

Devarim @ the DC Beit Midrash

Tuesday, July 20, 2004; 2 Av 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The Chumash (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. Each week, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion, or *parasha*. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion. Every week, a sheet summarizing the Torah portion of the week and the other sources the teacher will use will be provided to aid you in your study.

This Week's *Parasha* (Torah Portion): Devarim Deuteronomy (*Devarim*), 1:1–3:22

The Book of Deuteronomy, called Devarim in Hebrew, opens with the Israelites standing at the bank of the Jordan River, ready to cross over into the Promised Land. Knowing that his days as leader of the People of Israel, and his life, have come to an end, Moses takes this opportunity to impart some final words of wisdom, encouragement, and rebuke. Deuteronomy is then, in effect, one long speech—Moses' "swan-song" so to speak—delivered over a two week period at the end of the Israelites' forty year journey. Parashat Devarim begins with Moses recounting the history of the Exodus, from the giving of the second set of tablets at Sinai through to the incident of the 12 spies. Moses highlights his own role as leader, and blames the people for the fact that he has been prohibited from entering the Land. Special attention is also paid to the promise of the Land. Moses notes the establishment of the Sanhedrin and the Judicial system. Moses then jumps ahead and reviews some of the final battles that have been fought, including the battles with Sichon and Og and the acquisition of land to the east of the Jordan (in which they were standing). At the end of this portion, Joshua, who will assume the role of leadership after Moses, is assured that, just as God led Israel to victory in the wilderness, so too God will lead Israel in battle when they cross into the Land.

(http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/devarim_summary.html)

This Week's Sources

Onkelos

c. 300

An early translator of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, his work was later given the title *Targum Onkelos*. A proselyte, he gained the respect of the leading Hebrew scholars of his day, and his translation became almost as authoritative a text as the Pentateuch itself. In describing Onkelos, his extraordinarily strict observance of the Levitical laws of purity is often mentioned: he observed in his daily life the same laws of purity that Scripture commands at sacrifices and took his ritual bath in the sea because he held that the bathing-places outside of the Jewish territory were not fit to be used. According to the Babylonian Talmud (Meg. 3a), "Onkelos translated the Pentateuch into Aramaic according to the instructions of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua." For as soon as Aquila had to give place to Onkelos it was natural that Aramaic should be named as the language in which he made his translation, for a Greek Bible was hardly known in Babylonia.

(Adapted from <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0836672.html> and <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=75&letter=O&search=onkelos>)

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Isaac)

1040–1105

This French sage is regarded as medieval Judaism's greatest teacher. Since his death almost nine hundred years ago, Jews who study either the Torah or the Talmud invariably do so with the help of his commentary. As a young man, Rashi studied Talmud in Mayence (Mainz) and Worms. When he was about 25, he returned to Troyes, France and opened his own Jewish school. However, Rashi refused to draw a salary for his work, earning his living instead from several vineyards that he owned. The last years of his life were marred by the anti-Semitic Crusades that swept over France and Germany starting in 1096. In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of *peshat* (literal meaning) and *drash* (homiletical or sermonic meaning). He also makes use of words in his vernacular, Old French, for clarification. Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew, even before the Torah itself.

(Excerpted from *Fields*, TCFOT, p 10-12, and *Telushkin*, *Jewish Literacy*, p 180-183.)

Ramban (Nachmanides)

1194–1270

Ramban (Nachmanides) was the foremost *halakhist* (Jewish legal scholar) of his age. Like Rambam (Maimonides) before him, Ramban was a Spaniard who was both a physician and a great Torah scholar. However, unlike the rationalist Rambam, Ramban had a strong mystical bent. His biblical commentaries are the first ones to incorporate the mystical teachings of *kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism). He was well-known for his aggressive refutations of Christianity, most notably, his debate with Pablo Christiani, a converted Jew, before King Jaime I of Spain in 1263.)

(Adapted from <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Nachmanides.html>)

Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz

1872–1946

Joseph Herman Hertz was chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. Born in Slovakia, Hertz arrived in New York in 1884 and was the first graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1894. Hertz served congregations in the United States and South Africa and was elected chief rabbi of England in 1913. From this prominent stage, Hertz publicly criticized Russian anti-Jewish policy, fought against Liberal Judaism, and was a strong advocate of Zionism. He fought courageously against Nazism and its echoes in England and strongly criticized the policies adopted by the Mandatory

government in Palestine, which he visited frequently. His edition of the *chumash* (Pentateuch plus supplemental readings from the Prophets and Writings for use in the synagogue) is, to this day, one of the most widely used and cited bilingual Hebrew/English versions.

(From <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/diduknow/sources/jhhertz.shtml>)

Jeffrey H. Tigay

Contemporary

A 1995 winner of the Lindback Award for distinguished teaching, Jeffrey H. Tigay is A.M. Ellis Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages and Literatures in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and Graduate Chair of the department at the University of Pennsylvania. His published works include the books *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, *The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, and a brief commentary on Exodus in Oxford's *Jewish Study Bible*. His journal articles include studies of the Book of Jonah, prayer in the Bible, Moses' speech impediment, "Genesis, Science and 'Scientific Creationism,'" evaluating claims of literary borrowing, and the terms "phylacteries" and *totafot*.

(Adapted from <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jtigay/>)

Rabbi Shlomo Efraim of Luntchitz (Kli Yakar)

1550–1619

A disciple of the famous talmudist Rabbi Shlomo Luria (Maharshal), Rabbi Shlomo Efraim was appointed rabbi of Prague after leaving yeshiva. Legend recalls that when the Maharal of Prague lay on his deathbed in 1609 he told his followers, "Go to Lvov and find a man by the name of Ephraim Olelot. He will be your rabbi in my place." A delegation from Prague traveled to Lvov and was surprised, as was their host in Lvov, to find that the Maharal had appointed a simple laborer to be his successor. (It is not clear how this legend can be reconciled with the report that R' Ephraim headed a yeshiva in Lvov.) A spellbinding orator, Rabbi Shlomo Efraim inspired his listeners with fiery sermons, many of which were published. His most important work is the popular commentary on the Torah, *Kli Yakar* ("The Precious Vessel"), in which he expounds the text in a homiletic style. It is very readable and has a captivating quality. It is published in many editions of the Chumash, including *Mikraot Gedolot*. He is also the composer of selichot, the penitential prayers traditionally recited on the second day of Adar, the anniversary of a pogrom which occurred in Prague on that day in 1611.

(Adapted from <http://judaicaplus.com/tzadikim/kliyakar.htm>.)

Everett Fox

Contemporary

Everett Fox is associate professor of Judaica and director of the Jewish Studies Program at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Brandeis University and taught at Boston University. In addition to his translation of the Torah, *The Five Books of Moses*, he is the author of numerous studies on the Biblical narrative and its translation, and is coeditor, with Lawrence Rosenwald, of *Scripture and Translation*, a collection of essays by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. He lives in Newton, Massachusetts, with his wife and three children.

(Adapted from jacket cover of *The Five Books of Moses*)

This Week's Teacher:

jeremykadden@hotmail.com

Jeremy Kadden is a Research Assistant at the American Enterprise Institute. He particularly enjoys long walks on the beach and discussions of topics like these, and he can be reached at the above email to continue this, or other, conversations. Just don't ask him about his politics.

This Week's Food Sponsors and Shleppers

Bill and Dan Levenson, in honor of the *yarzheit* of their grandparents, Ted and Miriam Levenson.

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? E-mail Jesse at teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org

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