

**Parashat Ki Tavo**  
**The Main Monologue of Sefer Devarim**  
**By Rav Yehuda Rock**

Our *parasha* concludes Moshe's second monologue in *Sefer Devarim*. The speech occupies six *parashot*, stretching from the beginning of chapter 5 until the end of chapter 26. In this lecture, we will address the historical aspects of this speech: when it was uttered and when its content took place. As we shall see, an accurate understanding of these external elements will lead us to a better understanding of the messages of the speech.

There is no doubt that the speech, as it appears in *Sefer Devarim*, was given by Moshe to *Bnei Yisrael* in the fortieth year of their travels, on the eastern side of the Jordan river. The introduction to the speech, at the end of chapter 4 (verses 45-49), states explicitly:

These are the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments that Moshe spoke to *Bnei Yisrael* after they left Egypt, on the other side of the Jordan, in the valley facing *Beit Pe'or*, in the land of Sichon, king of the Emori, who dwelled in Cheshbon, whom Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael* smote after they came out of Egypt...

However, the *Rishonim* are divided as to when Moshe heard the actual content of this speech from God. Specifically, the *Rishonim* discuss the many commandments that appear within this monologue: did Moshe receive these commandments at Sinai or did he receive them only in the fortieth year?

According to the Radbaz (Responsa of the Radbaz, part VI, *siman* 2143), Moshe himself only heard these commandments during the fortieth year:

The way I understand it, all of the new *parshiot* [of *Sefer Devarim*] were uttered on the plains of Moav, and every issue that is repeated [from a previous mention in the Torah appears again] because of something new that it comes to teach. And if you ask why God did not give these commandments at Sinai, like the rest of the *mitzvot*, then why does the same question not apply to Shabbat, and the laws given earlier at Mara, and to those that were given in the Tent of Meeting – why were these not given at Sinai? One who asks this is questioning God's will, and this is a matter that a person has no power to understand, for the blessed God and His will are one and the same thing... For He gave many commandments on the plains of Moav, and we find several *mitzvot* which Moshe conveys to Israel and they do not include the words, "Command *Bnei Yisrael*!" or "Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*;" rather, Moshe sits and teaches, and everyone knows that it all comes from God. And all of the commandments that are introduced in *Sefer Devarim* – God told these to

Moshe at the plains of Moav, and Moshe conveyed them to Israel as part of his reiteration of the commandments that had already been given and all that he introduced that was new was from God; Moshe added nothing of his own.

However, a literal reading of the verses from the beginning of the speech would seem to contradict Radbaz's opinion. Immediately after Moshe recounts that God gave the Ten Commandments, he says (5:19-6:1):

(19) These words God spoke to all of your assembly at the mountain, from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the darkness, with a great voice that was not heard again...

(25) And God said to me...

(27) Go, say to them: "Go back to your tents."

(28) But as for you – stay here with Me, and I shall tell you of all the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them and you shall do them in the land which I give to them, to possess it.

(6:1) And this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, to do in the land to which you are passing over, to possess it...

It would seem that "the commandment, the statutes and the judgments" (6:1) that are to follow are what God commanded Moshe at Sinai (as described in verse 28 above). Radbaz would apparently have to conclude that the two verses are talking about different laws. However, this seems most improbable, considering the flow of the verses. (To highlight this flow, our citation above skips over verses 29-30, but a complete reading certainly suggests a single narrative continuity.)

In his explanation of this matter, Radbaz is actually responding to and disagreeing with Ramban, who maintains that all of the commandments included in this monologue had already been conveyed to Moshe previously, at the beginning of the period in the wilderness, but that Moshe waited until the fortieth year to convey them to *Bnei Yisrael*:<sup>1</sup>[1]

He also adds, in this *sefer* some commandments that have not previously been mentioned at all... They were all already conveyed to him at Sinai, or in the Tent of Meeting, in the first year, prior to the spies, for on the plains of Moav the only matter that was new to him was the covenant... Therefore, we do not find in this book the expression, "God spoke to Moshe, saying: Command *Bnei Yisrael*...", or "Speak to *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them such-and-such commandment." However, these commandments were not written in the previous books, for conveying to those who had come out of Egypt, for perhaps these commandments applied only once they were in the land, even though they are commandments pertaining to the person... or [perhaps] since

---

<sup>1</sup>[1] Admittedly, Ramban does not base his opinion on the verses cited above, from the end of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 6; he relies on other considerations.

they are not regular matters, he mentioned them only to the next generation, who would inherit the land. (Introduction to *Sefer Devarim*)

It should be emphasized that Ramban is talking only about when the commandments themselves were commanded, not their formulation in Moshe's speech. It is Moshe who formulates, explains, and sets forth the commandments in an orderly speech in the fortieth year.

A third approach, which will be our focus here, is proposed by Ibn Ezra. He maintains that Moshe told *Bnei Yisrael* the matters covered in the monologue a number of times over the course of the period in the wilderness, starting a short time after Sinai and ending in the fortieth year, as finally recounted in *Sefer Devarim*.

Ibn Ezra's view in this regard appears in his commentary to the first two verses of *Sefer Devarim*. He explains that these two verses are talking about the central monologue of the book, and that these verses include a list of all of the places where Moshe conveyed these commandments to *Bnei Yisrael*:

To my view, the correct interpretation is as follows: 'These words' – referring to the words of the commandments written in *parashiot Re'eh, Shofetim, Ki Tetzei, and Ki Tavo* – were already uttered while they were in the wilderness...And this is correct: Moshe spoke in the wilderness, on the plain, facing [the sea of] Suf, from the day that they journeyed from Sinai... 'Eleven days' – means that he spoke these words during those eleven days.

However, it is impossible that the full monologue, in the form in which it appears in *Sefer Devarim*, was uttered at the beginning of the period in the wilderness, since it contains matters which could only have been conveyed for the first time later on. A clear example is to be found in *parashat Ki Tetze*, concerning the Ammonites and Moabites:

Since they did not welcome you with bread and water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Bil'am, son of Be'or, from Petor of Aram Naharayim, to curse you. But the Lord your God would not acquiesce to listen to Bil'am, and the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you. [Therefore] you shall not seek their peace or their welfare all of your days, forever.

The episode concerning Bil'am took place during the fortieth year, after Balak witnessed the victory of *Bnei Yisrael* over the Emorites. Therefore, it makes no sense to propose that the above verses were conveyed, in this form, earlier on. The encounter with Ammon likewise took place at the end of the period in the wilderness (2:14-19). Ibn Ezra was unquestionably aware of this chronology, and he acknowledges that over the years in the desert, various elements were added to Moshe's monologue.

What arises from the above is that, according to Ibn Ezra, there was a basic monologue of commandments, which was uttered already during the first year and to which additional elements were later added. What we have before us in *Sefer Devarim* is the final verse of the speech, as delivered in the fortieth year.

Whether or not we accept Ibn Ezra's interpretation of these first verses of the *sefer*, it would seem that the monologue itself offers internal proof of the fact that it brings together content from earlier and later times. Moreover, there are places within the speech in which an earlier source, dating back to the time just after Sinai, and a later addition, from the fortieth year, can be identified within the same topic of discussion.

Let us consider a few examples.

### **First Example: Introduction to the Monologue**

The Lord our God forged a covenant with us at Chorev. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us – we, all of us who are here alive today. (5:2-3).

The literal meaning of these verses is that these words were spoken to the generation with whom a covenant was made at Sinai. Moshe could not have said to the generation that grew up in the wilderness, "It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant," as He obviously did. On the other hand, the generation alive at the time of the speech in the fortieth year were *not* present at Chorev.

Rashi, sensing this logic, inserts a word: "It was not with our fathers **alone** that the Lord made this covenant, but with us." While this addition does have the effect of retaining the logic of the verses while also making sense of them in the context of the plains of Moav, it clearly deviates from the plain meaning of the verse.

Ibn Ezra also tries to resolve the historical implication of the verse. He offers two explanations. The first reiterates Rashi's approach. The second is that at the time when Moshe spoke on the plains of Moav, there were still some people alive among *Bnei Yisrael* who had stood at Sinai. However, it seems difficult to accept that these few individuals justify a characterization of the entire generation that stands before Moshe as those with whom God had forged the covenant, rather than their parents.

In fact, it seems rather surprising that Ibn Ezra adopts this direction in resolving the problem in the verse considering that he believes that this speech (or parts of it) was delivered already just after Sinai. Apparently, Ibn Ezra believes that the editing and changes that the speech underwent should match precisely the

speech intended for the generation standing in the plains of Moav; in terms of its content, it should appear as if it were uttered only at the end of the period of the wilderness. However, from the above verse it appears that Moshe was limited (or set bounds for himself) as to the nature of the changes that he introduced into the speech. While introducing additions in keeping with changing times and circumstances, he did not remove any of the original elements; he left them intact. Moshe apparently understood that even in changing times, none of the original message should be abandoned or concealed.

Thus, the verse retains a line that was clearly delivered to the generation that witnessed the giving of the Torah at *Har Sinai*.

### **Second Example: Chapter 11**

Know this day that [I speak] not to your children, who have not known or seen the reproach of the Lord your God, His greatness, His strong hand and outstretched arm, and His miracles and His acts which He performed in Egypt for Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and for all of his land, and what He did to the Egyptian army, its horses and its chariots, causing the waters of the Sea of Suf to drown them as they pursued after you, and [how] the Lord destroyed them, to this day, and what He did for you in the wilderness, until your arrival at this place, and what He did to Datan and to Aviram, sons of Eliav, son of Reuven – that the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and their tents and all of their living substance, in the midst of all of Israel. For your eyes have seen all of the great acts of God which He has done. (11:2-7)

The distinction between "your children" and "your eyes" shows that this unit does not describe events that were passed down orally as a heritage, but rather events that were actually witnessed. This being the case, the description of seeing the miracles of Egypt can only apply to the generation that left Egypt.

On the other hand, the phrase, "what He did for you in the wilderness until your arrival at this place" would clearly seem to be addressed to the generation that now stands on the plains of Moav. It thus appears that the unit was originally said to the generation that left Egypt and that this phrase was added by Moshe in the fortieth year for the benefit of the new generation.

The episode of the earth swallowing up Korach took place during the second year in the desert – this, too, was an event experienced by those who left Egypt. It is therefore possible that this unit was uttered for the first time only after the episode of Korach. Alternatively, it may have been conveyed previously and after the events concerning Korach and his company, Moshe added the reference to them; as a third stage, at the end of the fortieth year, he added – in between the two descriptions – the phrase, "what He did for you in the wilderness until your arrival at this place."

### Third Example: Chapter 12

(8) You shall act in accordance with all that we are doing here today – each person [doing] whatever is right in his own eyes.

(9) For you have not yet reached the rest and the inheritance which the Lord God gives to you.

(10) But when you pass over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God gives you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all of your enemies around you, and you dwell in peace,

(11) Then the place which the Lord your God will choose to cause His name to abide there – to there shall you bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contributions of your hand, and all your choice vows which you vow to the Lord.

(12) And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God – you and your sons and your daughters and your man-servants and your maidservants and the Levite who is in your gates, for he has no portion and inheritance with you.

(13) Take care lest you offer up your burnt sacrifices in every place that you see.

(14) [You shall do so] only in the place which the Lord will choose, in one of your tribes; there you shall offer up your burnt sacrifices, and there you shall perform all that I command you.

(15) Yet you may slaughter [animals] and eat [their] flesh to your heart's desire, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you, in all of your gates; the unclean and the clean may eat of it – as of the gazelle and of the deer.

(16) Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it upon the ground like water.

(17) You may not eat within your gates the tithe of your corn and of your wine and of your oil, or the firstborn of your cattle or your flocks, or any of your vows which you vow, or your freewill offerings, or offerings of your hand.

(18) Rather, you shall eat them before the Lord your God, in the place which the Lord your God will choose – you and your son and your daughter, and your man-servant and your maid-servant, and the Levi who is in your gates, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all of your endeavors.

(19) Take care lest you forsake the Levi, for all of your days upon your land.

(20) When the Lord your God expands your borders, as He has spoken to you, and you say, "I will eat meat" – because your soul desires to eat meat, then you may eat meat to your heart's desire.

(21) If the place which the Lord your God chooses to place His Name there is far from you, then you shall slaughter of your cattle and of your flocks which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you, and you shall eat in your gates to your heart's content.

(22) Just as the gazelle or the deer is eaten, so you shall eat it – the unclean and the clean shall eat of them together.

(23) Only fortify yourself lest you eat the blood, for the blood is the soul, and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh.

(24) You shall not eat it; you shall pour it upon the ground like water.

(25) You shall not eat of it, in order that it may be good for you and for your children after you, when you do that which is upright in the eyes of the Lord.

(26) Only your holy things which you have and your vows shall you take and you shall come to the place which the Lord will choose.

(27) And you shall offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the sacrifice of the Lord your God, and the blood of your sacrifices shall be poured upon the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall eat the meat.

This unit raises two main difficulties. The first concerns the repetition: verses 20-27 repeat what we have already read up to verse 19 – the license to eat meat as desired, if it is not sacrificial meat; the prohibition against consuming blood; the obligation of bringing sacrifices to "the place that God will choose" (the prohibition against *bamot* - local altars).

The second difficulty concerns verse 8. A reading of the verse in context tells us that there is a contrast between the law that prevails "here, this day" and the law that will apply after the land has been settled. Right now, everyone does "what is right in his own eyes." Once in their own land, *Bnei Yisrael* will have to bring consecrated food to the Temple. In other words, the prohibition against *bamot* will apply in the land, while presently *bamot* are permitted.

But we know that the prohibition against *bamot* was applied in the time of the *Mishkan* as well! Not only could consecrated offerings be eaten only after they were brought to the *Mishkan*, but even meat that was desired for food without any connection to a sacrifice had to be brought to the *Mishkan*. In [Vayikra 17](#) (1-4) we read:

God spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons and to all of *Bnei Yisrael*, and say to them: This is the matter which God has commanded, saying: Any person of the house of Israel who slaughters an ox or a sheep or a goat in the camp, or who slaughters it outside of the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to offer of it as a sacrifice to God before God's *Mishkan* – blood shall be imputed to that person; he has spilled blood, and that person shall be cut off from his people.

The *mishna* ([Zevachim 112b](#)) likewise teaches, "Once the *Mishkan* was established, *bamot* were forbidden." How is it possible, then, that Moshe describes a situation where "here, this day" there is license for *bamot*? (We shall not review the various forced explanations offered here by the *Rishonim*.)<sup>2</sup> [2]

---

<sup>2</sup>[2] This contradiction has motivated Bible critics to distinguish between different "sources" within the Torah – sources which, to their view, reflect different perceptions of the proper form of worship. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann, who addresses such arguments extensively in his commentary, offers an innovative solution here. Further on in the *mishna* in *Zevachim*, we read, "When they came to

According to what we have said above, the solution is simple. Apparently, the first sections – verses 2-19 – was said early on, just after the revelation at Sinai, before the Mishkan had been established. At this stage, *bamot* were still permitted, and the emphasis in this section is on the prohibition of *bamot* for sacrifices in the land. The license for meat "to your heart's content" (i.e., without any connection to sacrifices) is a marginal element in this unit, whose main purpose is to limit the renewal of the prohibition of *bamot* for consecrated meat. The second section – verses 20-27 – repeats the same laws, but this time from the perspective of the period when even regular meat was prohibited outside of the *Mishkan*. For this reason, the emphasis here is not on the prohibition against *bamot* (which was already in practice at the time that this was said) but rather on the license to eat meat "to your heart's content" without connection to sacrifice, with the prohibition against *bamot* appearing merely as a qualification for this license.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

---

---

Gilgal, *bamot* were once again permitted.” In other words, during the brief period immediately following the crossing of the Jordan, *bamot* were permitted. The *mishna* does not explain why the prohibition dating back to *Vayikra* was overturned for this time. The *Rambam*, in his Commentary on the *Mishna*, explains that the prohibition in [Vayikra 17](#) was dependent upon *Bnei Yisrael* encamping by their tribes; when they reached Gilgal, they no longer encamped, but rather began to settle the land. Based on this logic, Rabbi Hoffmann suggests that the prohibition actually lost its validity as soon as the tribes of Gad and Reuven began settling on the eastern side of the Jordan, following the conquest of the lands of Sichon and Og. Thus, when Moshe gave his speech on the plains of Moav, *bamot* were already permissible. This explanation would seem to contradict the plain meaning of the *mishna*, which states that *bamot* were permitted only when they reached Gilgal, but we may explain that the *mishna* is simply talking about the laws applicable to different situations concerning the *Mishkan* and the Temple; there is no need, in this context, to get into the details of different situations within the same category. The weak point in this theory is that it makes the license for *bamot* dependent upon the partial settlement of two tribes.