergo martyrdom to cases in which Jews are threatened with death unless they commit murder, acts of sexual depravity, or public idolatry in times of persecution (S.A. YD 157).

with all your might Traditional rendering:
heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. 7 Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

6. Take to heart  Moses urges Israel to internalize God’s teachings.

these instructions with which I charge you this day  This and similar phrases refer to the entire body of Deuteronomic law.

7. Impress them  Literally, “repeat them.” Oral teaching was the primary means of instruction in Israel. Ancient Near Eastern treaties emphasize the vassal’s duty to instruct his sons about the treaty and their duty to follow it.

Recite them  Speak about them.

when you stay at home . . . when you get up  That is, “speak of these words wherever you are, and at all times.”

8. Bind them as a sign on your hand  Bind “these words” (v. 6) on your hand in the same way that signs are placed on the hand. Not only must God’s commandments be remembered and spoken of constantly but copies of them must be worn on the body as well.

as a symbol  Literally, “as a forehead.” That is, a headband, the characteristic headdress worn in the region of Syro-Palestine during the biblical period, as depicted in ancient Egyptian and Assyrian art.

9. on the doorposts  People will thereby be reminded of God’s instructions every time they enter and leave their homes.

gates  Of cities. (Houses rarely had gates.) City gates consisted of the entire roofed structure that housed the doors, including several chambers (some up to 32 feet [10 m] wide), benches, and a long passageway. It functioned as the center of public activity, because it was often the most open area in an otherwise crowded city, and people constantly passed through it on their way to and from the city. Inscribing God’s teachings on the walls of the gate would be the most effective way of publicizing them.

with your wealth. We serve God not only by giving to charity, but also by refusing financial gain in ways that either violate God’s law or risk bringing the Torah into disrepute (as when people known to be Jewish are exposed for fraudulent business dealings).

6. Take to heart  Literally, “they shall be upon your heart.” Why “upon” rather than “in” your heart? Much of the time, a person’s heart is closed, not ready to receive these words. Let the words remain outside, on the heart, until the day when circumstances break the heart open and the words of the Torah can enter (Menahem Mendel of Kotzk).

7. your children  Not only your biologic children but anyone whose impression of Judaism is likely to be shaped by their contact with you (Sifrei).

8-9. The t’fillin are personal statements of our committing our deeds and thoughts to God. The m’zuzah is a public declaration that this is a home where a Jewish family dwells.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

67. Impress them  The Sages maintain that grandparents are also obligated to teach these things to their grandchildren (BT Kidd. 30a).

Recite them  From this the Sages derive the obligation to recite the Sh’m’a in the evening—preferably before midnight, when most people “lie down”—and in the morning before the first quarter of the day is over, by which time most people would be up (M Ber. 1:1–2).

68. Bind them  The commandment to wear t’fillin is derived from this verse as well as Exod. 13:9,16 and Deut. 11:18. These four passages are, therefore, contained in the boxes worn on the head and on the biceps of the person’s weaker arm.

69. doorposts  The commandment is fulfilled by attaching a m’zuzah to the right doorpost of any entrance to the house. Some also attach a m’zuzah to the right doorpost leading into every livable room, excluding bathrooms and closets. The m’zuzah is placed in the top third of the doorway, its top angled into the room.
When the Lord your God brings you into the land that He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to you—great and flourishing cities that you did not build, houses full of all good things that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and you eat your fill, take heed that you do not forget the Lord who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. Revere only the Lord your God and worship Him alone, and swear only by His name. Do not follow other gods, any gods of the peoples about you—for the Lord your God in your midst is an impassioned God—lest the anger of the Lord your God blaze forth against you and He wipe you off the face of the earth.

DO NOT ALLOW PROSPERITY TO MAKE YOU FORGET (vv. 10–15)

10. This reminder that the Israelites did not create the material wealth they are about to possess is an implicit warning against the attitude of self-sufficiency that prosperity can induce.

11. all good things The basic possessions of a settled agricultural society, which the Israelites, after a generation of wandering in the wilderness, are about to enjoy.

cisterns Most Israelite population centers were in the highlands, which depend mainly on rain for their water. Because rain falls in Israel only between October and May, it was necessary to store rainwater for the dry season; otherwise, the highlands could not have supported many people. Water was stored in large jars and in communal and private cisterns located beneath houses or their inner courtyards.

vineyards and olive groves Among the agricultural staples of the land of Israel, grapes and olives were second in importance only to grains (8:8, 28:51).

12. take heed Literally, "be careful." For getting one’s dependence on God is not only wrong but also dangerous (8:19–20, 11:17). The possibility that material wealth and satiety can lead to pride and arrogance and to disregarding one’s dependence on God is a persistent concern in the Bible.

13. worship And obey. This is a common term in the ancient Near East both for worshiping deities and for obeying kings.

swear only by His name Swearing by a god indicates a belief that that god has power and authority. The Bible, therefore, considers it a test of loyalty that the Israelite swear by YHWH alone. This expression of fidelity is similar to ancient Near Eastern ways of displaying loyalty to a king. In a Sumerian prayer, the writer denies that he has sworn an oath by a foreign king.

14. gods of the peoples about you All foreign deities are prohibited to Israel (5:7, 13:8), but Moses’ immediate concern is with gods of the surrounding peoples that the Israelites will encounter in the Promised Land.

15. in your midst The recognition that God is present in Israel’s midst, regulating their affairs, is a deterrent to sin.

Its purpose is not magic, to protect us from harm, but to remind us, when we leave our homes and when we return to them, of what God demands of us.

10. that you did not build It is not just that generation which received so much. Similar statements could be made for every generation of human beings. Humility and gratitude, therefore, are appropriate responses for what we have received from those who came before us.
Do not try the Lord your God, as you did at Massah. Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you and that you may be able to possess the good land that the Lord your God promised on oath to your fathers, and that all your enemies may be driven out before you, as the Lord has spoken.

When, in time to come, your children ask you, "What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?" you shall say to your children, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that undoubtedly what is meant in His sight here and in 12:28.

19. A reminder that the injunctions of this passage are a condition for the conquest of the Promised Land.

EXPLAINING THE COMMANDMENTS TO ONE'S CHILDREN (vv. 20–25)

In this passage, Moses resumes the theme of verse 7, which calls for teaching children about God's instructions.

22. before our eyes The parents—those who, as children, witnessed the Exodus and the Revelation—can now assure their children that they speak not from hearsay but personal experience.

16. Do not try the Lord Do not test God by demanding miracles, nor lose faith in God when miracles do not occur. True love does not require constant proofs of its genuineness. Rel) instead on the memories of what God did for your ancestors (vv. 20–23).

18. The Torah could not possibly include every specific instance of good conduct; therefore it offers this general statement to cover any eventuality. That is, be willing to compromise or to accept mediation, or to go beyond the letter of the law—"for God loves the good and the right" (Ramban). The Sages of the Talmud also insisted that this verse requires us to go beyond the letter of the law and, as Rashi suggests, voluntarily waive privileges in order to end disputes amicably.

20. This verse is the source of the wise child's question in the Pesah Haggadah. In the better manuscripts of the Haggadah, the last word of the verse reads "us," following the reading in the Talmud and in the Septuagint.
He had promised on oath to our fathers, 24 Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. 25 It will be therefore to our merit before the LORD our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us.”

When the LORD your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashtites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you—and the LORD your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. 26 observe ... revere Observing the laws is in itself an act of reverence.

AVOIDING DANGERS TO FAITH AND OBEDIENCE AFTER THE CONQUEST (7:1–10:22)

Moses now turns to specific laws, beginning with the first issue that the Israelites will face when they enter the Promised Land: what to do with the Canaanites. The laws are accompanied by explanations and exhortations, because the proper attitude in observing them is as important as the laws themselves.

EXHORTATIONS CONCERNING CONQUEST (7:1–8:20)

1. God brings you to the land The angel mentioned in Exod. 23:20 is omitted here, in keeping with Deuteronomy’s insistence on the exclusive role of God in Israel’s history.

Hittites A people by this name, living in Hebron, Bethel, and elsewhere in the central highlands of Canaan, is mentioned in Genesis. Outside the Bible, “Hittites” refers to several groups, and it is not clear which, if any, is meant in Genesis or here. This list of the inhabitants of the land is not meant to be complete. Other lists name as many as 12 nations, many name 6, and some name fewer.

Girgashtites Virtually nothing is known of this group, although Girgasht appears as the name of a person in some ancient texts. There was a land of Karkisha in Asia Minor; perhaps the Girgashtites migrated to Canaan from there.

Amorites, Canaanites Sometimes these names are used for all the peoples of the Promised Land, but here they refer to the inhabitants of specific regions (see 1:7).

Perizzites Several passages mention them in connection with the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, in the north-central part of the Land; that may be where they were concentrated.

Hivites The population of Shechem in the days of Jacob (see Gen. 34:2). In Joshua’s time they made up the population of Gibon and were also found in the far north, at the foot of Mount Hermon and in the Lebanon range.

Jebusites The population of Jerusalem before its conquest by David. Nothing is known of them outside the Bible; but at Mari, in Syria, Yabasi appears as a clan and a geographic name.

2. terms That is, conditions, such as labor in
shall not intermarry with them: do not give your
daughters to their sons or take their daughters
for your sons. 4 For they will turn your children
away from Me to worship other gods, and the
Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and
He will promptly wipe you out. 5 Instead, this
is what you shall do to them: you shall tear
down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down
their sacred posts, and consign their images to
the fire.

6 For you are a people consecrated to the Lord
your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord
your God chose you to be His treasured people.

return for which they would be spared (20:11).
According to Exod. 23:31–33, Canaanites were
to be expelled from the land; here they are to be
killed.

3. The intent behind the severe treatment of
the Canaanites is the prevention of the intermar-
riages, which would certainly lure the Israelites to
worship pagan gods and then to violate the first
two commandments (see Exod. 23:32–33,
34:15–16; Deut. 20:17–18).

4. from Me Moses, when transmitting God’s
commands, often alternates between speaking of
God in the third person and quoting Him di-
rectly.

He will promptly wipe you out Because the
exclusive worship of YHVH was the fundamental
condition for Israel’s survival, leaving Canaanites
alive who might entice the Israelites into idolatry
was a matter of life and death.

5. tear down Even the physical objects of
Canaanite religion must be eliminated. The com-
mon practice of taking them as booty or bringing
them as offerings to the victor’s deity is forbidden,
because anything associated with the religion of
the Canaanites is repugnant to the Lord (vv.
25–26).

altars Structures on which offerings of food,
drink, or incense were made to gods. They might
be simple stones or mounds of dirt, tables plated
with precious metal, or platforms large enough to
be ascended by steps or ramps.

pillars Cut or uncult stones that were erected
for a religious purpose. Some contained engrav-
ings or reliefs showing a deity or its symbols, and
others were plain. Apparently they were thought
to embody the presence of a deity, either by repre-
senting the deity or by serving as its residence.
Sacrifices were offered to them and they were
treated as idols.

sacred posts Hebrew: asherah. Refers to a
standing wooden object at a place of worship.
According to 16:21, it was a tree planted near an
altar. Some passages suggest that it might also be
an image, an artificial tree, or perhaps a tree trunk
or a pole. Others indicate that it was regarded as
a symbol of the Canaanite goddess Asherah.

fire If burning is meant literally, the text
must be referring to wooden images with metal
plating (see v. 25). All the verbs in these com-
mands, however, may simply mean “destroy.” In
the excavations at Hazor a statue with its head
chopped off was found in the remains of the stra-
tum destroyed by the Israelites at the time of the
conquest.

6. consecrated Hebrew: kadosh. Usually
translated “holy,” here it has the sense of “set
apart.”

God chose you Israel was the only people de-
oted to YHVH. The Bible considers this a special
privilege for which Israel was chosen.

His treasured people Israel is God’s “treas-
ure” (s’gullah), meaning that it is cherished. The
Hebrew word belongs to covenantal terminology.
There is an account of a Hittite king who called
his vassal, the king of Ugarit, his treasure. On a
Syrian royal seal a king is called “the servant of
Adad, the beloved of Adad, the siktum [s’gullah]
of Adad.”
7 It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the LORD favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

9 Know, therefore, that only the LORD your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments, but who instantly requites with destruction those who reject Him—never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly. Therefore, observe faithfully the Instruction—the laws and the rules—with which I charge you today.

AN APPEAL TO AVOID COMPLACENCY (v. 7–11)

7. smallest of peoples This assertion contrasts with others that state that in Egypt Israel grew into “a great and very populous nation” (26:5) and that it is now as numerous as the stars (1:10, 10:22, 28:62). Unless the present assertion is a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of dismissing Israel’s size as a factor, it may reflect conditions of a historical period different from that of the other references.

9. Know, from God’s election and redemption of Israel, that He is reliable and steadfast.

10. Although punishment may extend to three or four generations of descendants (5:9), offenders themselves cannot hope to escape retribution if they violate God’s laws.

11. observe The verb שָׁמַר describes both Israel’s obligation to “observe” and God’s act of “keeping” the covenant (v. 9). The intent here may be to lend a moral dimension to Moses’ argument: Israel ought to respond to God’s faithfulness with its own sincere faithfulness—and not merely obey God to avoid punishment and receive a reward.

CHAPTER 7

9. those who love Him and keep His commandments This phrase actually refers to two groups: those who wholeheartedly love and serve God; and those who keep commandments only for other reasons—such as seeking to be admired for their ethical standards, or out of concern for their neighbors’ opinion (Rashi).