



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: V'zot Haberakhah (וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה, "this is the blessing")**
- **Chapters: Deut. 33:1-34:12**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

V'zot Haberakhah is the *final* portion of the Torah, which records Moses' last words to the people just before his death. It is always read just after the festival of Sukkot on the holiday called "Simchat Torah." After reading this portion, we will "rewind the scroll" back to Parashat Bereshit to begin reading the Torah all over again. We do this every year because *Talmud Torah* - the study of Torah - never ends! A true student of Scripture cannot claim to have completed the study of the Torah, for the implications of such study extend forever. And so the cycle continues, over and over in a continuous chain of study, ever widening, and all encompassing.

The phrase *v'zot haberakhah* means "this is the blessing," and it seems fitting that Moses concluded his life with a blessing of the people. The patriarchal practice of a father imparting his blessing before departing from this world goes back to Noah (Gen. 9:25-27), Isaac (Gen. 27:4) and Jacob (Gen. 49), and many of the sages note that Moses' blessing here extends or complements Jacob's earlier blessing given in Egypt.

Moses' blessing is especially significant in light of the prophetic song (i.e., the "Ha'azinu") which foretold of Israel's future sins and terrible punishments. Unlike the harshness of that prophecy, the message of this portion is entirely one of *blessing* - without correction or warning directed to the tribes (though the tribe of Simeon is oddly omitted from the blessing)... It is as if all sins are forgotten and all is now forgiven. Moses wanted to leave the people with a positive memory of him. There is a closing benediction for all the tribes in which Moses reminds them of the abundance they are to enjoy and the goodness that God has bestowed upon them.

At the end of the portion, Moses ascended Mount Nebo and God showed him all of the Promised Land – from the territory of Dan in the north to the Negev in the south. After receiving this great vision, Moses died on his birthday at the age of 120, at an unknown burial site. After a 30 day period of national mourning, Joshua assumed leadership over the people of Israel.

The portion (as well as the Torah itself) ends with the statement that no prophet ever again arose in Israel like Moses, "who knew the LORD face to face. He did all the signs and wonders the LORD had sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, all his servants, and the whole land, and he displayed great power and awesome might in view of all Israel."



Parashah Questions

[First read Deut. 33:1-5]

1. Why did Moses want his last words to be a blessing? (Deut. 33:1) ¹
2. How does Moses' blessing set him as a "father" to the Jewish people? ²
3. Can you recall three other times Moses blessed the people? ³
4. Moses was described as a "man of God" (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים). Name some others that the Bible also calls a "man of God." ⁴
5. Why did Moses say God came "from Sinai" and not "to Sinai"? (Deut. 33:2) ⁵
6. Why does Moses mention the LORD "dawning from Seir" and "shining forth from Mount Paran?" (Deut. 33:2) ⁶
7. What is unusual about the statement, "the LORD came from the myriads of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand" (Deut. 33:2)? ⁷



¹ The prophetic song, the Ha'azinu, was put into Moses' mouth as an oracle, but Moses wanted to speak from the heart before he died. According to midrash, when God came and told Moses to get ready to depart from this world, he appealed to Him saying, "Wait until I bless Israel. All my life they have had no pleasant experiences with me, for I constantly rebuked them and admonished them to fear God and fulfill the commandments. I do not wish to leave this world before I have blessed them."

² Moses dedicated himself to the welfare of the people with the same level of sacrifice a father makes for his own son.

³ After the physical tabernacle was complete (Exod. 39:43), after the altar was dedicated (Lev. 9:23), and at the start of Moses' farewell discourse (Deut. 1:11).

⁴ Some others include Elkanah (1 Sam. 2:27); Samuel (1 Sam. 9:6); David (Neh. 12:24); Shemayah (1 Kings 12:22); Ido (1 Kings 13:1); Micah (1 Kings 20:28); Elijah (2 Kings 1:9); Elishah (2 Kings 4:9); Amotz (2 Chron. 25:7). In general the term refers to a great prophet of the LORD, or someone who is "part man and part God."

⁵ According to Rashi, this metaphor suggests that the marriage bond between God and the Jewish people was forged when God came "from Sinai," like a groom waiting for his bride, coming forth to greet her.

⁶ Before God came to Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish people, he first offered it to all the Gentile nations, who all made various excuses why they could not accept it. For instance, the descendants of Esau (Seir) told God they could not accept it because they were destined to "live by the sword." Likewise, Mount Paran belongs to the Ishmaelites, who gave God their own reasons for refusing the Torah. Only the Jews answered God unreservedly, *na'aseh v'nishma*: "we will do and we will obey." Upon their acceptance, God descended from myriads of holy angels with his Torah. Alternatively, Maimonides interprets this as a chronicle of God's revelation to Israel. First, the LORD appeared "from Sinai." After camping at the Sinai desert for a year, the people traveled to "Mount Paran," where God decreed that the people would wander in the desert 38 more years because of the sin of the spies. After this 38 year period of exile was over, the people reached the border of Mount Seir, and there God appeared to Moses to guide the next generation of Israel to begin taking possession of the land.

⁷ First, God descended *from* the midst of the heavenly host to reveal Himself. Second, "flaming fire" is better translated as "fiery law," from *esh* (אֵשׁ) and *dat* (דָּת). In the Torah scroll, *esh* and *dat* are joined together, appearing as one word (*eshdat*: אֵשׁ־דָּת), sometimes translated as "foundation," that implies we can never separate God's will from His fire.



8. Discuss Deut. 33:3, “Though God loves the nations, he keeps his holy ones (kedoshim) in his hand. They are led in His footsteps and are upheld in his word.”⁸
9. What is the heritage (מורשת) of the congregation of Jacob? (Deut. 33:4)⁹
10. What does the word “Jeshurun” (יֵשׁוּרֻן) mean? (Deut. 33:5, 26)¹⁰

[The following pertains to the blessings mentioned in Deut. 33:6-29]

11. Which tribe did Moses bless first? (Deut. 33:6)¹¹
12. Which tribe did Moses bless second, third? (Deut. 33:7-8)¹²
13. What special power was given to Levi? (Deut. 37:8)¹³
14. Why was the tribe of Simeon *excluded* from the blessing?¹⁴



- ⁸ This statement is thought to elaborate on God’s special relationship with Israel. Note that the word *af* (אף) means “anger” as well as “though,” and therefore Yalkut Shimoni states that this verse alludes to the fact that Gentiles will only enjoy grace for a brief period. Ultimately their relationship will end in anger.... Some of the traditional Jewish commentators translate the term “nations” (עַמִּים) to refer to Israel’s tribes, not the peoples of the earth in general...
- ⁹ The Torah Moses commanded us is the *heritage* (מורשת) of the congregation of Jacob. “We will grasp it and not let go” (Rashi). The Talmud states that this verse provides the basis for a father to begin teaching his child Torah as soon as he can speak. On the other hand, those who prevent others from learning Torah are like those who steal their inheritance (יִרְשָׁה). The word *morashah* is related to the Aramaic word for “fiancee,” which suggests that Torah is the “bride” of every Jew (Sifri). Note that the rabbis use this verse to condemn non-Jews who study Torah and to sentence them to death: “It is our heritage, and not theirs.” Can we all say *Oy Vey*?
- ¹⁰ Jeshurun is a poetic name for Israel meaning “upright one,” from *yashar* (יָשָׁר), to be straight, right, true, just, etc. Rabbi Bachya understands the name to come from the root *shur* (שׁוּר), meaning “to see,” from Num. 24:17 (“I see him”), referring to the Jewish people who were granted a direct vision of God. The Septuagint translates this term as “beloved one” (ὁ ἡγαπημένος). The prophet Isaiah calls Israel, “Jeshurun, whom I have chosen” (Isa. 44:2). Followers of Yeshua are called to be “yesharim,” upright ones. Our verse (33:5) states that the LORD became King over Jeshurun when the heads of the people and all the tribes were gathered together to receive the Torah at Sinai.
- ¹¹ Moses first blessed Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn son with Leah. Recall that Jacob rebuked Reuben because of the latter’s illicit relationship with his concubine Bilhah (Gen. 35:22). Moses’ blessing, “Let Reuben live and not die!” is therefore meant to counteract the earlier rebuke given by Jacob. Moses’ additional request that the tribe would multiply was meant to demonstrate his complete forgiveness for the sin of the rebellion with Korach (Num. 16). Finally, the sages note that the phrase, “his men will be counted” alludes to the world to come.
- ¹² Moses next blessed Judah, the tribe that represented the monarchy (Messiah) and then Levi, the tribe that represented the priesthood and its service. Compare the blessing of Levi with Jacob’s statement that Levi (and Simeon) would be scattered within Israel (Gen. 49:7). It seems that the anger of Levi was sanctified, but not the anger of Simeon.
- ¹³ The urim and the tumim, precious stones used to discern God’s will.
- ¹⁴ Rashi states that it was because Simeon played a major role in the sin of Baal Peor (Num. 25), and the death of Zimri at the hand of Pinchas prefigured future judgment. The census taken shortly afterward showed that most of the 24,000 men who died in the plague were from the tribe of Simeon. Rambam, on the other hand, states that Moses gave only 12 blessings because of the mystical significance associated with the number 12. Indeed, in no place are more than twelve tribes listed in one place in the Torah (despite there being total 13 tribes).



15. Why was the tribe of Levi so highly honored? (Deut. 33:8-11) ¹⁵
16. What special blessing was given to Benjamin? (Deut. 33:12) ¹⁶
17. What tribe received the “favor of the One who dwelt in a bush”? (Deut. 33:14-16) ¹⁷
18. Why is Ephraim described as a “firstborn bull” with horns of a wild ox? (Deut. 33:17) ¹⁸
19. What was the relationship between Zebulun and Issachar? (Deut. 33:18) ¹⁹
20. What two tribes does Moses liken to lions? ²⁰
21. What tribe would occupy the fresh water Sea of Galilee? (Deut. 33:23)? ²¹
22. What blessing was given to Asher? (Deut. 33:24-25) ²²
23. What blessing was given to “Jeshurun” (Deut. 33:26-29) ²³

¹⁵ First, the Levites did not sin when Israel complained about the lack of water at Massah (Exod. 17:1-7), nor later at Meribah (Num. 20:2-13). Second, Levi did not engage in the sin of the Golden Calf and were willing to execute their fellow countrymen in obedience to God's verdict of judgment (Exod. 32:27-28). Because of these things, the tribe of Levi was selected to become Israel's Torah teachers and the ones responsible for service at the altar of the LORD. The plural form of “torahs” (i.e., “they shall teach your Laws,” 33:10) alludes to both the written and oral law. Because of their ongoing faithfulness, God would especially bless his effort and the work of his hands...

¹⁶ The Temple would be built in his territory. “God hovers over him all day and dwells between his shoulders.”

¹⁷ Joseph (or rather, his two sub clans of Ephraim and Manasseh). The yield of the sun and the moon alludes to Joseph's dreams as a youth (Gen. 37:9). “The One who dwells in the bush” (שֹׁכֵן בִּסִּיחַ) refers to the LORD God, who first revealed himself to Moses in the thorn bush on Sinai (Exod. 3:2).

¹⁸ This was intended to bless Joshua, Moses' successor, who was an Ephraimite. The ox was a symbol of strength. Prophetically this pictures the coming reign of Yeshua, who will “gore the nations to the ends of the earth.”

¹⁹ The two tribes helped each other. Zebulun went out on business trips whereas Issachar would study in the “tents of the Torah.” Zebulun helped support Issachar in return for a share in the merit of his studies...

²⁰ The tribes of Gad (33:20) and Dan (33:22), both of which were situated on the borders of Israel. Note that Jacob also referred to Judah as a lion in Gen 49, referring to the Messiah.

²¹ The Sea of Galilee (or “Yam Kinneret”) was granted to the tribe of Naftali. This has always been Israel's most fruitful region of the promised land.

²² Asher would be blessed with sons and with oil... Note that Jacob blessed Asher that “his bread would be fat” (Gen. 49:20), which implies that oil (shemen) would be a source of blessing in his territory. Asher's territory would also include natural mineral deposits (“iron and copper” are your bars).

²³ God would ride through the heavens to help Israel, because God is their “dwelling place” and underneath are the “everlasting arms,” so that they would be empowered by heaven to take possession of the land and destroy the enemy. Note that the Sifri states that when Israel obeys God's will, He “rides the heavens to their aid,” but if they disobey, “His majesty is in the skies,” meaning that He will not condescend to intervene on their behalf... When Israel obeys the LORD, however, she is invincible and will be blessed above the nations. “Who is like you, O Israel” mirrors the Song of Moses at the Sea (Exod. 15:11). Israel's greatness is connected with the greatness of the LORD.



24. Where did Moses die, and at what age? (Deut. 34:1-7) ²⁴
25. How long did Israel mourn for Moses? (Deut. 34:8) ²⁵
26. What does it mean that Moses knew God *panim el panim* (פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים), that is, “face to face”? (Deut. 34:10) ²⁶
27. Why is it customary for the Torah reader to strike the bema several times when he reads “ulkhol hamora ha-gadol (וְלִכְלֹל הַמִּזְרָא הַגָּדוֹל), “and for all the great deeds of terror” that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (i.e. the last verse of the Torah)? ²⁷
28. What does chazak, chazak, ve'nitchazek mean? ²⁸

חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזֵּק!

For Next Week:

- Read parashat **Bereshit** (i.e., Genesis 1:1-6:8)
- Read the Haftarah (Isaiah 42:5-43:11)
- Read the New Testament (John 1:1-14)



- ²⁴ Moses died atop Mount Nebo, the top of the cliff facing Jericho. From this vantage point, God showed him all of the promised land, as far as “the latter sea” (עַד הַיָּם הָאַחֲרִיון), i.e., the Mediterranean Sea. Note, however, that the Hebrew text can be read as “until the End of Days,” which suggests that God showed Moses the complete vision of divine history from atop the mountain. Moses died at age 120, “at God’s command,” which states that even in death Moses was a faithful servant. God Himself buried him in a valley in Moab, in “repayment” for Moses’ service of carrying Joseph’s coffin out of Egypt. Moses died in strength and vigor, despite his age: “His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated.” You can bless someone with long life by saying “ad me’ah v’esrim shanah,” [may you live to be] to be 120 years [as did Moses].
- ²⁵ Thirty days, which is considered the standard period of mourning after shivah (called *avelut*). There were 30 days of mourning after Jacob died (Gen. 50:3), after Aaron died (Num. 20:29), and now 30 days for Moses...
- ²⁶ It meant without any “veils” or need for mediation. He could speak to God boldly and from the heart (see Heb. 4:16). Originally Moses was not allowed to see God’s face directly (Exod. 33:20-23), though at his death he was given a direct vision of God (Sifrei).
- ²⁷ The great deeds of terror performed before the eyes of all Israel refer to God’s acts of judgments, such as the breaking of the tablets after the sin of the Golden Calf. Since it is customary to end all Jewish books on a positive note, the Torah’s final phrase recalls the sin of the people, though the “tapping” of the table is meant to indicate the call to *teshuvah*, repentance. Thus the Torah’s concluding allusion is not to sin, but to the healing of sin through *teshuvah*.
- ²⁸ “Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened,” said after completing a book of Torah.

