**The Structure and Significance of the Opening Verses**

**By Rav Mordechai Sabato**

I. STRUCTURE OF THE PARASHA

Chapter 11 of Devarim concludes as follows:

(26) Behold, I give before you today a blessing and a curse.

(27) The blessing – that you shall listen to the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today,

(28) and the curse – if you shall not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, and you shall stray from the path that I command you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

(29) And it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you to the land to which you are coming, to inherit it, then you shall give the blessing upon Mt. Gerizim and the curse upon Mt. Eval:

(30) Are these not across the Jordan, beyond the way where the sun sets in the land of the Canaanites that dwell in the Arava, facing Gilgal, by the terebinths of Moreh?

(31) For you are crossing over the Jordan to come and inherit the land that the Lord your God has given you, and you shall inherit it and dwell in it,

(32) and you shall observe and perform all the statutes and all the judgments that I give before you today.

Although these verses conclude chapter 11, they open the parasha of Re'eh. The division of the chapters here reflects the view that these verses are not the beginning of a new topic, but rather the conclusion of the previous one. (The division of the chapters was set down in the 13th century by an English bishop.) We shall therefore first turn our attention to a clarification of the purpose of these verses and the question of whether they indeed conclude the previous topic, as the chapter division would suggest, or whether they introduce a new topic, as we would assume based on the division of weekly parasha readings (which reflects the Babylonian annual Torah-reading cycle).

The verses under discussion may be grouped into three sections. The first includes verses 26-28, in which Moshe informs the nation of the two options facing them, a blessing or a curse, and their respective conditions. In the second section, verses 29-30, Moshe commands the nation to hold a ceremony after entering the land, during which the blessing and the curse will be given upon the mountains of Gerizim and Eval. This section also includes an indication of the geographical location of these mountains. In the third section, verses 31-32, Moshe exhorts the nation to observe, in the land, the statutes and judgments that are given before them today.

After these verses, starting at the beginning of chapter 12, Moshe lists the statutes and judgments, with the following introduction:

(12:1) These are the statutes and the judgments that you shall observe to perform in the land which the Lord your God gave to your forefathers for you as an inheritance all the days that you live upon the earth.

The linguistic and thematic connection between the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 is quite noticeable, and forms a chiastic parallel:

(11:31) For you are crossing over the Jordan to come and INHERIT THE LAND THAT GOD YOUR GOD HAS GIVEN TO YOU, AND YOU SHALL INHERIT it and dwell in it.

(11:32) AND YOU SHALL OBSERVE AND PERFORM ALL THE STATUTES AND THE JUDGMENTS that I give before you today.

(12:1) THESE ARE THE STATUTES AND THE JUDGMENTS THAT YOU SHALL OBSERVE TO PERFORM

IN THE LAND WHICH GOD YOUR GOD HAS GIVEN TO YOUR FOREFATHERS FOR YOU AS AN INHERITANCE all the days that you live upon the earth.

The crux of verses 31-32 of chapter 11 is the command to observe the statutes and judgments. This command is stated in verse 32; verse 31 describes a time that precedes the principal clause. The crux of the first verse of chapter 12, on the other hand, is a presentation of the statutes and judgments, and the description of their observance in the land is a subordinate clause that defines the nature of these laws. For this reason Moshe presents the principal clause first, before the subordinate clause.

Hence, the connection between the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 is unquestionable. Let us now clarify the function of the other verses, 26-30, and their relationship with our parasha. For this purpose we shall need to broaden our perspective and review the framework of Moshe's speech.

We have already noted that starting from chapter 12, Moshe lists the statutes and judgments. How far does this list extend?

An examination of the language of the text reveals that the sequence of statutes and judgments opening in 12:2 continues uninterrupted until 26:15. In the latter verse, Moshe concludes the mitzva of "bi'ur ma'asrot" (removal from the house of produce designated for tithes), and concludes this section of laws as a whole. At the end of this section, Moshe adds the following verses:

(26:16) This day the Lord your God commands you to perform these statutes and the judgments, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul.

(17) You have declared God today to be your God and to walk in His ways and to observe His statutes and His commandments and His judgments, and to listen to His voice.

(18) And God has declared you this day to be for Him a chosen nation, as He told you, and to observe all His commandments.

(19) And to place you high above all the nations that He has made, for honor and for praise and for glory, that you may be a holy nation to the Lord your God as He has spoken.

These verses may be divided into two sections: 16, and 17-19. Verse 16 is in fact a summary of the section of statutes and judgments, emphasizing the need for their punctilious observance. Verses 17-18 describe the mutual relationship between Israel and God, as expressed in observance of God's mitzvot. For our purposes, it is especially important that verse 16, which follows immediately after the conclusion of the section of laws, parallels chapter 12 verse 1, which serves as their introduction:

(12:1) THESE ARE THE STATUTES AND THE JUDGMENTS THAT YOU SHALL OBSERVE TO PERFORM in the land which the Lord your God has given to you to inherit all the days that you live upon the earth.

(26:16) This day the Lord your God commands you TO PERFORM THESE STATUTES AND THE JUDGMENTS, AND YOU SHALL OSBSERVE AND PERFORM them with all your heart and with all your soul.

The word "these" in chapter 12 hints at what is to follow. The same word in chapter 26 hints at what has already been said. Between them we find the entire section of statutes and judgments.

Immediately following the conclusion of this section, in chapter 27, Moshe describes in detail the ceremony of giving the blessing and the curse on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval:

(27:11) And Moshe commanded the nation on that day, saying:

(12) These shall stand to bless the nation upon Mt. Gerizim when you cross over the Jordan: Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Yissachar, Yosef and Binyamin.

(13) And these shall stand for the curse upon Mt. Eval: Reuven, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan and Naftali.

Thereafter, in chapter 28, Moshe specifies the contents of the blessing and the curse. (It is interesting to note that there are six blessings and six curses, which would seem to parallel the number of tribes on each mountain. Note also that the blessing and the curse are each subdivided into three pairs of statements.)

Now we may return to our original question, and explain the function of verses 26-30 in chapter 12. In verses 26-28, as we have noted, Moshe reminds the nation of the existence of a blessing and a curse, which are dependent on observance or lack of observance of the mitzvot. In verses 29-30 Moshe commands the nation to hold a ceremony of uttering the blessings and the curses on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval. Thus we may say that chapter 27 specifies the procedure of the ceremony mentioned in 12:29-30, and that chapter 28 specifies the content of the blessing and the curse that were mentioned in 12:26-28.

What faces us, then, is a unit of perfect symmetry, with the section ostatutes and judgments at it center:

1. Blessing and curse as a result of observance or lack of observance of the mitzvot (11:26-28)

2. Command that the blessing and curse be uttered upon Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval (11:29-30)

3. Exhortation to observe the statutes and the judgments in the land (11:31-32)

4. Introduction to the statutes and judgments ("These are the statutes and the judgments…") (12:1)

5. LIST OF STATUTES AND JUDGMENTS

4a. Conclusion of the statutes and judgments ("…These statutes and the judgments" (26:16)

3a. Significance of the observance of the statutes and judgments (26:17-19)

2a. Specification of the ceremony of uttering the blessing and the curse on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval (27)

1a. Specification of the blessing and the curse (28)

Our study therefore leads us to conclude that the verses at the beginning of parashat Re'eh indeed open a new section, and the beginning of the parasha should hence also have been the beginning of a new chapter. This unit continues, as we have mentioned, until the end of chapter 28, and is perfectly symmetrical.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRUCTRE

Having explored the structure of the unit, let us turn our attention to the significance of this structure.

We noted that the unit concludes with chapter 28, which specifies the blessing and the curse. Let us also note that the final verse of that chapter states explicitly the significance of the unit as a whole:

(28:69) These are the words of the covenant that God commanded Moshe to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moav, aside from the covenant that He made with them at Chorev.

The text defines the unit as a whole as the elaboration of a covenant that Moshe is commanded to make with Am Yisrael. But we must clarify whether the expression, "These are the words of the covenant," refers to the unit as a whole, or whether it refers only to the chapter of the blessings and the curses.

The key to this question is to be found in the clause at the end of the verse: "…aside from the covenant that He made with them at Chorev." What is the covenant that was made with them at Chorev?

Rashi explains, "The curses contained in Torat ha-Kohanim (Sefer Vayikra) that were said at Sinai." Rashi refers here to the parasha of "If you will walk in My statutes" in chapter 26 of Sefer Vayikra, which concludes with the words "at Mt. Sinai by the hand of Moshe." According to this view, it may be assumed that the "words of the covenant" referred to here hint only at chapter 28, which includes the blessings and the curses.

The Rashbam accords with Rashi's interpretation, adding "and Sinai is Chorev". In other words, the mountain of Chorev mentioned here is just another name for the mountain of Sinai mentioned in parashat Bechukkotai.

But the very need to add this identification points to the difficulty entailed in the explanation of Rashi and the Rashbam, for if the Torah wanted to hint in Devarim 28:69 to parashat Bechukkotai, it should have used the same name that was used there: Mt. Sinai.

A study of the appearance of the expression, "the covenant that He made with them at Chorev," may shed light on its meaning. In parashat Vaetchanan (Devarim chapter 5), in the introduction to the description of the revelation at Sinai and the transmission of the Ten Commandments, we learn:

(5:1) And Moshe called to all of Israel and said to them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the judgments that I declare for your ears today, and you shall study them and observe them to perform them.

(2) The Lord our God MADE A COVENANT WITH US AT CHOREV.

(3) It was not with our forefathers that GOD MADE THIS COVENANT, but rather with us – we who are here today, all of us alive.

(4) Face to face God spoke with you at the mountain from within the fire.

(5) I stood between God and you at that time, to tell you the words of God, for you were fearful of the fire and did not ascend the mountain, saying…

The context demonstrates clearly that the revelation at Sinai and the transmission of the Ten Commandments are the "words of the covenant" that God made with Am Yisrael. The concluding verse of chapter 28, then, should be seen in light of the above verse in chapter 5:

(5:2) The Lord our God MADE A COVENANT WITH US AT CHOREV.

(28:69) These are the words of THE COVENANT that God commanded MOSHE TO MAKE WITH THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL in the land of Moav, ASIDE FROM THE COVENANT THAT HE MADE WITH THEM AT CHOREV.

The covenant that Moshe makes with the nation in the plains of Moav is "aside from" (i.e., in addition to) the covenant that he made with them at Chorev. The covenant of Chorev concerns the Ten Commandments, which Israel heard from God. The covenant of the plains of Moav concerns the collection of statutes and judgments that Israel heard from Moshe. These two covenants complement one another and represent together the eternal connection that was formed between God and His nation.

It is interesting that Moshe opens his speech in chapter 5 with the command to hear "the statutes and the judgments that I declare for your ears today," and that immediately thereafter he mentions the covenant of Chorev that God made with Israel. Moshe hereby wishes to convey to Israel that the collection of statutes and judgments that they are destined to hear from him now, at the plains of Moav, and which will form a covenant, do not stand alone; rather, they complement the covenant of Chorev where Israel heard the Ten Commandments from God.

The covenant of Chorev represents the basis. Without entering into a discussion of how much the nation heard directly from God, the Torah draws a clear and emphatic distinction between the Ten Commandments, which were heard from God, and the statutes and judgments which they heard from Moshe. The nation heard from God the Ten Commandments, which serve as a basis for the entire Torah. As Rashi (Shemot 24:12) explains, "All 613 mitzvot are included in the Ten Commandments." The covenant of the plains of Moav completes the structure, for there Am Yisrael heard from Moshe the entire collection of statutes that complement the Ten Commandments.

This complement, the covenant of the plains of Moav, has two aspects to it. On one hand, it is a complement in the literal sense – adding the statutes and the judgments. On the other hand, it completes the covenant of Chorev – the revelation at Sinai – in the sense that it adds the dimension of the blessing and the curse. (Regarding the earlier blessing and the curse in parashat Bechukkotai, note that the Rashbam (Vayikra 26:46) and others view them as dependent on the mitzvot in parashat Behar only.) The Torah hereby means to establish that the statutes and judgments, by their very nature, involve a blessing and a curse. Their observance brings blessing; their lack of observance leads to a curse.

This principle brings us back to the significance of the structure that we explored above. The Torah opens the section of statutes by noting the fact that there is a blessing and a curse that accompany the mitzvot. Their content is elaborated and specified in chapter 28, as we have stated. We must therefore ask why Moshe sees a need to mention the blessing and the curse right at the start, if he means to elaborate upon them in detail only at the end of his speech. Logic would seem to dictate that they be mentioned only after listing the mitzvot, for the blessing and the curse are the RESULT of their observance.

We are forced to conclude that even before the mitzvot are listed, a person has to know that the mitzvot entail a blessing and a curse. This fact precedes the details of the mitzvot themselves. It is a fundamental principle that Moshe feels a need to stipulate at the very start of the main part of his speech, before discussing the mitzvot.

The same applies to verses 29-30 of chapter 12, which mention the giving of the blessing and the curse on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval. Here, too, we may ask why Moshe mentions this here with no further elaboration, if he intends to stipulate all the details of the ceremony in chapter 27.

Again, our answer follows the logic of the previous one. But first we must explain the reason for the cereitself: Why must the blessing and the curse be given on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval?

Here, too, the Torah seems to hint at the significance of the ceremony through the style that it adopts. What does the Torah mean by the instruction that the blessing and the curse be given on these mountains? Are a blessing and a curse not abstract concepts – how are they to be "given on" a certain place?

Rashi explains that you shall place those who bless on Mt. Gerizim, etc. The Ramban comments, "This is not correct according to the literal text, for he had not yet given the command concerning those who are to bless." In addition to the Ramban's difficulty, we may add a further question: quite simply, if the text meant to refer to "those who are to bless," then Moshe should have stated this explicitly, rather than referring to them in such an oblique manner (i.e., "you shall place the blessing on Mt. Gerizim..."). The Ibn Ezra comments, "And you shall give the blessing – verbally, as in the verse, 'And you shall place them upon the head of the goat' (Vayikra 16:21)," and he concurs with the explanation of the Ramban. To the view of Ramban and the Ibn Ezra, the declaration of the blessing and the curses atop the mountains is what the Torah refers to in the command that they be "given" or "placed" on the mountain. Proof of this literary style is brought by the Ibn Ezra from Vayikra (16:21-22):

And Aharon shall place both his hands upon the head of the living goat, and he shall confess upon it all the sins of the children of Israel and all their iniquities, all their wrongdoings, and he shall place them upon the head of the goat and send it by the hand of a man who walks slowly, to the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon itself all of their sins, to a barren land, and he shall cast the goat into the wilderness.

Although the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban fail to explain why the term "placing" is used here, it appears that the example as brought by the Ibn Ezra explains the Torah's intention. In the verses in Vayikra it is clear from the context that the Torah perceives the sins of the children of Israel as being placed, physically, upon the goat, for the text declares that "the goat bears upon itself all of their sins, to a barren land." The confession recited over the goat causes, according to the Torah, a tangible "placing" of the sins upon it.

Likewise, we may conclude in our parasha that the declaration of the blessings and the curses upon the mountains of Gerizim and Eval causes a physical "placing" of them upon these mountains. In other words, the ceremony gives expression to the fact that the blessings and the curses fall upon the mountains and become part of them. The significance of this fact seems to be that from that moment onwards, the blessing and the curse arise from the land itself; the mountains are simply symbolic of the land. The ceremony expresses the faith that the land itself has special properties. It embraces with love those who fulfill the mitzvot, and expels those who transgress. This is what the text means by the words, "So that the land will not vomit you out in your defiling of it as it vomited the nation that was there before you" (Vayikra 18:28).

This may also explain the text's emphasis on the geographical location of these mountains, "Are they not across the Jordan… by the terebinths of Moreh?" This place, "by the terebinths of Moreh," was the first place of encampment by Avraham, father of the nation, when he arrived in the land, and it was there that he built his first altar to God: "And Avram passed in the land up to the place of Shekhem, up to Elon Moreh… and he built there an altar to God" (Bereishit 12:6-7). It is therefore fitting that it is here in this place, a sort of portal to the land, that Israel will place the blessing and the curse. They thereby declare, as it were, "This is the gateway to God – let the righteous enter it."

In light of the above, it is not difficult to explain why Moshe mentions this at the beginning of the parasha, although his elaboration comes only much later, in parashat Ki Tavo. Moshe wishes to emphasize at the very start not only that the observance of mitzvot entails a blessing and a curse, but also that the blessing and the curse are part of the conditions of the land itself, part of its specialness. The facts that, firstly, the blessing and curse exist and, secondly, that they apply to the land from the moment and place of entry into it, are fundamental facts that the nation must know even before the statutes and judgments are enumerated. Thereafter Moshe indeed lists all of these laws, and only at the end does he come back to the ceremony of giving the blessing and the curse upon the mountains, concluding with the same subject with which he opened – the blessing and the curse. Moshe thereby completes the covenant that God commanded him to make with the nation in the plains of Moav. This is in addition to the covenant He made with them at Chorev. Now, after both of these covenants are firmly set down, the nation is ready to realize the mission that is the crux of its purpose – entry into the land and its habitation.

And He gave them the lands of the nations, and they inherited the work of the peoples, in order that they would observe His statutes and preserve His teachings, Halleluya. (Tehillim 105:44)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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