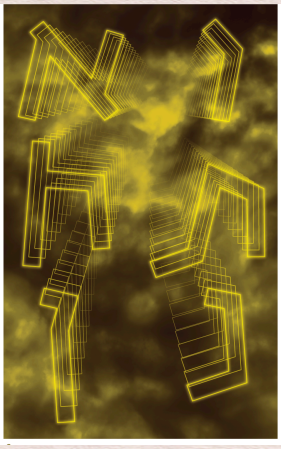
Vaetchanan: Devarim (Deuteronomy)

What's it all about?



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Moses confides in the Israelites, telling them that **he pleaded with God to let him enter the Promised Land, but God refused,** instructing him instead to climb a nearby mountain and watch the land from afar. Moses then continues his historical review, describing the Exodus and the giving of the Torah and declaring them miraculous and unprecedented events. He predicts that **future generations of Jews will turn away from God and will be punished with exile, but will eventually return to God and His commandments.** The parsha also includes the repetition of the Ten Commandments, the verses of the Shema, and the commandments to put on tefillin and install mezuzot on our doorposts.

> "Just be wary and guard yourself carefully lest you forget the things that you saw with your own eyes, and lest these things depart from your heart all the days of your life—and you must impart them as well to your children and to your children's children."

Take a deeper dive

Towards the end of this week's parsha, we receive a curious commandment: "**You must do what is proper and good in the eyes of God,** in order that it go well with you and that you come and take possession of the good land that God swore to your forefathers." The wording is a bit strange; why, after all, do "what is proper and good in the eyes of God" when God has already given us a very specific set of instructions on precisely how we must behave? Rashi, the Torah's greatest commentator, explains that the verse is here to teach us that we must "go beyond the letter of the law," which, in a book dedicated largely to the law, is confusing: What does going beyond the letter of the law even look like?

The Ramban, the great Nachmanides, delivered a simple but piercing answer. It's one thing, he wrote, to merely follow God's laws because we were thus commanded; it's another to do them because we desire good, and want the world to be better, and would act to make it better even if we hadn't been explicitly told to do so. It's a fine distinction to parse. So Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, a great contemporary Israeli rabbi, stepped in to help explain it. Think, he taught us, of some of the great mitzvot pertaining to how we ought to treat each other, like giving money to charity or visiting a sick friend. Can you imagine giving money to a charity you don't actually care about and support? And what would a visit to the hospital look like if you had no feelings for the sick person and didn't really wish them well? Were that the case, obviously, you wouldn't really fulfil the mitzvot, even if you went through the motions of giving the money or completing the visit, because it's the kavanah, or intentionality, that counts.

The same is true for all of God's commandments. **If we only do them because we expect some reward, we aren't really serving God—we're serving ourselves.** This, maybe, is why we need a Deuteronomy, a second telling of God's laws: So that we may learn again how to keep them, not because we must, but because we desire nothing else.

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