26. The Israelites are given the choice between material well-being and misfortune (see Deut. 28).

28. other gods, whom you have not experienced The Lord's claim on Israel's loyalty is based on the fact that He alone has acted on Israel's behalf (see 5:6). Israel has received nothing from other gods.

29. The covenant relationship with God, vital for Israel's existence in the Promised Land, is to be reaffirmed as soon as the people enter the land, in a public ceremony described in chapter 27. The mountains where the ceremony is to take place face each other south and north of Shechem, respectively. Shechem was located on the eastern approach to modern Nablus.

30. other side of the Jordan West of the Jordan River, across from the side on which Moses is addressing the people.

This parashah emphasizes the concept of a central sanctuary in a place to be designated by God, to serve as the only legitimate site for sacrificial offerings and corporate worship. The Torah seems to fear that if the Israelites take over the holy places where the Canaanites worshiped, some of the residual paganism may cling to those sites and influence Israelite worship.

26. See, this day I set before you blessing and curse We have learned that different people absorb information in different ways—some by seeing, some by hearing, some by touching. Those Israelites who were not persuaded by hearing God's commandments at Sinai, or by hearing Moses' exhortations, are asked to see the difference that following God's ways can make in one's life.

The distinguishing characteristic of human beings, setting us apart from other animals, is our ability to choose the values by which we live. Other animals are driven by instinct. The Torah repeatedly affirms that humans have the potential to control instinct. At our best, we are greater than the angels, who do not have to overcome temptation and apathy. At our worst, we are less than beasts. Their destructiveness is part of their nature; human cruelty is the result of choice.

27. obey Hebrew; tishma', which most commonly means "hear" (as "listen" in English) can also mean "obey"). The reward of an observant life will be the ability to hear God's voice among the conflicting messages competing for our attention in a noisy world (S'fat Emet).

28. and curse, if you do not obey Does God curse and afflict the person who leads an immoral life? Or does the individual, through personal behavior, bring curses down on himself or herself and sometimes on others who are closely involved?
DEUTERONOMY 11:31

12 These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe in the land that the Lord, God of your fathers, is giving you to possess, as long as you live on earth.

4 You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills


INTRODUCTION AND HEADING TO THE LAWS (11:31–12:1)

31. For you are about to cross Better: “When you cross.” This introduction specifies when the laws are to be put into effect.

THE SANCTUARY AND OTHER RELIGIOUS MATTERS (12:2–16:17)

THE PLACE OF WORSHIP (12:2–13:1)

DESTROYING CANAANITE SANCTUARIES (vv. 2–3)

Most of the Canaanite places of worship were open-air sanctuaries (with altars, sacred pillars, sa-
or under any luxuriant tree. 3 Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.

4 Do not worship the LORD your God in like manner, but look only to the site that the LORD your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there. There you are to go, and there you are to bring your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, your votive and credited posts, and images) rather than temple buildings. Those in the countryside outnumbered those in the cities.

2. destroy all the sites   This does not refer to the geographic locations but to the altars and other objects used in worship at those sites.

3. obliterating their name   Wiping out all reminders of their existence.

from that site   The Torah does not require the Israelites to engage in a worldwide campaign against idolatry, but only to eliminate it from the land of Israel where it might influence them. This is consistent with the biblical view that for other nations idolatry is not a sin.

THE SINGLE PLACE OF SACRIFICE  (vv. 4–7)

The reason for restricting sacrifice to a single place is not explicitly explained. The Torah appears to view multiple sacrificial sites as inherently pagan. This limitation is unique to Deuteronomy and its most far-reaching law. It affected the religious life of every Israelite, involving the sacrificial system, the celebration of festivals, the economic status of the Levites, and even the judicial system. The only known attempts to enforce such a restriction occurred in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. during the reigns of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah (see 2 Kings 18, 22–23).

4. Israelites must not worship the Lord in the ways that Canaanites worshiped their gods: by sacrificing on hills and under trees, using pillars and idols and sacred posts.

5. the site   Not named in the Torah. Eventually Jerusalem was chosen, but according to Jer. 7:12 it was preceded by Shiloh.

God will choose    Presumably, the divine choice would be communicated by a prophet. The site where Solomon built the Temple was initially chosen by David for an altar on the instructions of the prophet Gad (see 2 Sam. 24:18).

to establish His name there   The idea that God’s name is “established” at the Temple means that He is accessible there in worship, because it is the focus of His attention. By speaking of God’s name as dwelling in the chosen place, Deuteronomy seeks to correct the impression that God dwells there literally. Only His name dwells there, whereas God is in heaven. The doctrine of God’s name dwelling in the Temple is central to Deuteronomy.

6. God, by choosing a single sanctuary, limits to that locale all sacrificial worship. The regular pilgrimage festivals were probably the most convenient occasions for these offerings, but farmers presumably made private pilgrimages at other times as well.

burnt offerings   See Lev. 1.

other sacrifices   The Hebrew is based on the term zavah, a sacrifice in which most of the meat is eaten by the one who offers it (see v. 27).

tithes   Literally, a tenth; gifts or payments amounting to 10 percent of the value of the yield from agricultural products and cattle. They were originally used to support temples and their personnel, but their function changed when the local sanctuaries were abolished (see 14:22–29).
freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. Together with your households, you shall feast there before the LORD your God, happy in all the undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

You shall not act at all as we now act here, every man as he pleases, because you have not yet come to the allotted haven that the LORD your God is giving you. When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land that the LORD your God is allotting to you, and He grants you safety from all your enemies around you and you live in security, then you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name: your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, and all the choice votive offerings of the sanctuary. These you shall act as we now act here, but your God is giving you.

Contributions Literally, “the contribution of your hands” (t’rumat yedekhem). The word t’rumah refers to something separated (literally, “lifted”) from a larger amount and dedicated either to the sanctuary or to the priest. Here, it most likely refers to first fruits, although the term also refers to tithes, the priest’s share of a sacrificial animal, and the portion of war spoils assigned to the sanctuary.

Votive A gift promised to God on condition that He grant a benefaction, such as the birth of a son or the safe return from a journey or a battle.

Freewill An offering that the worshiper—usually with no prior obligation or commitment—promised to give as an expression of devotion or gratitude.

Firstlings Firstborn male oxen, sheep, and goats, each of which had to be offered to God as a sacrifice (see 15:19-23).

Together with your households Members of the household are listed in verses 12 and 18. It was common for wives to attend, except in special circumstances, as when they were nursing. This is indicated by the story of Hannah and Peninnah in 1 Samuel 1.

Feast Eating the offerings of verse 6 (see vv. 17-18). This is a generalization, because some offerings (e.g., burnt offerings) were not eaten.

Happy Literally, “you shall celebrate,” with a sacrificial meal. Although each type of offering has a specific purpose, Deuteronomy emphasizes the overall value of sacrifices in providing occasions for celebrating God’s bounty. They serve to inculcate love and reverence for God (see esp. 14:23). Deuteronomy stresses the effect of offerings on people rather than on God.

When Centralization of Sacrifice Is to Take Effect (vv. 8-12) This section explains why sacrifice is not yet limited to a single site and indicates when the limitation is to be put into effect.

8. every man as he pleases Literally, “every man [doing] what is right in his own sight.” This implies that at the time of Moses’ address, Israelites were permitted to offer sacrifices wherever they wished. But Lev. 17:1-9 states that a restriction of sacrifice to a single place—the Tent of Meeting—had been commanded earlier, in the wilderness. Modern scholars assume that Deuteronomy was not aware of Lev. 17, which they assign to a different source.

9. The present situation is permitted because the Israelites are not yet settled in the land. Once there, they must possess it securely so that pilgrims may travel safely to the chosen place.

11. choice votive offerings Your votive offerings are to be of the choicest products.
And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your sons and daughters and with your male and female slaves, along with the Levite in your settlements, for he has no territorial allotment among you.

13 Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like, but only in the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribal territories. There you shall sacrifice your burnt offerings and there you shall observe all that I enjoin upon you. But whenever you desire, you may slaughter and eat meat in any of your settlements, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has granted you. The impure and the pure alike may partake of it, as of the gazelle and the deer. But you must not partake of the blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

17 You may not partake in your settlements of the tithes of your new grain or wine or oil, or of the firstfruits of your fruit or of that which grows in the vineyard, or of any of your increase.

12 slaves The requirement to involve slaves in religious celebrations, like the requirement that slaves rest on Shabbat (5:14), is part of the Torah's unique concern for their welfare.

along with the Levite Once sacrifice is restricted to a single sanctuary, the Levites living in settlements around the country will lose the income they earned from officiating there. They had no tribal lands from which to earn a living, and the single chosen sanctuary could not possibly support all of them. Hence Deuteronomy urges soliciitue for them, and establishes a special tithe for them, along with the poor, every three years (14:28–29). Here, their participation in sacrificial meals somewhat makes up for their former shares of sacrifices and donations.

NONSACRIFICIAL SLAUGHTER (v. 13–10)

13 burnt offerings Here, refers to all types of offerings.

15 slaughter and eat meat This signals a major change in religious and dietary practice. Previously, only game animals were permitted to be slaughtered outside of the framework of sacrificial offerings. Domestic cattle (oxen, sheep, and goats) could be slaughtered only on altars, as sacrifices, even if the offerer's purpose was solely to use them for food. Only after the blood was dashed on the altar and certain of the innards burned could the remainder be eaten. This rule was practical as long as it was legitimate to have sanctuaries throughout the land. But the requirement would become nearly impossible to fulfill once a single sanctuary was chosen, because those who lived far from it would be able to eat meat only on the infrequent occasions when they visited there. To avoid this hardship, nonsacrificial slaughter of domestic cattle is to be permitted, and people may eat meat whenever they choose.

according to the blessing... you That is, as much as you can afford.

The impure and the pure As long as domestic cattle had to be slaughtered sacrificially, people who were ritually impure could eat meat only from nonsacrificial animals, such as gazelle and deer. Once the nonsacrificial slaughter of domestic cattle is permitted, they will be treated like game animals, and the ritually impure may eat their meat as well.

16 you must not partake of the blood The prohibition against eating blood (see v. 23) will remain in effect. When domestic animals are slaughtered only for food, their blood is to be poured on the ground, unlike the blood of sacrifices (v. 27).
of the firstlings of your herds and flocks, or of any of the votive offerings that you vow, or of your freewill offerings, or of your contributions. These you must consume before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levite in your settlements—happy before the Lord your God in all your undertakings. Be sure not to neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

20When the Lord enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, “I shall eat some meat,” for you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you wish. 21If the place where the Lord has chosen to establish His name is too far from you, you may slaughter any of the cattle or sheep that the Lord gives you, as I have instructed you; and you may eat

SACRIFICIAL FOOD (vv. 17–19)

17. Both the act of sacrifice and the eating of the sacrifice are restricted to the chosen place. The new freedom to eat nonsacrificial meat at home will not mean that sacrificial food may be taken home and eaten there after having undergone the sacrificial procedure in the chosen place. The entire household must travel to the chosen place and eat the sacrificial food there, “before the Lord,” to experience the religious influence of the act (see 14:23).

NONSACRIFICAL SLAUGHTER (vv. 20–25)

20. enlarges your territory This act will give you the entire Promised Land (see 19:8; Exod. 34:24). Full possession of the land, however, will come gradually (7:22). As long as some of it remains in the hands of the Canaanites, Israelites will lack the security that is a prerequisite for centralization (see v. 10). as He has promised you In Exod. 34:24.

21. too far from you The text does not define what “too far” means and may intend to leave this to the discretion of each individual.

slaughter Hebrew: zabah. The verb refers to sacrificial slaughter and indicates that nonsacrificial slaughter should follow the same procedure—namely, slitting the animal’s throat. This method facilitates maximal drainage of blood, in keeping with verses 16 and 23–25.

19. Be sure not to neglect the Levite Among a population engaged in farming and raising cattle, such ‘unproductive’ members of society could easily come to be neglected and resented. The people might fail to recognize the vital role of the Levites in their spiritual and moral welfare” (Hirsch).

20. Kook sees this passage as God’s reluctant compromise with the biblical ideal of vegetarianism (see Gen. 1:29; Isa. 11:6–7). In light of the moral decline of the human race before the Flood, God finds it necessary to emphasize that there is a difference between human beings and animals. We are permitted to slaughter animals under restricted conditions, while the shedding of human blood is strenuously forbidden. We are commanded to cover the blood of the slaughtered animal (Lev. 17:13) to inculcate in us a sense of ambivalence for having taken an animal life to satisfy our appetites.

HALAKHAH L’MA’ASEH

12:21, as I have instructed you From these words, the Sages determined (BT, Hull. 28a) that the laws of kosher slaughter (sh’hitah) of animals for food are rooted in the Torah.
22. The ritually impure may eat meat from nonsacrificial slaughter; they may even eat from the same bowl as those who are ritually pure. Because the meat is not sacrificial, defilement by contact with impure persons does not disqualify it, and there is no need to avoid sharing meat with them.

23. make sure This exhortation and the reiteration of the blood prohibition in verses 24–25 indicate a concern that people might not be careful to avoid the blood, either because they want to consume it or because of the effort involved in removing it from the meal.

partake... consume Literally, in both cases, "eat." The use of this verb instead of "drink" implies that the text is not dealing with the likelihood that people might drink blood but that they might consume it, in the form of blood pudding or gravy, or simply while eating meat because of laxity in draining the blood.

24. You must not partake of it; you must pour it out on the ground like water. You must not partake of it, in order that it may go well with you and with your descendants, for I enjoin upon you; this is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh.

25. But such sacred and votive donations as you may have shall be taken by you to the site that the LORD will choose. You shall offer your burnt offerings, both the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God; and of your other sacrifices, the blood shall be poured out on the altar of the LORD your God, and you shall eat the flesh.

26. Be careful to heed all these commandments that I enjoin upon you; thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the LORD your God.

27. The blood is the life. Blood is the life force in living creatures (see Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11).

28. sacred and votive donations Refers to anything sacrificial in character. Votive offerings are singled out because, since they are voluntary, the worshiper might be led to believe that there is greater discretion regarding where they may be presented.

29. The flesh of the burnt offering is consumed entirely by fire. The flesh of the other sacrifices is eaten by the one who offered the sacrifice and by the priests (18:3). In both cases, the blood is poured on the altar.
When the Lord your God has cut down before you the nations that you are about to enter and dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their land, be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.

If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent of two or more things, and even if they conform with everything that was done, then you shall say: "What an abominable thing we have done by being so negligent as to depart from your solemn assembly, and not to listen to your servants the prophets, who foretold in our ears at Jericho the downfall of these nations."

Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.

When the Lord your God has cut down before you the nations that you are about to enter and dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their land, if there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent of two or more things, and even if they conform with everything that was done, then you shall say: "What an abominable thing we have done by being so negligent as to depart from your solemn assembly, and not to listen to your servants the prophets, who foretold in our ears at Jericho the downfall of these nations."

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Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.

None of the Canaanite religious practices may be adopted, because many were abominable. They even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods. They perform for their gods every abhorrent thing which the Lord your God hates; they even offer up their sons and daughters to the sun, to the moon, and to the other gods. You shall be absolutely forbidden from doing any of these abominations; and also from doing any other abominable thing which might be adopted, because many were abominable.

Moses takes it for granted that the people know child sacrifice is wrong. He cites it as an extreme, showing example of Canaanite abominations. By stipulating that the prohibition may be adopted, because many were abominable.

The law puts a limit on prophecy and miracles both. See Comment to Deut. 4:2. "proclaimer." Some interpret it as "spokesperson."

Moses does not begin a new chapter here. This verse complements the first part of 12:31, indicating that Israelites may worship God only in the ways He commands, no less and no more. They may not abolish His commandments or add to them. Adopting any of the Canaanites' abominable practices would lead to both. See Comment to Deut. 4:2.

The law puts a limit on prophecy and miracles by stipulating that the prohibition against worshiping gods is an eternally binding principle. Even prophecies and seemingly miraculous proofs to the contrary are to be disregarded.

Prophecy and dreams are two of the regular means by which God communicates with people in the Bible.

"prophet Hebrew: navi, which probably means "proclaimer." Some interpret it as "spokesperson."

dream-diviner A person—either a prophet or a layperson—who claims to have received a message from God in a dream.

gives you a sign or a portent As Moses did in Exodus, to demonstrate that his message came from God. The signs refer to marvels that could pressing its values. We do violence to that coherence when we mix practices of one faith system with those of another.

CHAPTER 13

1. See Comment to 4:2.
1069 DEUTERONOMY 13:3 R'EH

have been brought about only by supernatural power (Exod. 4:1–9).

3. What follows is Moses’ pejorative paraphrase of the proposal offered by the dream-diviner or prophet. An instigator would not use vague and disparaging phrases like “another god, whom you have not experienced” but would identify a specific god.

Let us follow. Literally, “Let us walk after.” This idiom is frequently used to express loyalty to a king. By paraphrasing the prophet’s invitation as calling for “walking after” a god, Moses indicates that it is tantamount to proposing treason against the Lord.

4. testing you. By allowing the sign to come true, Moses does not explain why God would test Israel, but counters the false prophet’s argument that the sign proves his prophecy true.

with all your heart and soul. That is, whether your loyalty to Him is undivided.

5. none but the Lord. In contrast to what the false prophet urges.

6. urged disloyalty. The law refers to a prophet of the Lord who advocates the worship of gods and claims that such worship is compatible with loyalty to Israel’s God. Such a prophet is guilty of false prophecy, a capital crime (see 18:20).

who freed you from the land of Egypt. The Lord, unlike false gods “whom you have not experienced” (v. 3), has proven Himself to Israel. This underscores the gravity of the prophet’s sin, because the Lord’s redemption of the Israelites from bondage established their obligation to worship Him alone (see 5:6–7).

Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst. This expression, which appears several times at the close of instructions for punishing a criminal, reflects the view that the punishment removes a tangible evil from the community.

INSTIGATION BY A CLOSE RELATIVE OR FRIEND (vv. 7–12)

A secret proposal to worship a god is difficult to resist when it comes from a relative or a close friend. Because it originates with someone very close, one may be inclined to take no action against the instigator.

5. hold fast to Him. God is envisioned as a raging fire—how can one hold fast to fire? We cling to God by doing what God does, so to speak; this includes visiting the sick, sustaining the poor, freeing the enslaved, and comforting the grieving (BT Sot. 14a).
If your brother, your own mother’s son, or your son or daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your closest friend entices you in secret, saying, “Come let us worship other gods”—whom neither you nor your fathers have experienced from among the gods of the peoples around you, either near to you or distant, anywhere from one end of the earth to the other: do not assent or give heed to him. Show him no pity or compassion, and do not shield him; but take his life. Let your hand be the first against him to put him to death, and the hand of the rest of the people thereafter. Stone him to death, for he sought to make you stray from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thus all Israel will hear and be afraid, and such evil things will not be done again in your midst.

If you hear it said, of one of the towns that

7. your brother, your own mother’s son. The most closely related brother, the son of your mother as well as of your father.

8. the wife of your bosom. That is, your wife, who lies in your bosom. One would be reluctant to prosecute an instigator toward whom one feels particularly affectionate.

9. in secret. Given the stigma and punishment that were to befall those who worshiped gods, it was expected that instigators would make their proposals secretly.

10. do not assent or give heed. Verse 4 states only “do not give heed” to a prophet or dreamer. The additional verb here reflects the fact that family and friends can exert sustained pressure in the service of their cause, and greater effort is required to resist their importuning.

Show him no pity or compassion. You might be tempted to spare him out of love. But the danger to public welfare posed by these instigators requires the stifling of normal feelings.

11. take his life. This is not accomplished by summary execution, but only after a thorough investigation, as we see from verses 13–19 and 17:2–7. The person approached by the instigator must report the crime and later take part in the execution (see 17:7).

12. the rest of the people. Of his city (see 21:21).

13. Stoning, the most common form of capital punishment in the Bible, normally took place outside the city. The witnesses to the crime cast the first stones, followed by the rest of the people. Punishment by stoning enabled the entire public to participate and thereby express its outrage against the crime and the threat it posed to God’s authority and society’s welfare.

14. By taking part in the execution, the townspeople will be dissuaded from committing the same crime. News of the execution will have the same effect on the rest of the nation.

REPORTED SUBVERSION OF AN ENTIRE TOWN (vv. 13–19)

The most serious circumstance is one in which the instigation has apparently succeeded, and an entire town has committed the crime.

13. If you hear it said. The authorities are required to investigate only if the crime is reported to them by others; they need not search for such cases on their own [Siftei].
the Lord your God is giving you to dwell in.

14 that some scoundrels from among you have gone and subverted the inhabitants of their town, saying, “Come let us worship other gods”—whom you have not experienced—

15 you shall investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly. If it is true, the fact is established—that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in your midst—that put the inhabitants of that town to the sword and put its cattle to the sword. Doom it and all that is in it to destruction: gather all its spoil into the open square, and burn the town and all its spoil as a holocaust to the Lord your God. And it shall remain an everlasting ruin, never to be rebuilt. Let nothing that has been doomed stick to your hand, in order that the Lord may turn from His blazing anger and show you compassion, and in His

in which there are witnesses to the instigation. Hence the law stresses the necessity of carefully investigating the rumor.

that the Lord... is giving you An act of benevolence that the inhabitants have repaid with treachery.

15. investigate... inquire... interrogate The use of three verbs here for the investigative process, instead of one verb as elsewhere (17:4, 19:18), and the use of three phrases to confirm the charge, indicate the need for the most careful investigation and absolute certainty in the verdict.

16. Apparently the text deals only with a hypothetical case in which the entire town is guilty. There is no indication of what is to be done with any innocent inhabitants.

to the sword Individual apostates are executed by stoning (17:5), but it would be impos- ible to stone large numbers of people, as they would resist. The meaning here is that the town is to be conquered militarily.

Doom it... to destruction The apostate

16. put the inhabitants of that town to the sword Why so comprehensive a punishment for an entire town, rather than simply punishing the guilty? In all likelihood, the Torah deemed it inconceivable for a good person to remain in a town totally given over to idolatry. In the absence of a supportive community loyal to God, the lonely faithful individual would either leave in disgust or remain and become corrupted. Later, the Sages deemed it impossible for such a situation actually to occur. They considered it to be a purely hypothetical situation, included here to warn us of the serious consequences of idol worship (BT Sanh. 71a).
1.4 You are children of the LORD your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead. For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: the LORD your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people.

You shall not eat anything abhorrent. These

LAWS OF HOLINESS (14:1-21)

Laws of mourning (vv. 1-2) and laws of diet (vv. 3-21) are presented together here because, in the view of Deuteronomy, they share a common theme: the Israelites’ obligation to maintain holiness by avoiding pagan practices and everything abhorrent.

HOLINESS IN MOURNING (vv. 1-2).

1. You are children of the LORD your God. Hence, you may not disfigure yourselves during mourning. No reason is given for the connection between being a child of God and disfiguring oneself when mourning. Rashi explains: “Because you are children of the LORD, it is appropriate for you to be holy, not gashed and balded.”

shave the front of your heads. The Hebrew phrase refers to any form of removing hair, cutting and plucking as well as shaving. Gashing the flesh until the blood runs and removing hair are known as mourning rites the world over and were practiced by Israel’s neighbors and by some Israelites.

HOLINESS IN DIET (vv. 3-21)

This section is largely identical with the dietary laws in Lev. 11.

Land Animals (vv. 3-8).

3. Deuteronomy places forbidden foods in the same category of abhorrence as idolatrous and immoral actions that would defile the Israelites’ holiness.

You shall not gash yourselves. The Sages, basing their comment on a play on words, used this verse to demand that we not bicker among ourselves as a community, dividing into sects (BT Yev. 13b, 14a).

3. Dietary rules are part of Deuteronomy’s emphases on manifesting one’s humanity by controlling instinct and on the Israelites separating themselves from pagans whose land they would shortly be entering.
are the animals that you may eat: the ox, the sheep, and the goat; 5 the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, the mountain sheep, 6 and any other animal that has true hoofs which are cleft in two and brings up the cud—such you may eat. 7 But the following, which do bring up the cud or have true hoofs which are cleft through, you may not eat: the camel, the hare and the daman—for although they bring up the cud, they have no true hoofs—they are impure for you: also the swine—for although it has true hoofs, it does not bring up the cud—is impure for you. You shall not eat of their flesh or touch their carcases.

9 These you may eat of all that live in water: you may eat anything that has fins and scales.

10 But you may not eat anything that has no fins and scales: it is impure for you.

11 You may eat any pure bird. 12 The following

5. ibex Or “bison.”

7. Four animals are listed, to illustrate the principle that those that have only one of the required characteristics are forbidden.

camel Only the upper part of the camel’s hoof is split. The bottom is joined.

the hare and the daman Because these animals chew their food for a long time and sometimes move their jaws from side to side, they look as if they were chewing the cud, although they are not ruminants (who chew the cud).

8. The Midrash portrays a reclining pig stretching out its hooves and saying “Look, I’m pure,” while concealing the fact that it does not chew the cud, such was the hypocrisy of the Roman Empire, which posed as being dedicated to law and justice while oppressing the peoples it ruled [Lev. R. 13:5].
you may not eat: the eagle, the vulture, and the black vulture; the kite, the falcon, and the buzzard of any variety; every variety of raven; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, and the hawk of any variety; the little owl, the great owl, and the white owl; the pelican, the bastard, and the cormorant; the stork, any variety of heron, the hoopoe, and the bat.

You shall not eat anything that has died a natural death; give it to the stranger or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

You shall set aside every year a tenth part of all the yield of your sowing that is brought in. It was not torn by beasts, nor was it gathered up by the reaper. This is a perpetual ordinance for all your generations.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

Distinguished by you: they may not be eaten.

Natural death; give it to the stranger.

All winged swarming things are impure for you; they may not be eaten. You may eat only pure winged creatures.

You shall not eat anything that has died a natural death; give it to the stranger in your community to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

Virtually all the forbidden winged creatures are scavengers or birds of prey. They share four characteristics: they lack a crop (the pouchlike enlargement of the gullet that stores food), they lack an extra toe on the back of the foot, the sac in their gizzards cannot be peeled off, and they tear their prey. Note that the identification of several of the birds is not certain.

Eagle: Hebrew: nesher, which can refer also to a griffon vulture.

Swarming things: Hebrew: sha'arets, creatures that swarm or crawl—such as insects, rodents, reptiles, and ambulatory marine animals.

Pure winged creatures: Certain leaping locusts (Lev. 11:21-23).

Died a natural death: It was not torn by another creature.

give it to the stranger . . . sell it to a foreigner.

Deuteronomy, unlike Lev. 17:15, does not mandate that “strangers” (i.e., resident aliens) must avoid impurity, because they are not subject to the requirements of holiness that are incumbent on Israelites. Hence they may eat the flesh of animals that die of natural causes. The distinction between “giving” the meat to resident aliens and “selling” it to foreigners reflects the differing economic status of the two classes. Resident aliens were often poor and objects of charity. Nonresident foreigners normally were in the land for purposes of trade and were able to support themselves.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

This rule is listed with the food prohibitions because meat cooked this way may not be eaten (see Exod. 23:19, 34:26). Meat boiled in sour milk (leben) was probably regarded as a delicacy, as it is by Arabs. The prohibition is similar to the rule against slaughtering cattle and their young on the same day and the requirement that newborn cattle remain with their mothers at least one week before they are sacrificed, to prevent acts of insensitivity against animals.

PERIODIC DUTIES (14:22-16:17)

TITHES (vv. 22-29)

The farmer must set aside a tithe of his produce each year. Tithing was a well-known practice in
from the field. 23 You shall consume the tithes of your new grain and wine and oil, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks, in the presence of the Lord your God, in the place where He will choose to establish His name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God forever. 24 Should the distance be too great for you, should you be unable to transport them, because the place where the Lord your God has chosen to establish His name is far from you and because the place where the Lord your God has blessed you,

25 you may convert them into money. Wrap up the money and take it with you to the place that the Lord your God has chosen, 26 and spend the money on anything you want—cattle, sheep, wine, or other intoxicant, or anything you may desire. And you shall feast there, in the presence of the Lord your God, in the place where you shall bring your burnt offering, your sacrifices, and your tithe, there to eat as part of the feast.

The Annual Tithe (vv. 22–27)
In four years out of seven, the tithe is to be consumed by the farmer and his household during the course of worship at the chosen sanctuary.
22. This verse introduces the first tithe, which is given in years 1, 2, 4, and 5 of the cycle (Verses 28–29 deal with years 3 and 6). And in year 7, no tithe can be given because there is no harvest; see Exod. 23:10–11, Lev. 25:2–7).

23. in the presence of the Lord. The text does not say when these offerings are to be brought to the sanctuary. The regular pilgrimage festivals were probably the most convenient occasions, although farmers probably made private pilgrimages at other times, too. firstlings of your herds and flocks They are mentioned here because, like the tithe, they are brought to the chosen sanctuary by their owners and eaten there. All firstlings are consumed, not merely a tenth of them (15:19–20).

24. because the place where the Lord your God has blessed you. Because this was the blessing of abundant crops, the tithe would be too ample for transport over a long distance.

25. money Hebrew kesef; literally, "silver." Money consisted of precious metal, most often silver. The metal was shaped into rings, bracelets, and ingots, the value of which was established by their weight at the time of each transaction.

26. wine, or other intoxicants This phrase refers either to different types of grape wine, such as new and old or mixed and unmixed, or to grape wine and another intoxicant, such as date wine, pomegranate wine, or beer.

How will consuming the tithe in Jerusalem teach us to revere God? Seeing the Temple in all its glory and the priests at their service will inspire a sense of reverence (Rashbam). Another commentator suggests that we attain a sense of reverence not through an intellectual process but by experiencing God's grace in our lives.

24. because the place... is far from you Makom [place] is also one of the names of God—the site of all reality. Thus the verse can mean, "should the distance seem too great for you because God is far from your heart."
of the Lord your God, and rejoice with your household.
27 But do not neglect the Levite in your community, for he has no hereditary portion as you have. 28 Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your yield of that year, but leave it within your settlements. 29 Then the Levite, who has no hereditary portion as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your settlements shall come and eat their fill, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the enterprises you undertake.

15 Every seventh year you shall practice re-

rejoice with your household A farmer and his household could not possibly consume the entire tithe during the required 9 days of pilgrimage to the sanctuary each year (16:1-17). Theoretically, a household producing at subsistence level would require 35.4 days to consume 10 percent (a tithe) of its produce. Even if the farmers invited the Levites and the poor to the festival meals, as required, and doubled their normal consumption, they still could not dispose of all the food—unless there were as many Levites and poor as there were members of the farmers' households, which is unlikely. Perhaps whatever was left over had to be given away to the poor or was destroyed. 27. Levite in your community Those residing in the various towns and cities.

The Triennial Poor Tithe (vv. 28-29)
In the third and sixth years of each seven-year cycle (see 15:1), the farmers shall not eat the tithe at the sanctuary but must deposit it in their hometowns to feed the Levites and the poor. Presumably, the produce collected in each of these two years was expected to suffice for three or four years until the next collection. It seems unlikely that the poor were to be fed only two years out of seven.

28. bring out From your property.
full tithe None of it is to be diverted to any other use.
leave it within your settlements Public storage facilities and threshing floors near the city gate would have been natural locations for the deposit, distribution, and long-term stockpiling of the produce.

29. the fatherless, and the widow That is, the poor.
come and eat their fill The recipients of the tithe would be given food daily as needed.
so that the Lord . . . may bless you Such assurances are given with laws that require economic sacrifice for the sake of the poor. Because the Israelite might fear that these sacrifices would cause economic hardship, the donor is assured that, in the end, they will lead to prosperity.

MEASURES TO PROTECT THE POOR (15:1-18)
This section deals with extreme difficulties that can befall the poor: inability to obtain loans, inability to pay off debts, and indentured servitude. Some of these laws are also found elsewhere in the Torah and in other ancient Near Eastern societies.

CHAPTER 15

1. Most of this chapter is concerned with ensuring that there not emerge in Israel a permanent underclass—persons unable to lift themselves out of poverty. Such a condition would be unfair to human beings, fashioned in God's image, and dangerous to society as a breeding ground for lawlessness and irresponsibility. The first step in the direction of preventing that is the remission of debts in the seventh year.
mission of debts. 2This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not dun his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the LORD. 3You may dun the foreigner; but you must remit whatever is due you from your kinsmen.

4There shall be no needy among you—since the LORD your God will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion—if only you heed the LORD your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. 5For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you:

6With prosperity you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

7If, however, there is a needy person among your brothers, who is a resident alien in the land:

This seems to be the equivalent of the formula in Mesopotamian decrees explaining that debts may not be collected “because the king has established a remission for the land.” In the Torah it is God—Israel’s divine king—who establishes the remission.

3. The remission applies only to debts owed by fellow Israelites, not by foreigners. Similarly, the remission edict of the Babylonian, king Ammitaduca canceled only the debts of kinsmen: Akkadians and Amorites in Babylon. Collecting debts is a legitimate right, and forgiving debts is an extraordinary sacrifice that members of society are willing to forgo only on behalf of those who have a special family-like claim on their compassion.

4. your God will bless you. With prosperity, 6. as He has promised you. The promises are linked to the Israelites’ obedience.

you will extend loans. If the Israelites will obey God’s laws, not only will they have no poor who need loans but they will be so prosperous that other nations will turn to them for loans.

you will dominate. Economically.

Lend to the Poor! (vv. 7–11)

Even those who normally would be willing to lend to the poor might hesitate as the year of remission approaches, because it is likely that they would lose what they had loaned. Moses urges the people to disregard such calculations. Such appeals for
7. If ... there is a needy person among you
If the ideal promised in verse 4 is not achieved.
9. You will incur guilt
Guilt builds up until it leads to punishment, just as merit builds up and leads to reward.

7-10. An obligation to generously support a kinsman who has fallen on hard times without calculating whether the help will be repaid. This is not so much a loan as an investment in a decent, compassionate, stable society.

7. Do not harden your heart
One who ignores the needy is like an idolater [BT Ket. 68a]. Also, it is forbidden to insult the poor or accuse them of being undeserving.

9. In late Second Temple times, the law of remission did become a deterrent to lending, as anticipated by this verse. To protect people who needed loans and to prevent violation of verses 9 and 10, the sage Hillel [1st century B.C.E.-1st century C.E.] devised a legal means for circumventing the remission. The means was a document or declaration [prosbul] in which the lender declares that a specific loan will not be subject to remission. By this means, Hillel ensured that the law would not undermine its own purpose.

10. God will bless you
The closer the year of remission, the more likely it is that the loan will end up as a gift. But any loss incurred will be more than made up by God.

11. There will never cease to be needy ones
The realism of this verse contrasts with the ideal described in verse 4.

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH
15:7-11, Open your hand
These verses undergird Jewish poverty laws requiring us to feed, clothe, and house poor non-Jews as well as Jews. See also Exod. 12:49; Lev. 19:9-10, 25:25, 35; Deut. 24:10-22.
If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.

But should he say to you, "I do not want to leave you"—for he loves you and your household and is happy with you—you shall take an awl and put it through his ear into the door, the doors of the master's house.

**Manumission of Indentured Servants** (vv. 12–18)

This is one of several laws in the Torah that deal with servitude, an accepted fact of life in ancient Israel as it was everywhere else in the ancient world. Biblical law and ethical teachings aimed at securing humane treatment for servants with a modicum of decency. Only a later generation, nurtured in freedom, could empathize with the slave's yearning to be free.

**six years** The standard term of indenture (see also v. 18; Exod. 21:2).

13. Here Deuteronomy goes beyond Exod. 21:2, in requiring that newly freed servants be given capital and supplies for living as they resume independent life. The aim is to prevent them from starting off penniless and possibly returning to the same wretched condition that originally led to servitude.

14. flock, threshing floor, and vat Some sheep or goats (or their products, such as milk or wool), some grain, and some wine.

15. The servant might consider that the security gained through subservience is preferable to the risks of independence. The fact that the law thinks it possible that the servant might love the master and desire servitude implies that the treatment of indentured servants was expected to be quite benign.

16. happy In the sense of being well off.

17. you shall take an awl See Exod. 21:2–6: The ceremony for making the servant's status permanent consists of driving the point of an awl through his ear into the door of the master's

**HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH**

15:13–14. do not let him go empty-handed On the basis of these verses, some Jewish authorities require employers to pay severance to employees hired on more than a temporary basis. Others see it as a moral duty exclusively (Seifer Ha-Hinnukh 481–482).
and he shall become your slave in perpetuity. Do the same with your female slave. 18 When you do set him free, do not feel aggrieved; for in the six years he has given you double the service of a hired man. Moreover, the LORD your God will bless you in all you do.

19 You shall consecrate to the LORD your God all male firstlings that are born in your herd and in your flock: you must not work your firstling ox or shear your firstling sheep. 20 You and your household shall eat it annually before the LORD your God in the place that the LORD will choose. 21 But if it has a defect, lameness or blindness, any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. 22 Eat it in your firstling ox or shear your firstling sheep. 23 You and your household shall eat it annually before the LORD your God in the place that the LORD will choose.

The sacrifice of firstborn cattle

The first issue of all living things is considered holy, reserved for the Lord. Only after these are given to God, thereby acknowledging Him as the source and owner of all life, are the remainder of the crop and subsequent offspring of animals desacralized and freed for human use. Such practices were common in the ancient world.

19. consecrate  Treat them as holy by not using them for any secular purpose and by eating them in a sacral meal.

20. eat it annually before the LORD  As a shelamim sacrifice. According to 12:17-18, Levites also would be invited to take part in the meal (see Lev. 3).

21. if it has a defect  Offering a defective animal to God shows contempt. One would never present such an animal to a human ruler. Hence, in 17:1, sacrificing flawed animals is regarded as an abomination. It is among the offenses that profane God's name in Lev. 22:2, 17-25, 32.

22. A disqualified firstling may be eaten as food and need not be replaced sacrificially by another animal, redeemed for money, or destroyed, as would be the case with the firstling of an impure animal.
23 Only you must not partake of its blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

16 Observe the month of Abib and offer a passover sacrifice to the LORD your God, for it was in the month of Abib, at night, that the LORD your God freed you from Egypt. You shall slaughter the passover sacrifice for the LORD your God, from the flock and the herd, in the month of Abib and offer a passover sacrifice to the LORD your God, for it was in the month of Abib, at night, that the LORD your God freed you from Egypt.

The Pesah Sacrifice and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 1-8)

The first festival consists of two distinct celebrations: (a) the pesah, the protective sacrifice offered at the end of the 14th day of the first month; and (b) the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the 7-day festival that begins on the 15th day (see Lev. 23:6; Num. 28:17). Note the difference between the pesah sacrifice described here and the one in Exod. 12, especially in regard to the nature of the meal, the method of its cooking, and where it is to be offered.

1. month of Abib

Literally, “new ears of grain.” It is the old name of the month that falls in March and April, when ears of grain have just begun to appear. During the Babylonian exile (6th century B.C.E.), when Jews adopted the Babylonian month names that are still in use today, Abib (or Aviv) became known as Nisan.

passover sacrifice

This sacrifice (pesah) reenacts the original pesah offering brought by the Israelites on the eve of the Exodus immediately before the last of the Ten Plagues. The name is derived from the verb pasah, which describes the manner in which God spared the firstborn in the houses of the Israelites after the blood of the sacrifice was smeared on their doorposts and lintels (Exod. 12:13,23,27). In the Vulgate, the verb appears as “[the LORD] passed over,” and the sacrifice is called “passover.” The Hebrew verb, however, does not mean “to pass over.” Most of the ancient translations and commentaries render the verb as the Lord “spared,” “had compassion,” or “protected.” The sacrifice, accordingly, is called the “protective sacrifice,” referring to the protection of the Israelites during the final plague. This very likely is the correct translation.

at night

Although the Israelites themselves started to leave Egypt “on the morrow of the passover offering” (Num. 33:3), God’s action—the slaying of Egypt’s firstborn at night—is viewed as the essence of the event.

2. from the flock and the herd

According to Exod. 12:3–5 and 21, the pesah offering was brought only from the flock and limited to sheep and goats. Deuteronomy clearly indicates that herd animals, large bovines, may be used as well. Perhaps this reflects a different economy, or a time when the sacrifice would be made at a central sanctuary where many households could share a larger animal.

The summary of the festivals in other books of the Torah (Exod. 23:14–17; Lev. 23; Num. 28–29) tell us how to celebrate the holidays. In contrast, Deuteronomy tells us why: “for it was in the month of Abib, at night, that the LORD your God freed you from Egypt” (v. 1), “for you departed . . . hurriedly” (v. 3), “after the ingathering” (v. 13). One might think that the reason for observance should precede the commandment to observe, so that people would know why they were celebrating. It seems to be more effective pedagogy, though, especially for children, to start with the deed and only later explain that this is why we eat matzah on Pesah and live in booths on Sukkot.
place where the Lord will choose to establish His name. You shall not eat anything leavened with it; for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress—for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly—so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live.

For seven days no leaven shall be found with you in all your territory, and none of the flesh of what you slaughter on the evening of the first day shall be left until morning.

You are not permitted to slaughter the passover sacrifice in any of the settlements that the Lord your God is giving you; but at the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name, there alone shall you slaughter the passover sacrifice, in the evening, at sunset, the time of day when you departed from Egypt. This is a characteristic requirement of Deuteronomy.

The entire seven days need not be spent at the chosen place, because it is necessary to return home in time to begin the harvest. Either

3. anything leavened Food prepared from dough to which a leavening agent was added to make it rise. In postbiblical halakhah, this means any leavened product of wheat, barley, spelt, rye, or oats. Most Ashk'namim also include rice, millet, corn, and legumes in this prohibition.

unleavened bread Matzah; bread made without yeast and not allowed to rise. It can be made quickly and was commonly prepared for unexpected guests. It is similar to the flat unleavened bread that Bedouins still bake on embers.

bread of distress The matzah is “bread of afflication” or “bread of poverty,” eaten by prisoners or by the poor. It is unpretentious, primitive fare that one would not normally eat. There is no evidence that the Israelites ate matzah when they were slaves. It commemorates the Exodus, not the enslavement.

remember the day of your departure By re-enacting the first pesah sacrifice and eating unleavened bread.

4. leaven Hebrew: i'or. Here refers to leavening agents, such as sourdough or yeast. It differs from “anything leavened” (hametz, v. 3), which refers to foodstuffs that have been leavened by leavening agents.

none of the flesh shall be left until morning

The sacrifice is offered at sunset (v. 6). It must be eaten through the night and finished by morning, thereby emulating procedures with the original pesah sacrifice in Egypt (see Exod. 12:8).

5. Once sacrificial worship is centralized in the chosen place, the pesah must be offered there. This is a characteristic requirement of Deuteronomy.

6. the time of day when you departed from Egypt The original pesah sacrifice, which was indispensable in ensuring the safety of the Israelites during the 10th plague, is here seen as the onset of the Exodus.

7. cook Literally, “boil,” reflecting the practice of a populace settled in the promised land. (Compare this with Exod. 12:9, which requires roasting, reflecting pastoral nomadic practice.)

in the morning you may start your journey back home The entire seven days need not be spent at the chosen place, because it is necessary to return home in time to begin the harvest. Either

HALAKHAH, L'MAASEH
16:3 you shall not eat anything leavened From this verse, the Talmud determines that the use or ownership of hametz (leavened products) is prohibited from midday on the day preceding Pesah, the 14th of Nisan (BT Pes. 28b). As a precautionary measure, the Sages rule that the hametz be burned at least one hour before midday (S.A. O.H. 434:2) and that one refrain from eating hametz from two hours before midday (i.e., the fourth hour after sunrise) (see Exod. 12:15; Lev. 2:11).
You shall cook and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose; and in the morning you may start back on your journey home. After eating unleavened bread six days, you shall hold a solemn gathering for the Lord your God on the seventh day: you shall do no work. You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger,
12. The memory of slavery is invoked to motivate extending this prescription to the servants and the poor mentioned in verse 11.

The Feast of Booths (vv. 13–15)
The third feast, at the end of the summer, celebrates the gathering of grain and new wine into storage for the coming year, the goal of all the preceding agricultural activities. This is the most exuberant of the festivals and has come to be called “the time of our rejoicing” (z’man simhatenu).

13. After the ingathering from your threshing floor and from your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities.

14. You shall hold a festival for the LORD your seven days, in the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.

15. Three times a year—on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Booths—all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed, but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that the LORD your God has bestowed upon you.

16. Feast of Unleavened Bread Here, the term must refer to the night of the pesah sacrifice (and not the following seven days), because that is the only time (according to v. 7) when worshipers are required to be at the chosen place.

males Only the adult males are obligated to appear, probably because pregnant and nursing women and young children could not reasonably be required to make long trips. Nevertheless, women and children frequently did take part, as is clear from verses 11 and 14.

appear before the LORD To pay Him homage at His sanctuary. This resembles the practice of homage to human sovereigns as reflected in treaties.

17. each with his own gift Literally, “each according to his means” (as in v. 10).