



DENNIS  
PRAGER

DEUTERONOMY  
*God, Blessings, and  
Curses*

THE RATIONAL  
BIBLE

THE ALPERSON EDITION

# THE RATIONAL BIBLE: DEUTERONOMY



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*God, Blessings, and Curses*

DENNIS PRAGER

EDITED BY JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

ACADEMIC EDITOR: LEEOR GOTTLIEB

THE ALPERSON EDITION



REGNERY  
FAITH

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# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>XVII</b>
<b>Why This Commentary?</b>	xvii
<b>Who Is This Torah Commentary For?</b>	xix
<b>To Jewish Readers:</b>	xix
<b>To Christian Readers:</b>	xx
<b>To Non-Religious Readers:</b>	xxi
<b>The Torah Is Not Man-Made</b>	xxii
<b>Man-Made or God-Made: Why It Matters</b>	xxiii
<b>How Was the Torah Transmitted?</b>	xxv
<b>Reason, Torah, and God</b>	xxv
<b>Why Read <i>The Rational Bible</i>?</b>	xxvii
<b>Some Details</b>	xxviii
<b>Why <i>Exodus</i> Was Volume 1</b>	xxviii
<b>BC or BCE?</b>	xxviii
<b>God as “He”</b>	xxviii
<b>On How to Read This Commentary</b>	xxix
<b>The Use of Post-Biblical Jewish Sources</b>	xxix
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xxix
<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>XXXV</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>Why Moses Introduced New Laws and New Ideas</b>	1
<b>Did Moses Write Every Word of Deuteronomy?</b>	2
<b>On the Need to Explain the Torah</b>	4
<b>Moses’s First Address</b>	5
<b>ESSAY: A Good Society Is Unattainable without Wisdom</b>	6
<b>ESSAY: Fear of God Is Morally and Psychologically Necessary</b>	12
<b>Was Sending Spies into Canaan God’s Idea or Moses’s?</b>	15
<b>ESSAY: When Anger—Divine and Human—Is Appropriate</b>	17
<b>When God Does Not Listen</b>	20
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>God Is Not Ethnocentric, and Israel Is Not to Expand beyond the Promised Land</b>	23
<b>Another Moral First</b>	24
<b>Who Complains?</b>	24
<b>ESSAY: The Moral Problem of Killing “Men, Women, and Children” in the Torah</b>	28
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>The Torah and Monotheism</b>	36
<b>Moses Blamed the Israelites for Not Being Allowed to Enter the Promised Land</b>	37

## CHAPTER 4

<b>ESSAY: Do All of the Torah's Laws Have Reasons?</b>	39
<b>A Nation's Greatness Comes from Its Moral Power</b>	45
<b>ESSAY: Does God Answer Our Prayers?</b>	46
<b>When Nations Forget Their Past, They Cease to Exist</b>	48
<b>ESSAY: Are We to Fear or Only Revere God?</b>	49
<b>The Power of the Ear versus the Power of the Eye</b>	50
<b>God Is Not Physical</b>	51
<b>ESSAY: Can Other Nations Worship the Sun and the Moon?</b>	52
<b>Moses Expressed His Anger at the Israelites (Again)</b>	54
<b>A Good God Does Get Angry</b>	55
<b>What Happens When Jews Abandon God</b>	57
<b>How to Find God</b>	58
<b>God's Promise That the Jews Will Not Perish</b>	59

## CHAPTER 5

<b>On Blind Obedience</b>	63
<b>The Ten Commandments</b>	66
<b>ESSAY: Commandments Imply a Commander</b>	66
<b>Many People Reject the Idea of Commandments</b>	67
<b>Commandment One: The First Statement</b>	68
<b>First Be Grateful</b>	69
<b>The Ten Commandments: One of the Two Purposes of the Exodus</b>	70
<b>ESSAY: Commandment Two: Having No Other Gods Is as Important as Belief in the One God</b>	71
<b>ESSAY: Education as a False God</b>	73
<b>ESSAY: Art as a False God</b>	75
<b>ESSAY: Love as a False God</b>	77
<b>ESSAY: Intelligence as a False God</b>	79
<b>ESSAY: Science as a False God</b>	82
<b>God Cannot Be Depicted Physically</b>	83
<b>Does God Get "Jealous"?</b>	84
<b>What Does It Mean to "Hate God"?</b>	84
<b>ESSAY: Commandment Three: The One Commandment Whose Violation God Will Not Forgive</b>	86
<b>Commandment Four: The Sabbath, the One Ritual in the Ten Commandments</b>	89
<b>ESSAY: Shabbat in My Life, Part I:—"God Is Higher Than the Angels"</b>	93
<b>ESSAY: Shabbat in My Life, Part II: When I Decided I Would Observe Shabbat the Rest of My Life</b>	96
<b>ESSAY: Commandment Five: Parents Are the Only People We Are Commanded to Honor</b>	97
<b>In the Torah, Mother and Father Are Equals</b>	99
<b>We Are Not Commanded to Love Our Parents</b>	99
<b>Parents Should Be Honor-Worthy</b>	100
<b>The Second Five Commandments—How We Are to Treat Fellow Human Beings</b>	101
<b>Murder: The Great Evil</b>	102
<b>ESSAY: Is Murder Forgivable?</b>	103
<b>The Sixth Commandment Prohibits Murder, Not Killing</b>	105

The Seventh Commandment: Adultery	105
The Eighth Commandment: Stealing	106
The Ninth Commandment: Lying	107
The Tenth Commandment: Coveting Anything That Belongs to One's Neighbor	107
God Wants Us to Have a Good Life	110

## CHAPTER 6

III

Are We to “Revere” or “Fear” God?	111
ESSAY: The Jewish Credo (the Sh'ma): There Is Only One God	112
ESSAY: Love of God Does Not Come Naturally	113
The First Lesson	114
The Second Lesson	115
The Third Lesson	117
ESSAY: Is God Lovable?	117
Parents as Teachers of Moral Character	120
ESSAY: Ritual and Faith, Judaism and Christianity	121
The <i>Mezuzah</i>	127
Success, Gratitude, Memory, and Faith	127
On God Described as “Jealous”	129
On God's Threat to Wipe Out the Israelites	130
ESSAY: Faith Demands Good Works	131
ESSAY: Explain Your Religion (or Nation) to Your Children, or There Will Eventually Be No Religion (or Nation) to Explain	132

## CHAPTER 7

I37

Did the Israelites Commit Genocide?	137
Intermarriage with Idolaters	138
The Power of Wives	138
Outside of Israel, Paganism Is to Be Tolerated	139
God Chose the Jews Because They Weren't Special	140
Man and God (Like Husbands and Wives) Have a Contract	141
ESSAY: God Rewards Good—and That Is a Good Thing	142
No Infertility?	143

## CHAPTER 8

I49

ESSAY: Does <i>Mitzvah</i> Mean “Commandment” or “Good Deed”?	149
Everyone Is Tested	151
Man Needs Much More Than Bread for a Meaningful Life	152
Fear of a Just God Is Morally Necessary	153
ESSAY: Be Thankful—Even If You Don't Feel It	154
God Wants Us to Enjoy Life	156
Belief in God Means Living by God's Laws	157
The Rich Need God as Much as the Poor Do	158
How the Successful Can Avoid Self-Worship	159
Godless Nations Really Do Perish	161

<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>163</b>
Deuteronomy 9:3 to 9:6—Four Important Verses	164
Why Did God Choose This Unimpressive People?	165
Essay: How Are People to Regard Their Nation's Past?	168
On Arguing with God—or Parents	175
Moses's Three Arguments on Behalf of Sparing the Israelites	176
<b>CHAPTER 10</b>	<b>179</b>
What Are Verses 6–9 Doing Here?	180
Is There a Contradiction as to Where Aaron Died?	181
ESSAY: Why Did Moses Tell the Israelites That He Saved Them?	183
ESSAY: The Five Things God Wants from Us	185
The Commandments Are for Our Sake, Not God's	187
God Is First and Foremost a Judge. Thank God.	189
God Loves the Stranger—the Only God Who Ever Did	191
Empathy Is Important, but Not Enough	191
The Torah's Three Commandments of Love	193
<b>CHAPTER 11</b>	<b>195</b>
Miracles Alone Do Not Produce Faith	196
Are These Rewards That God Promises Believable?	197
Evil and Famine	199
ESSAY: Life Consists of Both Blessings and Curses	201
<b>CHAPTER 12</b>	<b>205</b>
On Destroying Canaanite Gods in the Holy Land	205
Sacrifice, Not Prayer, Was Permitted in One Place	207
Only the Torah Banned Human Sacrifice	207
God Wants Happy People	209
ESSAY: Religion, Like Everything Worthwhile, Demands Sacrifices	210
Slaves, Too, Are to Rejoice	212
ESSAY: The Torah, Vegetarianism, and the Value of Animals	214
On Not Eating Blood	220
The Essence of Ethical Monotheism	221
<b>CHAPTER 13</b>	<b>225</b>
ESSAY: Why People Add to and Subtract from God's Laws	225
Why Would God Test Us?	229
ESSAY: The Morality of a Seemingly Immoral Law	230
<b>CHAPTER 14</b>	<b>237</b>
No Self-Laceration in Mourning	237
Jewish Chosenness	238
ESSAY: Kosher Animals	239

Four-Legged Land Animals (Verses 5–8)	241
Birds (Verses 11–18)	243
Winged Insects (Verses 19–20)	244
Why Not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk?	244
God Does Not Eat	246
Why Does the Torah Permit Alcohol?	247
How Much Charity Are We Obligated to Give?	248

## CHAPTER 15 251

ESSAY: The Sabbatical Year Cancels Poor People’s Debts	251
What Does “There Shall Be No Needy among You” Mean?	253
It’s All about Loans	254
ESSAY: If the Sabbatical Year Annuls Loans, Will People Still Give Loans to the Poor?	254
Moral Limitations on Slavery and Indentured Servitude	256
When a Slave Does Not Want to Leave His Master	257

## CHAPTER 16 261

The Torah’s Holidays	261
The First Festival of the Year: Passover (Pesach)	262
The Power of Ritual	263
The Torah’s Behaviorist Approach to Happiness	267
The Third Festival: Sukkot, the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles)	269
Demands on Judges	270
ESSAY: Justice Comes before Everything—including Compassion	271

## CHAPTER 17 275

ESSAY: On Executing an Israelite Idol Worshiper	275
The Torah’s Moral Innovations in Charging the Accused	277
Why the Witnesses Must Cast the First Stones	278
Why the Rest of the Community Must Also Cast Stones	279
ESSAY: How Do We Know the Right Thing to Do If the Torah Doesn’t Specifically Tell Us?	280
ESSAY: Freedom and Theocracy	283
If the Israelites Want a King...	285
ESSAY: The Torah’s Limitations on a King’s Wealth and Power	286
The King Is Subject to God’s Laws, Just as Every Other Israelite	288

## CHAPTER 18 291

ESSAY: The Banning of the Magical Arts	293
The Role of the Prophet	295
How to Identify a False Prophet	297

## CHAPTER 19 299

What to Do with a Person Who Commits Homicide Unintentionally	299
The Lesson of Moses: To Know God Is to Love God	302
On Pitying Murderers	303
Private Property	304

<b>CHAPTER 20</b>	<b>309</b>
The Meaning of God's Promise of Victory	309
People Who Were Exempted from Battle	310
The Frightened Are Exempted from Military Service	311
Laws of War	312
<b>ESSAY: Morality and Moses's Order to Wipe Out the Canaanites</b>	314
<b>CHAPTER 21</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>ESSAY: The Earliest Known Ban on Rape in Time of War</b>	322
You May Love One Wife More, but You Cannot Favor Her Offspring	326
Love versus What Is Right	327
The "So What?" Principle	327
The Wayward Son—and the Centrality of Parental Authority	328
<b>ESSAY: Parents Are Not Permitted to Kill Their Children</b>	329
Putting the Bodies of Those Executed on Display...	332
... Is an Affront to God	332
<b>CHAPTER 22</b>	<b>335</b>
<b>ESSAY: Neither Sex May Wear the Clothing of the Other Sex</b>	336
Releasing a Mother Bird Prior to Taking Her Young	340
<b>ESSAY: God Made Order by Making Distinctions: Do Not Mix That Which Is Distinctive</b>	342
A Husband Claims He Was Cheated When He Paid to Marry a Virgin:	
The Torah Sought to Protect Wives—I	344
The Torah Sought to Protect Wives—II	346
The Torah Sought to Protect Wives—III	347
<b>ESSAY: Were Past Generations Unsophisticated for Valuing Virginity?</b>	349
The Penalty for Adultery Applies to the Man and the Woman	351
Engagement Is Tantamount to Marriage	351
Rape and the Involuntary Loss of Virginity	353
<b>CHAPTER 23</b>	<b>357</b>
Marriage to the Former Wife of One's Father Is Forbidden	357
<b>ESSAY: The <i>Mamzer</i>: A Seemingly Insoluble Moral Problem in the Torah</b>	358
What Does "Congregation of the Lord" Mean?	361
Three Possible Approaches to the Dilemma	364
Do Not Hate Those Who Enslaved You	366
Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness	368
A Runaway Slave May Not Be Returned to His Master	369
Cult Prostitution	370
<b>CHAPTER 24</b>	<b>375</b>
<b>ESSAY: Divorce</b>	375
Can a Person Divorce for Any Reason?	375
Can Only a Man Initiate a Divorce?	379
A Man May Not Remarry the Woman He Divorced If She Remarries and Is Widowed or Divorced	381

<b>A Man Is Obligated to Make His Bride Happy</b>	382
<b>Preserving a Borrower's Dignity</b>	382
<b>A Ban on Kidnapping People to Sell as Slaves</b>	383
<b>"Remember What God Did to Miriam"—the Importance of Memory</b>	384
<b>A Man's Home—Even the Home of a Poor Man in Debt—Is Sacrosanct</b>	385
<b>You May Not Take Advantage of a Borrower</b>	386
<b>You May Not Abuse Your Worker—Jew or Non-Jew</b>	386
<b>You May Not Delay Payment to Your Workers</b>	386
<b>ESSAY: Neither Children nor Parents May Be Punished for the Others' Crimes</b>	387
<b>Do Not Oppress the Most Vulnerable</b>	389

## **CHAPTER 25** **391**

<b>Corporal Punishment of Criminals</b>	391
<b>The Dignity of a Punished Man Must Be Preserved</b>	392
<b>Levirate Marriage: Marrying the Widow of One's Brother</b>	393
<b>What If a Man Doesn't Want to Marry His Brother's Widow?</b>	394
<b>What Does the Widow Do When Her Brother-in-Law Refuses to Marry Her?</b>	395
<b>When Noble Ends Do Not Justify Ignoble Means</b>	396
<b>The Overriding Significance of Honesty in Business</b>	398
<b>Evil Must Be Remembered</b>	400

## **CHAPTER 26** **403**

<b>The Feast of Weeks—Shavuot</b>	403
<b>Prescriptive versus Spontaneous Prayer</b>	405
<b>ESSAY: Happiness Is a Moral Obligation</b>	407
<b>Tithing</b>	409

## **CHAPTER 27** **413**

<b>ESSAY: The Need to Explain the Torah's Teachings and Offer Them to the World</b>	415
<b>Twelve Cursed Actions</b>	418
<b>1. Constructing a False God</b>	418
<b>2. Cursing One's Parents</b>	419
<b>3. Violating Private Property</b>	419
<b>4. Tricking Those Who Do Not See</b>	420
<b>5. Oppressing the Least Protected Members of Society</b>	420
<b>6. Sleeping with the Wife of One's Father</b>	420
<b>7. Bestiality</b>	421
<b>8. Sleeping with One's Sister</b>	421
<b>9. Sleeping with One's Mother-in-Law</b>	422
<b>10. Murdering a Person in Secret</b>	422
<b>11. Accepting a Bribe in a Murder Case</b>	422
<b>12. "This Teaching" ("This Torah")</b>	423
<b>The Importance of This Verse to Christian Theology</b>	423

<b>CHAPTER 28</b>	<b>427</b>
The Blessings for Obedience (Verses 1–14)	427
The Most Audacious Prediction in History	427
The Blessings	429
The Curses for Disobedience (Verses 15–68)	432
The Listed Punishments Are of This World, Not the Next	433
Additional Curses	434
The Sin of Not Serving God in Joy and the Sin of Ingratitude	438
Epilogue	443
The Curses: A True Story	443
<b>CHAPTER 29</b>	<b>445</b>
People Rarely Appreciate What They Receive for Free	446
Once Again—the Danger of Following One’s Heart	450
What Does the Blotting Out of One’s Name Mean?	451
Things That Are Unknowable	453
<b>CHAPTER 30</b>	<b>455</b>
Impediments to Loving God	456
God’s Instructions Are <i>from</i> Heaven—but Not <i>in</i> Heaven	459
ESSAY: Everything in Life Is a Choice—including Life	460
<b>CHAPTER 31</b>	<b>463</b>
ESSAY: Teach the Founding Texts to Every Generation or You Will Cease to Be a Nation	465
When God Hides His Face	469
Courage: The Rarest, and Most Important, of the Moral Qualities	471
Why Moses Called on Heaven and Earth as Witnesses	472
<b>CHAPTER 32</b>	<b>475</b>
Part I: Introduction to Moses’s Poem (Verses 1–3)	475
Part II: A Faithful God and a Faithless People (Verses 4–9)	475
ESSAY: God Made the Jews—and the West Was Made by Those Who Believed in the Jews’ God	477
Part III: The Goodness of God (Verses 10–14)	479
Part IV: Israel’s Prosperity and Apostasy (Verses 15–18)	480
Part V: God’s Responses to Israel’s Apostasy (Verses 19–22)	481
Part VI: The Execution of God’s Judgment (Verses 23–25)	482
Part VII: Why God Did Not Permit Israel to Be Decimated by Its Enemies (Verses 26–33)	483
Part VIII: God Will Ultimately Save Israel (Verses 34–38)	484
ESSAY: What Is Revenge? Is It Reserved to God Alone?	484
Part IX: God’s Nature and His Vengeance (Verses 39–44)	487
Part X (Conclusion): God’s Deliverance of Israel (Verse 43)	488
Moses Could See the Promised Land—but Not Enter It	489

<b>CHAPTER 33</b>	<b>491</b>
<b>Moses's Farewell Address</b>	491
<b>Introduction (Verses 2–5)</b>	492
<b>The Order of the Blessings</b>	493
<b>Epilogue</b>	501
<b>CHAPTER 34</b>	<b>503</b>
<b>Moses's Death</b>	503
<b>Few of Us Enter Our Promised Land</b>	503
<b>Moses Died Alone</b>	505
<b>People in Positions of Authority Should Not Seek to Be Loved</b>	508
<b>ESSAY: The Greatness of Moses</b>	509
<b>GENESIS</b>	<b>513</b>
<b>NOTES</b>	<b>517</b>



*To Sue*

*“It is not good for man to be alone.  
I will make for him a helper who is his equal.”*

*—Genesis 2:18 (literal translation)*

*In blessed memory of my beloved friend and budding scholar  
Benjamin Ben Zion Zev Telushkin*



# INTRODUCTION

**THIS INTRODUCTION IS INTENDED TO GREATLY ENHANCE YOUR UNDERSTANDING** and enjoyment of this commentary.

Though Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—this work is the third installment of my five-volume commentary on it. Deuteronomy is unique in a number of ways. First, with the exception of the final chapter, it contains no narrative. Second, it contains more laws than any other book of the Bible—and I have endeavored to explain nearly all of them. Third, virtually the entire book is in Moses’s voice.

## WHY THIS COMMENTARY?

I have been teaching the Torah all of my adult life and have devoted decades to writing this explanation of and commentary on it. I have done so because I believe if people properly understand the Torah and attempt to live by its values and precepts, the world will be an infinitely kinder and more just place. Since childhood, I have been preoccupied—almost obsessed—with the problem of evil: people deliberately hurting other people. At the age of sixteen, I wrote in my diary that I wanted to devote my life “to influencing people to the good.” That mission has animated my life. In a nutshell, I love goodness, and I hate evil. My favorite verse in the Bible is this: “Those who love God must hate evil” (Psalm 97:10).

Because of my (and the Torah’s) preoccupation with evil, in this commentary, I frequently cite the two most recent examples of mass evil: Nazism and

communism. I assume all readers of this commentary have some acquaintance with Nazi evil. Too few people have much knowledge of communist evil. Therefore, I should note here that communist regimes murdered about a hundred million people and enslaved and destroyed the lives of more than a billion. If you hate evil, you must confront what Nazis and communists wrought in the twentieth century (and what others wrought before them and are doing at this time).

I have had one other mission in life: to understand the human condition as best as possible. These two missions—promoting goodness and attaining wisdom—are linked, because it is impossible to do good without wisdom. Without wisdom, all the good intentions in the world are likely to be worthless. Many of the horrors of the twentieth century were supported by people with good intentions who lacked wisdom.

Therefore, because they have so much wisdom, the Torah and the rest of the Bible are indispensable. We live in an age, however, that has little wisdom; many people do not even value it. People value knowledge and intelligence, but not wisdom. This lack of wisdom—certainly in America and the rest of the West—is directly related to the decline in biblical literacy. In the American past, virtually every home, no matter how poor, owned a Bible, which was the primary vehicle by which parents passed on wisdom to their children.

In the modern period, however, people have increasingly replaced Bible-based homes and Bible-based schools with homes and schools in which the Bible plays no role. As a result, we are less wise and more morally confused. As I show in *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* through my discussions of secular education as a potential “false god,” the best-educated people in the West have often lacked wisdom and have been among the greatest supporters of evil ideologies and regimes.

Given the supreme importance of goodness and the indispensability of wisdom to goodness, the Torah, the greatest teacher of goodness and wisdom in human history, is the most important book ever written. It gave birth to the rest of the Bible, to Judaism, to Christianity, and to Western civilization. It gave us “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the Ten Commandments, a just and loving God, and many other bedrocks of civilization.

## WHO IS THIS TORAH COMMENTARY FOR?

I have written this book for people of every faith and for people of no faith. Throughout my years teaching the Torah, I would tell my students, “The Torah either has something to say to everyone or it has nothing to say to Jews.” The idea that the Torah is only for Jews is as absurd as the idea that Shakespeare is only for the English, or Beethoven is only for Germans. That is why, over time, half the people taking my Torah classes—at a Jewish seminary, no less—were not Jews.

Nevertheless, I would like to address some groups specifically.

### To Jewish Readers:

Because the Torah has formed the basis of Jewish life for three thousand years, there are very many Jewish commentaries, a good number of which have passed the hardest test: the test of time. However, the modern world poses intellectual and moral challenges that did not exist when the classic Jewish commentaries—most dating back to the Middle Ages—were written. Therefore, most modern Jews read neither those commentaries nor the Torah. I hope this commentary will address nearly all the intellectual and moral concerns of these Jews.

In general, it has not gone well for Jews (or for the world) when Jews cease believing in the Torah. Belief in the Torah as a divine document has probably been the single most important reason Jews have stayed alive for three thousand years, as well as forming the core of most Jews’ moral values. When Jews abandoned belief in the Torah, they or their offspring almost always ceased being Jews; too often, they created or joined social movements with non-Torah, or even anti-Torah, values.

To Jews who already believe in the Torah as a divine document: I hope this commentary gives you *chizuk* (strengthened faith). I hope it encourages you to go into the world to teach Torah-based values. To all other Jews, I hope this commentary leads you to an intellectual appreciation of the Torah’s unique

greatness and consequently causes you to at least entertain the possibility that God is its ultimate Author.

Jews read through the Torah in its entirety each year. It is therefore divided into fifty-four parshas (portions)—two extra for leap years and some combined during non-leap years. The names are generally taken from the first word or words of the portion. Here is the chapter and verse of each parsha in Deuteronomy, along with its corresponding page number in this book:

1:1–3:22	Devarim (דברים)	“Words”	1
3:23–7:11	Vaetchanan (ואתחנן)	“And I prayed”	36
7:12–11:25	Eikev (עקב)	“It will come to pass	141
11:26–16:17	Re'eh (ראה)	“See”	201
16:18–21:9	Shoftim (שופטים)	“Judges”	270
21:10–25:19	Ki Tetzei (כי תצא)	“When you go”	322
26:1–29:8	Ki Tavo (כי תבוא)	“When you enter”	403
29:9–30:20	Nitzavim (נצבים)	“Stand”	448
31:1–31:30	Vayelech (וילך)	“And he went”	463
32:1–32:52	Ha'azinu (האזינו)	“Listen”	475
33:1–34:12	V'Zot HaBracha (וזאת הברכה)	“And this is the blessing”	491

### To Christian Readers:

One cannot be a serious Christian without being familiar with the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament, as the Christian world named it). Nor can one understand Jesus, a Jew who was not only observant of Torah law, but who asserted he came to change not “one jot or one tittle” of it. For the many Christians who already believe the Torah embodies the word of God, I hope this commentary strengthens your faith in the Torah. As Maimonides, widely considered the greatest Jewish philosopher, wrote nine hundred years ago, his differences with Christian theology notwithstanding, it is Christians who have been primarily responsible for disseminating knowledge of the Torah to the world.

I should add that I have greatly benefitted from reading works by Christian Bible scholars, as the reader will often note. They combine a knowledge of modern Bible scholarship with religious faith in the text.

### To Non-Religious Readers:

I have had you most in mind when writing this commentary. With every passing generation in the West, fewer and fewer people believe in God, let alone in the Bible. This is a catastrophe for the West, and it is a tragedy for you. Having God, Bible-based religion, a religious community, and the Bible in one's life enables one to have a far deeper and happier life. After reading this commentary, such a life will hopefully become appealing to you.

To readers outside of the West, the Torah has as much to say to you as to anyone in the West. Just as Beethoven and Shakespeare have as much to say to a non-Westerner as to a Westerner, the Torah has as much to say to a non-Jew and a non-Christian as to a Jew or a Christian.

I look forward to your reactions. They influence my writing of subsequent volumes.

In writing this commentary, I have no hidden agenda. My agenda is completely open: I want as many people as possible to take the Torah seriously, to entertain the possibility that it is God-given—or, at the very least, to understand why many rational people do. Nor do I have a parochial agenda. I am a believing Jew, but neither God, nor the Torah, nor later Judaism ever obligated Jews to make non-Jews Jewish. Jews have always welcomed—and until prohibited (when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity) from doing so, even sought—converts. What God and the Torah obligate Jews to do is bring humanity to the God of the Torah and to His basic moral rules as found therein, especially the Ten Commandments. People can and have lived according to the Torah's moral values as members of other faiths (most obviously Christians) or as non-denominational believers in God: “ethical monotheists” such as the American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin.

## THE TORAH IS NOT MAN-MADE

For reasons I develop throughout the commentary, I am convinced God, not man, is the Torah's ultimate source. The Torah is so utterly different—morally, theologically, and in terms of wisdom—from anything else preceding it, and, for that matter, from anything written since, that a reasonable person would have to conclude either God or moral supermen were responsible for it.

To cite just a few examples of what the Torah introduced to the world:

- A universal God (the God of all people): This began the long road to human beings believing that with one “Father in Heaven,” all human beings are brothers and sisters.
- An invisible, incorporeal God: Therefore, the physical is not the only reality. Life is infinitely more than the material world in which we live during our brief lifetime on Earth.
- A moral God: All gods prior to the Torah's God were capricious and immoral. A just and moral God meant, among other things, that ultimately justice would prevail (if not in this life, then in the next). It also meant human beings, imbued with a sense of justice, could argue with and question this just God (the name “Israel” means “wrestle—or struggle—with God”).
- A God beyond nature: God made nature and is therefore not natural. This led to the end of the universal human belief in nature-gods (such as rain-gods). And sure enough, as belief in the Torah's God declined, nature-worship seemed to return.
- A God who loves and wants to be loved: This was another world-changing concept the Torah introduced to the world.

- Universal human worth: Every human being is “created in God’s image.” Nothing like this had been posited prior to the Torah.
- Universal human rights: Another world-altering consequence of universal human worth.

I do not believe people made all of that up. In the words of a contemporary Jewish thinker, Rabbi Saul Berman: “The more I study the Torah, the more I am convinced that it is the revealed word of God. The more I study ancient cultures, the more I see the absolutely radical disparity between the values of pagan civilizations and the values which Torah brought into the world. Torah was God’s weapon in the war against idolatrous culture; and war it was.”

Indeed, the Torah’s battle, and sometimes war, with many of the dominant ideas of our time is as great as it was with the dominant values of three millennia ago, when the Torah came into the world.

The other major reason I am convinced the Torah is not man-made is that it so often depicts the People of the Book—the Jews (“Israelites,” “Hebrews”)—in a negative light. Had Jews made up what is, after all, their book and their story, they never would have portrayed themselves as critically and even negatively as the Torah (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible) often does. There is no parallel to this in any ancient national—or any religious—literature in the world.

Such is the Torah’s greatness that, more than anything else, it has brought me to God. I have long held and often said: I do not believe in the Torah because I believe in God; I believe in God because I believe in the Torah.

### MAN-MADE OR GOD-MADE: WHY IT MATTERS

What difference does it make if the Torah is man-made or God-made? I can best answer this question by recounting a personal experience. Most people, especially in their younger years, pass through a difficult time with one or both of their parents. In my teen years and twenties, I was one of them. But no

matter how I felt, there was never a time when I did not honor my parents. Thus, from the age of twenty-one, when I left my parents' home, I called my parents every week of their lives—another forty-five years.

I treated my parents with such respect because I always believed God commanded me to do so: “Honor your father and mother” (the Fifth of the Ten Commandments). The Torah commands us to love our neighbor, to love God, and to love the stranger. But we are never commanded to love our parents. We are commanded to honor them, and we are not commanded to honor anyone else.

There is no comparison between God's commanding us and a human being's commanding us. If I believed the Ten Commandments were written by men, I would not have honored my parents as much as I did during periods of emotional ambivalence. Those who believe God is the source of the Torah's commandments are far more likely to obey them than those who believe they are all man-made.

It is only because of belief in a God-made Torah that I have worked to understand and explain difficult passages of the Torah. If you believe the Torah is man-made, when you encounter a morally or intellectually problematic verse or passage, you have an easy explanation: Men wrote it (ancient men, at that). And then you are free to dismiss it. But those of us who believe God is the source of the Torah do not have that option. We need to try to understand the verse or passage morally and intellectually.

Let me offer one of many examples. There is a Torah law that says if you have a particularly bad (“wayward”) son, you may take him to the elders (the court) of your city, and if they find him guilty, they are to stone him to death. When modern men and women read that, they not only dismiss that law as morally primitive, but they also dismiss the Torah itself as a moral authority. But since I do not believe people wrote the Torah, I do not dismiss that law or the Torah: I have to look for rational explanations for seemingly irrational laws and passages and moral explanations for seemingly immoral laws and passages.

I have almost always found them. In this case, for example, I came to understand that this law was one of the great moral leaps forward in the history

of mankind. In this law, the Torah brilliantly preserved parental authority while permanently depriving parents of the right to kill their child, a commonplace occurrence in the ancient world and even today (such as “honor killings” in parts of the Muslim world). The law permits only a duly established court (“the elders”), not parents, to take the life of their child. And we have no record of a Jewish court ever executing a “wayward” son.

My belief in the divinity of the Torah led me to seek a moral explanation for what appears to us to be an immoral law, and solely because of that belief, I found one. As you, the reader, shall see, this has happened over and over.

A third difference between belief in a God-made Torah and a man-made Torah is that only those who believe in the text as God-given will continue to live by it, carefully study it, and try to impart its wisdom to generation after generation. There will always be a few individuals who believe the Torah is man-made who will nevertheless diligently study it. But it is doubtful that their children, let alone their grandchildren, will. If Jews believed the Torah was man-made, there would be no Jews today.

Moreover, if you believe in God, but you don’t believe in any divinely revealed text, how do you know what the God you believe in wants of you? How do you know what this God wants of humanity? Of course, you or your society can make up laws and values, including some good ones the Torah would approve of. But if God Himself told us nothing, we would become gods when it comes to determining moral values.

## HOW WAS THE TORAH TRANSMITTED?

I take no position on how God revealed the Torah. What concerns me most is who authored the Torah. That is far more important than how it was written.

## REASON, TORAH, AND GOD

My commentary is titled *The Rational Bible* for two reasons. First, my approach to understanding and explaining the Torah is reason-based. I never

ask the reader to accept anything I write on faith alone. If something I write does not make rational sense, I have not done my job. On those few—very few—occasions when I do not have a rational explanation for a Torah verse, I say so. Second, reason has always been my primary vehicle to God and to religion. My beliefs—in God, the revelation at Sinai, the Torah, etc.—are not rooted in faith alone.

*We Have Reason to Believe*, the title of a book written in 1958 by British Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs, had a deep impact on me. The title has an important double meaning. The obvious one is that there are reasons to have religious faith. The less obvious meaning of the title is the one I cherish: we human beings have the ability to reason—and we are to use it in order to believe.

Of course, there is a faith component to my religious life. The primary example is the foundation of this commentary—my belief in the Torah as a divine document. While reason has led me to this belief, I acknowledge there are a few verses or passages that challenge this belief. Whenever I encounter such passages, however, I am not prepared to say, “‘Love the stranger’ is divine, but this difficult part is man-made.” Once one says that, the Torah not only ceases to be divine, but it also ceases to be authoritative. When you say, “this part is divine, but that one isn’t,” you become your own Torah. As I put it in a number of public dialogues with a secular Jewish scholar, Professor Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School: “I think I can sum up our basic difference this way: When Professor Dershowitz differs with the Torah, he thinks the Torah is wrong, and he is right. When I differ with the Torah, I think the Torah is right, and I am wrong.” Professor Dershowitz agreed with that summation.

My approach is to abandon neither faith nor reason. I neither abandon the claim of reason because of the dictates of faith, nor abandon the faith claim because of reason. In the Torah, faith and reason nearly always live together in harmony, and when they appear not to, I do not deny either. Moreover, there is a faith component to everyone’s life, including that of the atheist. Any atheist who believes good and evil really exist, or that life has a purpose beyond one he or she has made up, or that free will exists, or that science alone will explain

how the universe came about, or that life arose from non-life, or that intelligence arose from non-intelligence has taken his or her own leap of faith. Everyone is guided by beliefs. The question is: In what?

### WHY READ *THE RATIONAL BIBLE*?

Why should people devote time to reading my explanation of the Torah?

Here is my answer: I have devoted more than fifty years to studying and teaching the Torah. That includes a life-long immersion in Torah Hebrew—both its grammar and its vocabulary. I could not have written this commentary without this extensive knowledge of Hebrew. Most importantly, I have sought to make the Torah relevant to my life and to the lives of others.

In my case, “others” means millions of others. Every good teacher learns from his or her students, and I am no exception. But I have been blessed to have something very rare, perhaps unique, among Bible teachers or scholars: millions of “students”—of almost every nationality, ethnicity, religion, and philosophy.

For over three decades, I have been a radio talk show host, broadcasting more than half of that time on radio stations throughout America and on the internet internationally. This has enabled me to discuss virtually every subject imaginable with an extraordinarily large number of people—live on the radio and through tens of thousands of emails. It also has enabled me to dialogue about religious matters with many of the most prominent theologians and scholars—especially Jewish and Christian—of my time and to debate many contemporary leading atheists. I have been able to bounce ideas off—and learn them from—lay people and scholars of every background.

Given this background, I decided after much soul-searching to write this commentary from the first-person perspective where appropriate. I became convinced that showing how the Torah’s ideas and values have played themselves out in one individual’s life makes the commentary more interesting, more real, and more relevant.

Shortly before finishing the first volume (*Exodus*), I had the great honor of being invited to speak about my Torah commentary to the Bible faculty and students at Israel's religious university, Bar-Ilan University. They did not invite me because they thought I knew more than, or even as much as, any one of them did about the Torah. They invited me because they believed I would bring a fresh, often original, understanding of the Torah. That is why I wrote this commentary.

## SOME DETAILS

### Why *Exodus* Was Volume 1

The reason I began my commentary with the second book of the Torah, *Exodus*, is that it contains the Ten Commandments: the most important moral code in world history and the central moral code of the Torah. If people lived by those ten laws alone, the world would be almost devoid of man-made suffering. *Deuteronomy* is the one other book of the Torah that contains the Ten Commandments. It enabled me to offer many more insights into this world-changing code.

### BC or BCE?

Some readers will wonder why I use the letters “BCE” rather than the traditional “BC” in dates. I struggled with this issue, because I have no problem with “BC.” But virtually all academic works and many general works now use “BCE.” BCE stands for “Before the Common Era,” but any reader who prefers to read the letters as “Before the Christian Era,” is certainly welcome to—that is, after all, what “Common Era” denotes.

### God as “He”

I refer to God as “He” because that is how the Torah refers to God. I explain why the Torah does so in an essay in Chapter 1 of *Genesis*.

### On How to Read This Commentary

Readers can benefit from reading this commentary any way they desire. They can read it straight through, use it as a reference work for their own Bible study, or choose to read any subject heading that strikes them as interesting—particularly *Deuteronomy*, since it contains virtually no narrative, only laws and theology. The table of contents lists all of these headings.

### The Use of Post-Biblical Jewish Sources

I often cite non-Jewish commentaries; even more frequently, I cite Jewish commentaries, such as the Talmud. The Jews, after all, had the Torah for more than a thousand years prior to the rise of Christianity. The Talmud, often referenced in this commentary, is the encyclopedia-sized compendium of Jewish law and philosophy that reflects those thousand-plus years of Jews studying and living the Torah.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the most difficult part of this introduction, because so many people have influenced me with their insights into life and the Bible that I am certain to unwittingly omit names that should be included.

I attended yeshivas (all-day religious Jewish schools) from first grade until twelfth, and I continued formal study thereafter as well. That formal education made my Torah teaching possible. Two teachers at the Yeshivah of Flatbush High School in Brooklyn, New York, who particularly influenced me were the principal, Rabbi David Eliach, and one of my Torah teachers, Rabbi Amnon Haramati. I also obtained a superb knowledge of Hebrew language and grammar there. All my Jewish studies teachers were from Israel, so we students spoke Hebrew half the day. Unlike most mortals, I loved studying grammar and took in every grammatical rule these teachers imparted. My Hebrew was also greatly

abetted by spending a half-dozen summers at a Hebrew-speaking camp, Massad, in Pennsylvania.

In my late twenties and early thirties (1976–1983), as the director of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, a Jewish educational center in California, I had the unique opportunity to meet and have extended dialogues with most of the influential Jewish thinkers of the time—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular, from North and South America, Europe, and Israel. They included (in alphabetical order) Yehuda Bauer, Eliezer Berkovits, Saul Berman, Eugene Borowitz, Emil Fackenheim, Norman Frimer, Martin Gilbert, Arthur Hertzberg, Louis Jacobs, Norman Lamm, Julius Lester, Hyam Maccoby, Jacob Milgrom, Pinchas Peli, Jakob Petuchowski, Gunther Plaut, Emanuel Rackman, Richard L. Rubenstein, Uriel Simon, David W. Weiss (the Israeli immunologist), and Elie Wiesel.

From 1982 until 1992, I was given another unique opportunity—a true gift—to discuss religion for two hours every Sunday night with clergy and spokesmen of virtually every religion in the world. I was the moderator of a radio show, *Religion on the Line*, broadcast on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) radio station in Los Angeles. This constituted a decade-long immersion in religious conversations with people who devoted their lives to their respective religions: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist rabbis; mainstream and evangelical Protestant ministers; Roman Catholic priests; Eastern Orthodox priests; Mormon bishops; Muslim imams; Seventh Day Adventist ministers; Buddhist priests; and others. It was a life-shaping experience. I not only learned from all these people, but I was also able to test my religious beliefs with lucid minds of all faiths—and of no faith: I regularly invited atheist and humanist spokesmen on the show. I ended up speaking in at least a hundred synagogues, in scores of churches, and at the largest mosque in the western United States.

After 1992, I continued to raise religious issues on my daily radio shows and discuss religious matters with highly knowledgeable Jewish friends such as Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, Izzy and Rita Eichenstein, Allen and Susie Estrin, Rabbi Leonid Feldman, Rabbi Mordecai Finley, Rabbi Michael and Jill Gotlieb,

Drs. Stephen and Ruth Marmer, Rabbi Eyal and Tzippy Ravnay, Rabbi David Wolpe, and Rabbi David and Beverly Woznica. I would be particularly remiss if I did not mention the role Chabad rabbis around the world have played in my religious life. I would like to mention all of them, but I must at least mention my family's three Chabad rabbis at whose homes I have spent Shabbat evenings talking about God, the Torah, and just about everything else—Rabbi Moshe Bryski of Agoura Hills, California; Rabbi Simcha Backman of Glendale, California; and Rabbi Yosef Lipsker of Reading, Pennsylvania.

Special mention must be made of a man who combines uncompromising intellectual honesty, Jewish religious faith and practice, and awe-inspiring biblical scholarship: Professor Leor Gottlieb of the Bible Department at Bar-Ilan University. He read every word of this commentary, and his contribution—including more than a few corrections—has been indispensable. That one of the greatest Bible scholars of our time offered to help edit *The Rational Bible* is a great honor to me, as was his inviting me to lecture on my commentary before his colleagues and students at the Bible Department at Bar-Ilan (a lecture that can be viewed on the internet). We do not always agree, and on more than a few of the occasions we differ, I turn out to have been mistaken—which makes his help all the more valuable. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any remaining errors.

Knowledgeable and wise Christian friends such as Joshua Charles, Gregory Koukl, Dr. Wayne Grudem, and Eric Metaxas have helped me form my thoughts on the Bible and religion generally. In particular, I wish to thank another Christian, Holly Hickman, one of the five people to have reviewed the book prior to publication. I cannot praise her enough as an editor and as a human being.

Ilana Kurshan, a prominent writer and serious thinker, edited the hundreds of hours of tapes of my eighteen-year teaching of the Torah verse by verse. She was instrumental in making this commentary a reality. Debbie Weinberger was one of the transcriptionists who helped make this project a reality, and this work is written in her memory.

I had the luck to obtain the services of Aryeh Leifert as an editor of the final manuscript. I benefited from his truly remarkable command of English grammar and punctuation and from his ability to find typos even after four of us read every word aloud. His vast knowledge of Jewish sources—he is a licensed Israeli tour guide and ordained rabbi—was also indispensable.

Once again, I was very fortunate to have the editing services of Barney Brenner of Tucson, Arizona. I am embarrassed to think how this book would read were it not for him.

Then there is Joel Alpers. Aside from being a close friend since 1982, when we met at a speech I gave in Kansas City, Kansas, it was Joel who ultimately made this commentary a reality. Let me put it succinctly: No Joel, no commentary. It was Joel who found a company to transcribe my Torah tapes, resulting in the creation of five thousand pages of text. It was Joel who found Ilana Kurshan, whose work he carefully reviewed. And it was Joel who was determined that my Torah commentary be put into print.

I knew, as it stood, even after Ilana's superb editing of my lectures, that I had much more to say. So, one day, Joel—not one to ever give up—put the question to me: "What would it take for you to complete and publish the commentary?" I told him I would do so if Joseph Telushkin served as the editor. Rabbi Telushkin is a fount of biblical, rabbinic/Talmudic, and historical knowledge, and no one knows my thinking on the Torah as well as Joseph—we had already written two books together. If Joseph worked with me, I would put all other writing aside for years to write this commentary.

I did not think that would happen, but Joel makes things happen. He not only brought Joseph on board, but also oversaw every detail of the highly complex process of putting this vast commentary together, played a seminal role in the intellectual input, and relentlessly insisted that I always live up to the name of the commentary, *The Rational Bible*—the name he came up with.

Joseph Telushkin and I met in our second year of high school at the Yeshiva of Flatbush. We met one day after school at a nearby bookstore. We both loved books because we loved ideas. We both wanted to understand Judaism and life. That was an immediate bond. And there was one other: Neither of us

did almost any schoolwork. Instead, we read books and magazines (and, in my case, studied orchestral scores). At the age of twenty-six, we wrote and published our first book, *Eight Questions People Ask about Judaism*, which was soon thereafter expanded to be published as *The Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism*. The book became one of the most widely read introductions to Judaism and remains in print forty-five years later. Working with him on this commentary was a reminder of the joy we experienced when we wrote our first two books together at the outset of our careers. Joseph constantly contributed information that influenced and deepened my arguments—even on those occasions when we disagreed. From the earliest days of our friendship, people would often say about Joseph and me: “They’re as close as brothers.” And we have always responded: “Would that all brothers could be so close.”

Finally, a word about the person to whom I have dedicated *The Rational Bible*—my wife, Sue. She was a final editor of every word of this book—not only for grammar and syntax, but for her specialty: logic. She is trained as a lawyer, but her ability to think rigorously is an innate gift—as rare a gift as perfect pitch. The number of less-than-clear assertions she uncovered is so great that it is humbling to think this commentary might have been published without her input. That is one of the many reasons everyone who knows Sue knows how blessed I am to have her in my life.

While on the subject of blessings, I must make mention of my two sons, David and Aaron. Not a day passes without my thinking how blessed I am to be their father—and, for that matter, to be the grandfather of Daniel and Jack Prager, the father-in-law of Myriam Prager, and the stepfather of my two wonderful stepsons, Brandon and Reed. My cup runneth over.

I will end with a thank-you to my late parents, Max and Hilda Prager, who raised my brother, Dr. Kenneth Prager, and me to take God and the Torah seriously. My love of the Torah is in no small part due to them. The aforementioned youthful difficulties notwithstanding, I loved them. I wish I could hand-deliver *The Rational Bible* to them.

Dennis Prager  
April 2021



# PREFACE

Joel Alpers

## **I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE. WHEN**

I was all of nine years old, after a close friend showed me some magic tricks, I found the magic book he had read so I could perform the same tricks.

Later, as a college freshman, I discovered Plato, who addressed many of the “big questions” I deeply cared about with arguments that were linear and well-thought-out. Later, as a college senior, I studied one-on-one with a professor who told me of a legend which held that Plato had written a book on “the good.” I was so excited. I thought if I could only read this book, I could learn “the secret” of leading a good life. Unfortunately, the legend also held that this volume had been lost in a great fire. So, my search for “the good” began and ended in the span of that one-hour study session.

Who would have guessed that decades later I would not only find myself reading a brilliant explanation of what I have come to regard as the greatest book ever written, but that I also would have helped to make this work possible? My Sunday school and Hebrew school teachers certainly would not have guessed. Given my awful grades and even worse behavior, they'd be shocked.

My grandfather, who was Orthodox, would also be shocked. He had given me a five-volume set of the Torah when I was a teen, but whenever he would open one of those volumes, he would hear the binding crack. He knew I hadn't even touched the books.

My story is hardly unique. The majority of those living in the West have dismissed the Torah and the rest of the Bible as little more than ancient religious fairy tales. And why not? Ten plagues? The creation of the world by a

supernatural God? A giant flood wiping out virtually all of mankind? Ten Commandments from three thousand years ago? Why would people choose to study—let alone think their lives could be transformed by—such stories?

I certainly didn't.

Then, one weekend in 1982, I heard Dennis Prager speak at a retreat outside of Kansas City. I remember arguing with him all weekend. But he had answers. And they stayed with me. So began my long journey of realizing that the Torah had more meaning than I had ever imagined.

Eventually, Dennis taught the Torah to a class in Los Angeles, line-by-line, over eighteen years, and I started listening to recordings of those classes in my car as I drove around my hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Realizing that I couldn't focus on the material and my driving at the same time, I asked him if I could transcribe some of those recordings. That was in 2002. Little did I know at the time that his agreement would start the process of creating this remarkable work. I was able to enlist the help of Ilana Kurshan, a very talented student of the Torah. For one year she took approximately five thousand pages of Dennis's Torah class transcripts and converted them into a first draft of this commentary. Her work was excellent and enormously helpful.

It was also our very good fortune that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin was available to help with this project. For all the reasons Dennis listed in his introduction, no one else could have added to this great work as Rabbi Telushkin has. The finished product, as Dennis is the first to acknowledge, was made possible because of Rabbi Telushkin's passionate involvement.

Helping Dennis Prager author this work has been an honor for me. I helped the wisest man I know comment on the wisest book ever written. Having carefully and repeatedly listened to Dennis's Torah lectures, I expected this book to be an edited version of all the wonderful ideas he has offered over the years. But I was surprised by the many new and important insights he added to this project. I think even he was surprised. This work captured him. It was obvious from his tremendous investment of time, thought, and research that this was not just another book. This is arguably his greatest work and

his legacy. You have only to read a few essays or a single chapter to see the profundity of his writing.

Dennis has repeatedly said how grateful he is to me for helping to make his, as he likes to put it, “magnum opus” possible. He says it is one of the greatest gifts he’s ever received. Ironically, after working so closely with him over so many years, I believe the greatest gift I’ve given was to myself.

I’ve come to realize the book on “the good” was not lost in a fire.

It’s here for you to read.

**Acknowledgments:** This remarkable project could never have been completed without the help of so many wonderful and devoted individuals. In addition to Dennis’s acknowledgments, I would like to thank some of those individuals with whom I worked. I can’t possibly give them all the credit they’re due, but these individuals’ efforts were indispensable in creating this book:

Talia Gordis, Emily Sirotkin, Helen Lin, and Katrina Chen devoted many hours to reviewing lecture transcripts to identify and organize the essay topics which were used throughout this commentary.

Thanks to Scott Dugan for carefully and accurately accounting for the expenses related to this commentary.

Thanks to Pete Sirotkin, whose great work at our office in Omaha allowed me the freedom to work on this book. I would also like to thank him for his important insights on and intimate understanding of Deuteronomy 25:11. He is an exemplary human being and exemplary Christian—and he believes this is the most important Bible commentary he’s ever read.

While many people were involved in transcribing hundreds of Dennis’s Torah lecture recordings, one transcriptionist stands out. Debbie Weinberger lived in Israel and transcribed much of Dennis’s work. Very sadly, this remarkable young woman died of cancer in 2007. Her feelings about being remembered in this work were expressed in the following email:

“When he said it was Dennis Prager on the line, I think my heart stopped for a nanosecond! We had a lovely conversation and we agreed that our biggest

prayer is that I get to see or receive a copy of Leviticus personally—in other words, that I stick around. . . . So very touched deep in my soul that Dennis wants to add a note about me and my working on the project/book.”

When I was struggling to decide whether to devote the necessary time and expense to this commentary, my dear friend Ron Carson asked how I would feel on my deathbed if this book were never published. Thank you, Ron, for helping me to make the right decision.

To my dear friend Dr. Howard Gendelman (Howie), who constantly amazes me with his tremendous courage, passion, and persistence. His life has been a *Kiddush Hashem* (a sanctification of God’s name).

To my dear friend Dennis Prager: There is no one else on the planet for whom I would have involved myself so deeply in such a project. It is your life-changing ideas and the promise they hold of making so many people better human beings that continue to inspire and excite me. What greater goal could one have, and how many others could make such a goal attainable? Thank you for allowing me to share in your remarkable dream.

And finally to Conny—my beautiful wife and the mother of our children. Thank you so much for your encouragement, for listening to me endlessly discuss the details of this work, and for celebrating its many successes with me. As I’ve told you so often, no one’s support and enthusiasm means as much to me. How can I possibly thank you for your endless love, kindness, and devotion? May we spend many happy hours teaching our children, Hannah, Rachel, Aaron, and David, the lessons contained within this great work. And may our children teach them to their children.

Joel Alperson  
March 2021

# CHAPTER

# I

*This is the last of the five books of the Torah, the most influential body of literature in history. Deuteronomy is particularly significant because it is, in effect, Moses's last will and testament to Israel and, for that matter, to the world.*

*The name Deuteronomy comes from the Greek words for “second law” or “second teaching” (deuteros = second; nomos = law). Moses himself describes this book as a “second teaching” (Deuteronomy 17:18), which is how ancient Jews referred to the book. It is the “second teaching” because it is Moses's review of many of the laws found in the previous books of the Torah (as well as additional laws and teachings).*

*Just about every aspect of life—religion, morality, happiness, anger, judgment—is contained in Deuteronomy. And the most important document of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, is repeated here.*

*As there is virtually no narrative in Deuteronomy—only laws and beliefs—it is not necessary to read Deuteronomy straight through. I therefore suggest that general readers (as opposed to students of the Bible) first look for subject headings that interest them and proceed from there.*

## WHY MOSES INTRODUCED NEW LAWS AND NEW IDEAS

### 1.1 These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel

Deuteronomy consists of three final addresses given by Moses to the Israelites. In addition to reviewing laws and giving new laws, he offered his perspective

on the people’s travels and travails. Deuteronomy is, therefore, composed overwhelmingly of Moses’s words. But due to Moses’s uniquely close relationship with God—“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses whom the Lord singled out face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10)—these words can be regarded as having divine approval for inclusion in the Torah.

As to why Moses gave new commandments in Deuteronomy, the Bible commentator Nachmanides (Ramban, 1194–1270, Spain and Israel) explained: “The reason the new commandments were not mentioned in earlier books . . . is that perhaps these commandments, though incumbent on the individual wherever he might be, were not actually practiced until they entered the land. Moses did not mention them until it was time for the generations of those who left Egypt to take possession of the land.”

Thus, for example, Moses introduced certain offerings to be brought to the Temple with the words, “*When* you enter the land which I am giving you to settle in . . .” (Numbers 15:2, emphasis added). So, then, my understanding of Deuteronomy is that it consists of Moses’s words (except when God is directly quoted). No matter when or how it was written, it has the divine imprimatur, and is therefore part of the Torah.

## DID MOSES WRITE EVERY WORD OF DEUTERONOMY?

### on the other side of the Jordan

The words “on the other side of the Jordan [River]” have presented scholars, both modern and medieval, with an obvious question. The medieval Bible scholar Ibn Ezra (1089–1167, Spain) posed the question this way: If Moses wrote every word in the Torah, why would he use the phrase “on the other side of the Jordan”? That implied that Moses was writing from inside the Jordan River, i.e., Israel—not “the other side.” But Moses was never in Israel.

Citing Ibn Ezra, the British Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs wrote: “This expression makes sense only to someone writing in Israel, which Moses never entered. This would appear to suggest some parts of the Torah were written after Moses. Ibn Ezra appears to accept this, but because it is a very radical

departure from the tradition [that Moses wrote the Torah], he remarks on it only by hint.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two ways of dealing with the dilemma cited by Ibn Ezra.<sup>2</sup> One is that Moses could simply have written whatever God instructed him to write, including writing of the Canaanites in the past tense (“And the Canaanite was then in the land”—Genesis 12:6), as well as details of his own death and burial. The other is to accept that Joshua or someone else wrote some of the Torah’s words after Moses’s death.

As I write in the introduction, I am not concerned with the who or how of the Torah’s composition. I am concerned that it be regarded as a divine document. That is what matters.

**—through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.**

**1.2 It is eleven days from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea by the Mount Seir route.—**

The Hebrew Bible uses Horeb interchangeably with Mount Sinai.

Kadesh-barnea is at the entrance to the southern border of Canaan. Moses stated that it takes only eleven days to get there from Sinai. The reason he did so is obvious. In the words of the ancient rabbinic commentary Sifre, “Had Israel been worthy, they could have entered the Land within eleven days; but they were sadly found wanting, and they drew upon themselves the punishment of forty years’ wandering.”

**1.3 It was in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, that Moses addressed the Israelites in accordance with the instructions that the Lord had given him for them,**

**1.4 after he had defeated Sihon king of the Amorites, who dwelt in Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan, who dwelt at Ashtaroth [and] Edrei.**

The Hebrew of this verse is ambiguous: Is Moses or God credited with defeating Sihon? This English translation spells “he” with a lowercase “h,” meaning

the translators believe the reference is to Moses. In any case, Moses mentions these victories to remind the Israelites of all that God did for them.

The Torah's description of the defeat of Sihon and Og is in the Book of Numbers, the book immediately preceding Deuteronomy (Numbers 21:21–35; see also Numbers 32:33). Although Moses alludes to this victory yet again in Deuteronomy 3, the story of the conquest of Canaan is related in the Book of Joshua, the biblical book immediately following Deuteronomy.

## ON THE NEED TO EXPLAIN THE TORAH

### **1.5 On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching.**

The most revered Jewish Bible commentator, Rashi (1040–1105, France), wrote that the meaning of “expound this Torah (‘Teaching’)” here and in Deuteronomy 27:8 was that Moses had the Torah translated into seventy languages. “Seventy nations” is the traditional way of referring to all the world's nations.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Jews are obligated to bring the Torah to the world. And since the world's nations will relate only to a text that is perceived as rational, it is imperative to explain (“expound”) the Torah—and its laws. The entire premise of this commentary, *The Rational Bible*—that the Torah is to be explained to the world if there is any chance of goodness prevailing on Earth—is not some idiosyncratic view of mine, but the normative view of Jews going back thousands of years.

The related question of whether one should seek rational explanations for all the Torah's laws is the subject of three extended essays:

“Do People Need to Understand Religious Rituals?” (Numbers 19:2).

“Do All of the Torah's Laws Have Reasons?” (Deuteronomy 4:1).

“What Does It Mean to Be ‘Wise in the Eyes of the Nations?’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

It is also the subject of the commentary to Deuteronomy 27:8.

## MOSES'S FIRST ADDRESS

### He said:

This marks the beginning of Moses's first address, which lasts until Deuteronomy 4:40.

**1.6 The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain.**

**1.7 Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the river Euphrates.**

**1.8 See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to them and to their heirs after them.**

As noted on a number of occasions, the purpose of taking possession of the Promised Land was to enable the Israelites to build a society that would be a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Therefore, if the Israelites engaged in immoral behavior, they too would be dispossessed (see, for example, Leviticus 18:28).

**1.9 Thereupon I said to you, "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself.**

Moses said, "I said to *you* at that time" (italics added), even though most of the people he was addressing were not alive at the time he was discussing. Moses spoke this way throughout his address, mixing past, present, and future generations, because he was addressing every generation who will ever read Deuteronomy.

In the words of Bible scholar Richard Elliott Friedman (professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia): "The concept of a 'nation' or 'people' is a fluid one, crossing lines of generations. Like a river, which is constantly being made up of new molecules of water yet is always the same river... so a people

retains its identity even though its individual members are constantly changing over time.”<sup>4</sup>

**1.10 The Lord your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky.—**

“Numerous as the stars in the sky” is an expression, not a literal statement. See the commentary to Genesis 22:17.

**1.11 May the Lord, the God of your fathers, increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as He promised you.—**

Although Moses asserted that the Israelites’ great numbers became a burden, he nonetheless asked God to continue to increase their numbers. Despite his periodic exasperation and anger with the Israelites, Moses remained their great advocate.

**1.12 How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!**

Of all the problems the Israelites presented to Moses, it was their constant arguing (“bickering” here) and complaining that most angered him. Anyone who lives with a querulous individual at home or at work can well understand Moses.

**ESSAY: A GOOD SOCIETY IS UNATTAINABLE WITHOUT WISDOM**

**1.13 Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.”**

In Moses’s recounting, God did not tell him to pick *good* men to be leaders. Wouldn’t being a good person be one of the major attributes, if not *the* major attribute, one would seek in a leader? While the Torah takes for granted that a leader should be a good person, goodness is not sufficient. That is why *all three traits listed here concern wisdom*. There is an extraordinarily important lesson here—one of the most important in the Torah and in life: A good society is unattainable without wisdom.

That is why God told Moses to choose wise men rather than good men. There have always been people who were personally good—individuals who had good intentions and even a kindly disposition—who enabled evil to prevail.

Let me offer two examples, one personal and one global.

I have interviewed recovering drug and alcohol addicts, many of whom told me one reason they continued their drug or alcohol use was that their family enabled them. People who enable addicts often hurt them. This damage is done by people with good and loving intentions.

Quite aside from addiction, parents who coddle or spoil their children don't necessarily lack goodness or good intentions; they lack wisdom.

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*A good society is unattainable without wisdom.*

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In the global sphere, the most obvious modern example of the devastating effects of good intentions without wisdom has been communism, which killed about one hundred million innocent people, non-combatants all, and enslaved a billion more. Communist tyrants had tens of millions of supporters within their countries and around the world. Most communist leaders were power-hungry, cruel, and evil people, and many of their supporters were immoral sycophants. But a significant number of people supported communism because they thought it would make a better world.

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*Parents who coddle or spoil their children don't necessarily lack goodness or good intentions; they lack wisdom.*

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For many of its supporters, communism was rooted in a desire to do good. The many millions of people all over the world who supported communism did not think they were supporting unprecedented levels of mass murder and torture, or the near-total deprivation of the most fundamental human rights for a substantial percentage of humanity. They thought they were supporting the creation of a beautiful future for humanity. They were convinced the moral arc of history was

bending in their direction and that they were good people because their motives were good.

What supporters of communism lacked was wisdom. With regard to morality, not to mention economics, they had no wisdom. They were fools. Western supporters of communism were frequently labeled “useful idiots”—a term frequently attributed to Vladimir Lenin, the father of Russian communism. This is not a description of their totality as human beings. Fools may be personally kind and generous, may be loyal friends and devoted spouses, and may, of course, be well-intentioned. But in terms of making the world worse, there is little difference between a well-meaning fool and an evil human being. Among the tens of millions of Westerners who supported Joseph Stalin, more than a

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*In terms of making the world worse, there is little difference between a well-meaning fool and an evil human being.*

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few were well-intentioned. The Westerners who supplied Stalin with the secrets to the atomic bomb were not all motivated by evil. But few truly evil people did as much harm to mankind as they did.

One should add that communists also lacked a fixed moral code and a transcendent moral code. Good and evil were what communist parties said they were. Lenin often said that good and evil were defined as whatever

furthered the interests of the working class, interests entirely defined by the Communist Party, whose policy was, in turn, entirely defined by Lenin and later by Stalin. That is why millions of communists who were virulently anti-Nazi in the 1930s changed their policy overnight when Stalin signed a peace treaty with Adolf Hitler in August 1939, a peace treaty that enabled Hitler to start World War II a week later. The combination of no fixed moral code, no God-based ethic, and a lack of wisdom is a demonic combination, even when the person holding such views is kind, honest, and loving on an individual level.

As difficult and uncomfortable as it may be to believe, good intentions can even apply to some—I emphasize *some*—Germans who supported the Nazis in the early 1930s. Not every German who voted for Hitler and the Nazis in the late 1920s and early 1930s was voting for the mass murder of the Jews or

anyone else. Many Germans were voting for a better Germany as they understood it. Every historian I have read on the subject emphasizes that Hitler toned down his Jew-hatred in order to appeal to German voters. In fact, in the last free vote prior to the Nazis' ascent to power, the Nazi Party lost thirty-four seats in the German parliament (the Reichstag).

Germans who voted for Hitler and who were not primarily animated by Jew-hatred were fools for not recognizing how evil the Nazis were. Consequently, they contributed as much to making World War II and the Holocaust possible as the Germans who were animated by Jew-hatred. Such is the legacy of a lack of wisdom.

As regards making a good world (and a good person), wisdom is not only more important than good intentions; it is also more important than knowledge. Most people—especially intellectuals—confuse wisdom with knowledge, which is why, for example, it is widely believed that people who hold a doctorate are wiser than people who do not. But Western supporters of communism were disproportionately intellectuals: highly educated Westerners were the group most likely to support communist tyrants.

No one devoted more research into intellectuals' support of communism and communist dictators than Paul Hollander, a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts and an associate of Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Hollander, an outlier among intellectuals, described "the apparently limitless capacity of idealistic human beings... to engage in wishful thinking and substantial political misjudgment."<sup>5</sup>

Two of the many examples Hollander cited are H. G. Wells—who, after an interview with Stalin, proclaimed that Stalin's rule was all the more remarkable "since no one is afraid of him and everybody trusts him"—and

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*The combination of no fixed moral code, no God-based ethic, and a lack of wisdom is a demonic combination, even when the person holding such views is kind, honest, and loving on an individual level.*

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John K. Fairbank, a Harvard professor who was the leading Chinese studies scholar in America during and after World War II. Fairbank wrote in 1972, fifteen years after Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward that cost about fifty million Chinese lives, that "Americans may find in China's collective life today an ingredient of personal moral concern for one's neighbor that has a lesson for us all."

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*It is inconceivable that the notion that "all men are created equal" would have entered the Western mind without the biblical teaching that every human being is created "in God's image."*

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Hollander's conclusion: "There is no shortage of noxious blather peddled by Western intellectuals."

That is why the Torah and the rest of the Bible are so important. While there are other sources of wisdom, from the Buddha to Shakespeare, the Bible has been the greatest source of wisdom and the moral foundation of the Western world. To cite just one example, it is inconceivable that the notion that "all men are created equal" would have entered the Western mind without the biblical teaching that every human being is created "in God's image" (Genesis 1:27 and 9:6). However, as a result of

the secularization of the West, the conflation of knowledge with wisdom, and the increasing reliance on feelings as guides to behavior, the Bible is rarely studied outside of religious Jewish and Christian circles. The results have been disastrous, as the West produces more and more highly educated individuals who lack wisdom.

**1.14 You answered me and said, "What you propose to do is good."**

**1.15 So I took your tribal leaders, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you: chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens, and officials for your tribes.**

**1.16 I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, "Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger."**

A “stranger” was a non-Israelite residing among Israelites. Moses instructed that there was to be no double standard of justice—one for fellow Israelites and another for outsiders. This was a radical and unprecedented revolution in the human understanding of the humanity, let alone the rights, of the outsider. Justice in society begins in the courtroom. For example, in nineteenth-century America, justice was routinely denied to Chinese immigrants; in some states, they were not allowed to testify in court. This behavior was exactly what the Torah outlawed.

There is another moral innovation here. The verse underscores that non-Israelites who lived among the Israelites were allowed to remain as they were: they did not have to become Jews.

### **1.17 You shall not be partial in judgment: hear out low and high alike.**

Literally translated, the words “you shall not be partial in judgment” mean “do not recognize the face of anyone in judgment.” A judge is not allowed to rule in a case in which he personally knows one of the parties. The judge must either recuse himself, or, if no other judges are available, make sure to judge as if he does not know the person.

It also means that a judge may not give preferential treatment to a famous or wealthy person. The words translated “hear out low and high alike” literally read, “listen to the small person as you listen to the great person.” By definition, justice means equal justice for everyone and that all people have an equal right to be heard. Even the poorest and seemingly unimportant person must have access to the judicial system. The same holds true in the other direction: a judge may not favor a poor man, no matter how wealthy his litigation opponent happens to be (see Exodus 23:3 and Leviticus 19:15).

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*The Torah emphasizes that fear of God must supersede all other fears. It is this fear that ensures we do not permit fear of a human being to cause us to support, let alone engage in, evil.*

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## ESSAY: FEAR OF GOD IS MORALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY NECESSARY

Fear no man, for judgment is God's.

Every normal person fears someone or something. Precisely because fears are natural and universal, the Torah emphasizes that fear of God must supersede all other fears. It is this fear that ensures we do not permit fear of a human being to cause us to support, let alone engage in, evil.

The Egyptian people, fearing Pharaoh, obeyed his command to drown Israelite babies in the Nile, while the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, who feared God more than they feared Pharaoh, saved babies (Exodus 1:15–22). In the twentieth century, if more Germans had feared God more than they did Hitler,

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*If more Germans feared God more than they did Hitler, and if more Russians feared God more than they did Lenin and Stalin, the murders of tens of millions of people would not have occurred.*

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and if more Russians had feared God more than they did Lenin and Stalin, the murders of tens of millions of people would not have occurred.

A German Christian pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged because he would not obey the Nazis. He feared (and loved) God more than he feared the Nazis. Unfortunately—both for the Jews and for the moral record of Christianity—too few German Christians feared God more than they feared the Nazis.

Fear of God helps to deter people from committing evil in a very different circumstance: when the person

whom they are tempted to hurt is powerless, making resistance or retribution impossible. That is why “you shall fear God” is appended to the prohibition of actions where it is virtually certain that the perpetrator will not be apprehended by human authorities. Two such examples are found in Leviticus 19:14: “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind [but] you shall fear your God.” A blind person has no idea who injured him. Therefore, God appends to the prohibition a reminder to fear Him, who does see what we do.

The same applies to one who insults (or “curses,” as the Hebrew literally puts it) the deaf. “[But] you shall fear God” is appended to laws protecting

society's weakest members, including slaves and servants (Leviticus 25:42–43), as well as the deaf and the blind. Throughout history, mistreated servants and slaves had no recourse to justice. The Torah therefore instructs employers to fear God, who sees and judges everyone.

Only the naïve believe fear of a just God who judges people—“for judgment is God’s,” as this verse states—has no moral impact. It would be like saying that fear of the police has no impact on the way in which people behave.

Fear of God is also psychologically indispensable.

It seems that secular societies produce more fearful people. For example, though I cannot prove a direct cause and effect, it is clear that as America and the West have become more secular, parents have far more fears regarding their children than they did in a more religious America and West. To cite just a few examples, parents today are far more likely to fear letting their children take unsupervised walks, play on seesaws and monkey bars, jump off diving boards, and fear sleeping alongside their babies (lest they smother the infant). Many parents fear their child will be traumatized by losing in sporting events. Many communities do not allow keeping score of soccer games in which children under twelve participate, lest the children on the losing team experience too much emotional pain.<sup>6</sup>

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More parents today fear their child’s receiving lower grades and fear their child’s traveling alone. Regarding the latter, when I was seven years old, I flew alone from New York to Miami and back. While even then not all parents would have allowed this, few found it particularly strange, let alone irresponsible of my parents. At this time, a child as old as fourteen must be registered

with the airline, signed in by a parent at the airport, and accompanied off the plane by an airline employee.

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*People who struggle to believe in God but who believe they cannot do so are worthy of respect. People who deny the importance of God are not.*

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A particularly dramatic example, if not proof, of greater fears among the secular was the dramatically different responses of secular and religious people to the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious Jews and Christians were far less accepting of the draconian lockdown orders that profoundly circumscribed normal life and rendered tens of millions of people unemployed.

The combination of secularism, higher education, and affluence seems to produce more people who are afraid of emotional pain, and even of marrying and having children.

People who struggle to believe in God but who believe they cannot do so are worthy of respect. People who deny the importance of God are not. They are fooling themselves, leading vast numbers of people to unhappiness and leading society toward moral chaos.

**And any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it.”**

**1.18 Thus I instructed you, at that time, about the various things that you should do.**

**1.19 We set out from Horeb and traveled the great and terrible wilderness that you saw, along the road to the hill country of the Amorites, as the Lord our God had commanded us. When we reached Kadesh-barnea,**

**1.20 I said to you, “You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the Lord our God is giving to us.**

**1.21 See, the Lord your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed.”**

## WAS SENDING SPIES INTO CANAAN GOD’S IDEA OR MOSES’S?

**1.22 Then all of you came to me and said, “Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to.”**

**1.23 I approved of the plan, and so I selected twelve of your men, one from each tribe.**

Moses then recounted the unfortunate episode of the spies who were sent to scout out the Promised Land (Numbers 13–14). There are discrepancies between the account in Numbers and Moses’s account here. In Numbers, it was God who commanded Moses to send the spies; here, Moses says the idea came from the Israelites. As is often the case, modern Bible scholars tend to point to these discrepancies as evidence that the Torah is a composite of different documents written by different authors.

One obvious response is that even if there were different source documents here, the final editor or editors (the “Redactor”) would surely also have noticed such a glaring difference between Numbers and Deuteronomy and changed one of the narratives so that it would not conflict with the other. (To which these scholars would likely respond that although the text was edited, it was not always possible to reconcile inconsistencies because they had already attained a quasi-canonical status.)

I see the reason for the discrepancy as much simpler and, I believe, more honest to the narrative: Deuteronomy is Moses’s repetition of the narrative *in his words, and therefore according to his understanding*. No human being relates events of the past precisely as they happened. If anything, the differences that exist in the spies’ story argue more for the authenticity of the text: this is Moses’s take on the spies’ story. And his take gives us further insight both into those events and into Moses.

**1.24 They made for the hill country, came to the wadi Eshcol, and spied it out.**

**1.25 They took some of the fruit of the land with them and brought it down to us. And they gave us**

**this report: “It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving to us.”**

**1.26 Yet you refused to go up, and flouted the command of the Lord your God.**

Moses seems to be recounting the episode in a manner somewhat unfair to the majority of the Israelites. In truth, only two of the spies brought back fully favorable reports, emphasizing both that the land was good and that the Israelites should go to war to conquer it. In contrast, the ten other spies claimed that while it was true that the land was fertile and produced beautiful fruit, far more significant was the fact that it was full of giants and warriors who would defeat the Israelites.

Apparently, Moses decided to describe the spies’ report as favorable in order to place the blame on the people for their unwillingness to conquer the land. From Moses’s point of view (and God’s, since God punished the people in Numbers for their lack of faith), the people were at fault—despite the spies’ faithless report.

**1.27 You sulked in your tents and said, “It is because the Lord hates us that He brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to wipe us out.**

**1.28 What kind of place are we going to? Our kinsmen have taken the heart out of us, saying, ‘We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even Anakites.’”**

**1.29 I said to you, “Have no dread or fear of them.**

**1.30 None other than the Lord your God, who goes before you, will fight for you, just as He did for you in Egypt before your very eyes,**

**1.31 and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place.**

**1.32 Yet for all that, you have no faith in the Lord your God,**

**1.33 who goes before you on your journeys—to scout the place where you are to encamp—in fire by night and in cloud by day, in order to guide you on the route you are to follow.”**

### **ESSAY: WHEN ANGER—DIVINE AND HUMAN—IS APPROPRIATE**

**1.34 When the Lord heard your loud complaint, He was angry.**

Christian Bible professor Gary Hall comments that the depiction of God as an angry God is firmly embedded in the Hebrew Bible; the Book of Deuteronomy alone refers to God’s anger twenty-six times. In Hall’s view, however, God’s anger is not a flaw; sometimes anger is the only appropriate response to people’s behavior. Would we want to live in a society whose citizenry was not outraged at rapists and child molesters? Hall’s insight is important because historically many Christians distinguished between an “angry God” of the Old Testament and a “loving God” of the New Testament—as if anger and love are mutually exclusive.

But, of course, they are not. The morality of anger, like that of virtually everything else in life, is determined by its context. Love of one’s neighbor or of anyone kind is a beautiful thing; love of Stalin or Hitler is repulsive. “Those of you who love God—hate evil,” the Bible tells us (Psalm 97:10). Anger at evil is morally necessary; anger not morally driven is immoral. In Saul Bellow’s memorable words, “A man is only as good as what he loves.”<sup>7</sup>

Instances of morally appropriate anger in the Hebrew Bible include:

—Anger at ingratitude: Laban prospered from Jacob’s twenty-year-long stewardship of his flocks, yet never thanked Jacob. Instead, he tried to lower Jacob’s wages and cheat him out of the livestock he was due. In response, “Jacob became incensed and took up his grievance with Laban...” (Genesis 31:36–42).

—Anger against slander: Moses was outraged by the rebels Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who slandered Moses when they asserted that he used his position

to aggrandize himself. Moses was much “aggrieved,” the Torah tells us, and asked God to pay no attention to their gift offerings (Numbers 16:15).

—Anger at people who mistreat the poor: The prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of an angry God, said: “That which was robbed from the poor is in your houses. How dare you crush My people and grind the faces of the poor?” says the Lord, God of Hosts.”<sup>8</sup>

—Anger at Israelite idolatry: God was furious at King Solomon, who, in his later years, built idolatrous shrines in Israel: “The Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.”<sup>9</sup>

The man widely regarded as the greatest Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1138–1204, Spain and Egypt), described those who never become angry as “corpse-like” because it is neither natural nor moral never to become angry. However, we should become angry, in Maimonides’s words, only “for a grave cause that rightly calls for indignation, so that the like shall not be done again.”<sup>10</sup>

Maimonides’s view of anger was probably influenced by Aristotle, of whose writings he was a lifelong student. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote: “A person is praised who is angry for the right reasons, with the right people, in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time.”<sup>11</sup>

While righteous anger is righteous, nevertheless, like God, we should be “slow to anger,” a description of God that appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible:

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: ‘The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, *slow to anger*, abounding in kindness and faithfulness...’” (Exodus 34:6).

“The Lord! *slow to anger* and abounding in kindness...” (Numbers 14:18).

“But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

God “is gracious and merciful, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love...” (Joel 2:13).

**He vowed:**

**1.35 Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers—**

**1.36 none except Caleb son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his descendants will I give the land on which he set foot, because he remained loyal to the Lord.**

Joshua's name is not mentioned here—it is mentioned two verses later—even though he, along with Caleb, gave an optimistic report about the land.

**1.37 Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it either.**

Numbers 20:6–12 clearly indicates that Moses's punishment was a consequence of what he declared when extracting water from the rock: attributing the miracle to himself and Aaron rather than to God. Here, however, Moses seems to be connecting his not entering the Promised Land with the Israelites' behavior in the incident of the spies.

Moses, like people throughout history, did not recount events strictly in linear fashion, but deviated briefly here to mention his being prohibited from entering the Promised Land and his perception of the reason for it: not so much his own sin, but the faithless, grumbling people who led him to become angry and say what he said at the rock.

**1.38 Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Imbue him with strength, for he shall allot it to Israel.**

**1.39 Moreover, your little ones who you said would be carried off,**

This is another example of Moses expressing (pent-up) displeasure with the Israelites. They had complained to him, “Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!” (Numbers 14:3). But, lo and behold, Moses

now tells them, “your little ones who you said would be carried off” not only were not carried off; they would enter the Promised Land.

**your children who do not yet know good from bad, they shall enter it; to them will I give it and they shall possess it.**

Young children cannot be held accountable for wrongdoing since they do not yet know right from wrong. In post-biblical Judaism, Jews developed the concept of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which asserts that only when boys reach the age of thirteen, and girls the age of twelve, are they to be regarded as adults (i.e., people who are held accountable for their moral behavior).

**1.40 As for you, turn about and march into the wilderness by the way of the Sea of Reeds.**

**1.41 You replied to me, saying, “We stand guilty before the Lord. We will go up now and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us.” And you all girded yourselves with war gear and recklessly started for the hill country.**

**1.42 But the Lord said to me, “Warn them: Do not go up and do not fight, since I am not in your midst; else you will be routed by your enemies.”**

**1.43 I spoke to you, but you would not listen; you flouted the Lord’s command and willfully marched into the hill country.**

**1.44 Then the Amorites who lived in those hills came out against you like so many bees and chased you, and they crushed you at Hormah in Seir.**

## WHEN GOD DOES NOT LISTEN

**1.45 Again you wept before the Lord; but the Lord would not heed your cry or give ear to you.**

The Hebrew translated here as “give ear to you” (*shama*) is the same Hebrew word (with different vowels) translated as “listen” in verse 43. This led biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman to write:

“Moses reminds the people that ‘*You* didn’t listen,’ and so later, ‘*He* didn’t listen.’ This foreshadows developments coming in the Tanakh [the Hebrew Bible] in which God will be described as hiding His face, not seeing and not listening—always in response to the people’s not listening to God. It will be stated explicitly among God’s last words to Moses at the end of the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:16–18).”

We, of course, do not know why God ever “hides His face” (Deuteronomy 31:17), why He seems not to see, or doesn’t listen. Too often, in contrast to the biblical cause-and-effect here and elsewhere (Israel doesn’t listen to God, so God later forsakes Israel), there appears to be no sin-based correlation to God’s silence.

From a Jewish perspective, this relates most specifically to God’s apparent hiding of His face during the Holocaust, when six million Jews were erased from the face of the earth. But other groups and individuals who have suffered horrific injustice can ask the same question: “Why does God hide His face?” And, for that matter, all people who have dear ones who suffered terrible fates can, and often do, ask the same question.

We mortals cannot know the answer. But the problem is not new, and it has long been acknowledged. As an anonymous medieval Jewish philosopher expressed it, “If I knew God, I’d be God.”

#### **1.46 Thus, after you had remained at Kadesh all that long time,**

Strangely enough, the chapter ends at this point, mid-sentence, and is completed with the opening sentence of Chapter 2. It is worth noting that the division of the Torah into chapters is not original to the biblical text. It was introduced in the twelfth century, roughly two millennia after Deuteronomy was already known to have existed.



## CHAPTER

# 2

**2.1 We marched back into the wilderness by the way of the Sea of Reeds, as the Lord had spoken to me, and skirted the hill country of Seir a long time.**

**2.2 Then the Lord said to me:**

**2.3 You have been skirting this hill country long enough; now turn north.**

### **GOD IS NOT ETHNOCENTRIC, AND ISRAEL IS NOT TO EXPAND BEYOND THE PROMISED LAND**

**2.4 And charge the people as follows: You will be passing through the territory of your kinsmen, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. Though they will be afraid of you, be very careful**

**2.5 not to provoke them. For I will not give you of their land so much as a foot can tread on; I have given the hill country of Seir as a possession to Esau.**

There are two great moral lessons here.

One is that God is interested in all nations, not only in His Chosen People. This is repeated throughout the Torah and the rest of the Bible and is inherent to Jewish chosenness from the beginning. God told Abraham: “All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants” (Genesis 22:18). The very purpose of chosenness is to bring God and His moral message to the world’s nations:

“And the many nations shall go and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.’ For Torah [literally ‘instruction’] shall come forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.... And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation and they shall never again know war” (Isaiah 2:3–4).

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*There appears to be little correlation between people’s well-being and how much they complain. Many individuals who have suffered terribly almost never complain, and many who have had it comparatively easy constantly complain.*

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Therefore, God set aside land not only for the Israelites, but for other nations as well. God chose the Jews, but God is not ethnocentric. See, for example, Amos 9:7: “Are you not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? says the Lord. ‘Have I not brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?’”

The other great moral lesson is that there is no allowance for imperialism in the Torah. There are no other Promised Lands.

## ANOTHER MORAL FIRST

**2.6 What food you eat you shall obtain from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them for money.**

If there was another nation or religion in the ancient or medieval world that prohibited its soldiers from seizing food or water from nations they traversed, I am unaware of it. Israel was stronger than Seir, but no matter how strong it was, Israel had no more right to take food and water from a weaker nation than a stronger individual has to take food and water from a weaker individual.

## WHO COMPLAINS?

**2.7 Indeed, the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings. He has watched over your wanderings through this great wilderness; the Lord your God has been with you these past forty years: you have lacked nothing.**

Though the Israelites lacked nothing, they still continually complained.

There appears to be little correlation between people's well-being and how much they complain. Many people who live in the freest and most affluent countries—and who themselves are particularly affluent—complain more than their less affluent fellow citizens and more than people living in poor countries. Similarly, it is impossible to gauge from people's levels of complaint how much they have actually suffered. Many individuals who have suffered terribly almost never complain, and many who have had it comparatively easy constantly complain.

**2.8 We then moved on, away from our kinsmen, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the road of the Arabah, away from Elath and Ezion-geber; and we marched on in the direction of the wilderness of Moab.**

**2.9 And the Lord said to me: Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war. For I will not give you any of their land as a possession; I have assigned Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot.—**

Lot was Abraham's nephew (see Genesis 12:5).

Many people condemn the Torah for positing that God assigned a specific land to the Jews. But they never mention that the same Torah posits that the same God assigned lands to nations other than the Jews. At the very least, that should undermine the notion of an ethnocentric or chauvinistic God.

**2.10 It was formerly inhabited by the Emim, a people great and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites.**

**2.11 Like the Anakites, they are counted as Rephaim; but the Moabites call them Emim.**

**2.12 Similarly, Seir was formerly inhabited by the Horites; but the descendants of Esau dispossessed**

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**them, wiping them out and settling in their place, just as Israel did in the land they were to possess, which the Lord had given to them.—**

**2.13 Up now! Cross the wadi Zered! So we crossed the wadi Zered.**

**2.14 The time that we spent in travel from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the wadi Zered was thirty-eight years, until that whole generation of warriors had perished from the camp, as the Lord had sworn concerning them.**

In the aftermath of the Israelites' panicked acceptance of the report of the spies that they were too weak to prevail over the Canaanites ("the whole community broke into loud cries...[and said] 'It would be better for us to go back to Egypt'"—Numbers 14:1, 3). God, seeing the people's lack of trust in Him, decreed the generation of the Exodus would die in the desert (Numbers 14:21–25).

**2.15 Indeed, the hand of the Lord struck them, to root them out from the camp to the last man.**

**2.16 When all the warriors among the people had died off,**

It is striking that Moses called the generation of the Exodus "warriors," given that generation's fear of fighting.

**2.17 the Lord spoke to me, saying:**

**2.18 You are now passing through the territory of Moab, through Ar.**

**2.19 You will then be close to the Ammonites; do not harass them or start a fight with them. For I will not give any part of the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession; I have assigned it as a possession to the descendants of Lot.—**

Again, God forbade the Israelites from fighting a specific nation.

**2.20 It, too, is counted as Rephaim country. It was formerly inhabited by Rephaim, whom the Ammonites call Zamzummim,**

**2.21 a people great and numerous and as tall as the Anakites. The Lord wiped them out, so that [the Ammonites] dispossessed them and settled in their place,**

**2.22 as He did for the descendants of Esau who live in Seir, when He wiped out the Horites before them, so that they dispossessed them and settled in their place, as is still the case.**

**2.23 So, too, with the Avvim who dwelt in villages in the vicinity of Gaza: the Caphtorim, who came from Crete, wiped them out and settled in their place.—**

**2.24 Up! Set out across the wadi Arnon! See, I give into your power Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin the occupation: engage him in battle.**

In light of modern criticisms of the Torah's description of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, in which the Israelites were ordered to kill virtually all the inhabitants, one should be aware that those orders were unique. That is why there are no such instructions here regarding the conquering of Sihon—only “engage him in battle.”

Now, in the case of the Midianites—the nation that sought to seduce the Israelites and have them return to idolatry—there was an order to single them out for destruction (Numbers 25:16–18). However, we know this directive was never actually carried out because the Midianites appear later in the Bible, in Judges, when they invaded Canaan, drove the Israelites into the hill country, and plundered their crops and cattle for seven years (Judges 6:1–6).

**2.25 This day I begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven, so that they shall tremble and quake because of you whenever they hear you mentioned.**

The Book of Joshua, the biblical book that follows Deuteronomy, reports that the Canaanites came to fear the Israelites because they had heard about the Israelites' military successes, one being the battle with Sihon, which Moses recounted here (see Joshua 2:9–11).

**2.26 Then I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to King Sihon of Heshbon with an offer of peace, as follows,**

**2.27 “Let me pass through your country. I will keep strictly to the highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left.**

**2.28 What food I eat you will supply for money, and what water I drink you will furnish for money; just let me pass through—**

This episode is also related in Numbers 21, where money is not mentioned. Moses apparently filled in a detail here. Viewing Torah episodes through Moses’s eyes is one of the most interesting aspects of Deuteronomy.

**2.29 as the descendants of Esau who dwell in Seir did for me, and the Moabites who dwell in Ar—that I may cross the Jordan into the land that the Lord our God is giving us.”**

**2.30 But King Sihon of Heshbon refused to let us pass through, because the Lord had stiffened his will and hardened his heart in order to deliver him into your power—as is now the case.**

In Numbers 21, no mention is made of God’s hardening Sihon’s heart. It merely says that the king refused the Israelites’ request to peacefully pass through his land. This is the only instance in the Torah, aside from the famous case of the Egyptian Pharaoh, in which God is described as hardening a person’s heart. (See the essay “Did God Deprive Pharaoh of Free Will?” at Exodus 4:21.)

**2.31 And the Lord said to me: See, I begin by placing Sihon and his land at your disposal. Begin the occupation; take possession of his land.**

**2.32 Sihon with all his men took the field against us at Jahaz,**

**2.33 and the Lord our God delivered him to us and we defeated him and his sons and all his men.**

### **ESSAY: THE MORAL PROBLEM OF KILLING “MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN” IN THE TORAH**

**2.34 At that time we captured all his towns, and we doomed every town—men, women, and children—leaving no survivor.**

**2.35 We retained as booty only the cattle and the spoil of the cities that we captured.**

**2.36 From Aroer on the edge of the Arnon valley, including the town in the valley itself, to Gilead, not a city was too mighty for us; the Lord our God delivered everything to us.**

Based on the evidence of Moses himself, Moses was not speaking literally in asserting that the Israelites obliterated all of Sihon’s people. The Israelites never wiped out every member of any nation—including the Canaanites.

That God later instructed the Israelites not to marry Canaanites made it clear there would be many surviving Canaanite women to marry (and men as well). The verse prohibiting intermarriage with Canaanites reads, “You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons” (Deuteronomy 7:3). And two verses later, Moses instructed the Israelites to tear down the Canaanites’ altars but did not order the Israelites to kill them (Deuteronomy 7:5).

In addition, despite the claims in the later Book of Joshua of Israel’s total victory over the Canaanites, it seems that many Canaanite nations and people survived (see, for example, Judges 1:27–33). Thus, the Book of Judges, which follows the Book of Joshua, records that the Israelites often adopted the practices of their Canaanite neighbors—exactly what the Torah feared would happen (Judges 2:11–12).

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It may also be worth noting that while the Torah states that God gave the Israelites victory over Sihon, it does not state that God ordered the Israelites to wipe out Sihon’s people.

In his book *Biblical Literacy*, Joseph Telushkin put this issue into moral perspective:

Most important, the reason that the Israelites’ conduct so disturbs us is because the Bible itself has sensitized us to high standards of respect for human life, especially

in its commands to love our neighbor and to love the stranger. As the late Princeton philosopher Walter Kaufmann wrote, “The reproach of callousness and insufficient social conscience can hardly be raised. Our social conscience comes largely from the religion of Moses.” But, Kaufmann noted, “to find the spirit of the Old Testament [in the description of the battles with the Canaanites] is like finding the distinctive genius of America in the men who slaughtered the Indians.”<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the Bible’s disturbing ethics of warfare can perhaps be best explained in terms of monotheism’s struggle to survive. Monotheism started out as a minority movement with a different theology and ethical system than the rest of the world. It expanded and developed because it had one small corner in the world where it could grow unmolested. Had the Hebrews continued to reside amidst the pagan and child-sacrificing Canaanite culture, monotheism itself would almost certainly have died....

The late Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufman has similarly argued that it was only because of the wars Israel fought against the Canaanite nations that Israel “did not assimilate into the indigenous population.... It provided Israel’s new religion with an environment in which to grow free of the influence of a popular pagan culture.”<sup>22</sup>

The reason humanity came to be morally troubled by the killing of King Sihon’s people or of other Canaanites is that the Torah and the rest of the Bible taught humanity to be morally troubled by such killing. Therefore, I do not dismiss the Torah because of a moral problem that the Torah alone taught humanity to regard as a moral problem.

Moreover, if neither war—against Sihon or against the Canaanites—involved extermination, would any of those who reject the Bible and its God believe in this God and this Bible? I doubt it. Few people who reject God and the Bible do so because of Sihon or Canaan.

The alleged wiping out of the Canaanites is almost always an excuse to reject the Bible, not the reason. Those who reject the Bible and its God also reject the God who gave the Ten Commandments and the God who commanded “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). If the Bible consisted of only one chapter, that of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), they would still reject God and the Bible. (My own experience attests to this. I have given video presentations explaining each of the Ten Commandments, which have garnered tens of millions of views around the world. These videos have received more hate and mockery online than any of the hundreds of other videos my educational organization, PragerU, has put on the internet.)

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*I do not dismiss the Torah because of a moral problem that the Torah alone taught humanity to regard as a moral problem.*

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Finally, if God had indeed ordered the killing of all of King Sihon’s people and/or all Canaanites, I would offer two responses:

First, if God is good and just, which is the entire premise of the Bible, God had His reasons to order the killing of the inhabitants of Sihon and/or Canaan—just as the United States, in its defensive and just war against Japan, had legitimate reasons to drop an atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The dropping of these two bombs ended World War II in the Pacific. That meant the lives of millions of Americans, Japanese, and others were saved. And it meant the end of the Japanese regime, which was Nazi-like, given the horrors it perpetrated in Korea and China.

The only other explanation would be that God is not good, but evil. However, an evil god would render the world a perverse joke—which is essentially

how it was portrayed in the pre-biblical world, with its capricious, unjust, and cruel gods.

But if the God of the Bible is evil, how does one explain the Ten Commandments; the “love your neighbor” commandment; the laws concerned with reducing animal suffering; the bans on oppressing the vulnerable; the repeated demands for justice for the poor, the widow, and the orphan; the plea that “Nation shall not lift sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore”; and so much more emphasis on goodness?

It is far easier to explain a good God who is demanding a once-in-three-thousand-years call to decimate Canaanites than an evil God who is preoccupied with goodness, compassion, and justice.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, nowhere in the Torah or the rest of the Bible is there permission, let alone a commandment, to ever again destroy a nation. This was a singular event at a particular time. No Israelite or Jew ever understood the wars against Canaan or Sihon as a way to wage war—even a just war.

**2.37 But you did not encroach upon the land of the Ammonites, all along the wadi Jabbok and the towns of the hill country, just as the Lord our God had commanded.**