

# Ki Tavo @ the DC Beit Midrash

Monday, September 8, 2003; Yom Sheini, 11 Elul 5763

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## 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. On a regular evening, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion, or *parsha*. 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 Parsha (Torah Portion):

Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy), Chapter 7: Verse 12 to Chapter 11:Verse 26

The parsha opens with the commandment to bring the first fruits to the priests. This ritual includes a verse many will recognize from the Pesach Seder, recalling that "my ancestor was a wandering Aramean." This is followed by another ritual for the completion of tithing. Both are a statement of God's dominion over the land. Next we find a dramatic ritual called *tochacha* (admonition) that is to be performed by the Israelites when they first cross the Jordan and enter into the Promised Land. As a reaffirmation of Israel's acceptance of the covenant with God, they are to inscribe the Torah upon twelve stones, erecting them as a monument on the top of Mount Ebal. Then the tribes were divided, six to ascend to the top of Mount Grizzim, and six to the top of Mount Ebal. The Cohanim (priests) and the Levites, along with the Ark of the Covenant, stood in the valley in between. There, they called out a list of curses that would befall anyone who ignored God's commandments and a list of blessings that would benefit those who followed God's way. After each statement, all of the people said, "Amen". The *parsha* concludes with the beginning of Moshe's final discourse. He begins by recounting all that God has done for Israel over the past forty years.

([http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/devarim\\_summary.html#devarim](http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/devarim_summary.html#devarim))

## This Week's Sources

### Ibn Ezra

1092-1167

A poet, physician, philosopher, and astrologer, Ibn Ezra spent the first part of his life in native Spain. From about 1140, he resided for brief periods in France, England, Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy, and finally again in Spain, where he died. Many believe that his wandering began in the bewildered disappointment of his only surviving son's conversion to Islam. Ibn Ezra's interests in both science and grammar, along with his experiences as a traveler, are expressed within his commentary to the Torah. He often includes discussions on mathematics, astrology, and linguistics within his explanations.

(Excerpted from Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, 10-11)

### Rambam (Maimonides)

1135-1204

If one did not know that Rambam was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *Mishna*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his spare time, served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community. Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations without having to expend large amounts of time. Despite sometimes-intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice, later serving as a model for the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative.

(Adapted from [www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html))

### 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 [www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Nachmanides.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Nachmanides.html))

## **Baal Shem Tov**

**1698-1760**

Jewish founder of modern Hasidism, b. Ukraine. His life is the subject of many tales that circulated even before his death. Originally named Israel ben Eliezer, he is said to have been born of elderly, poor parents and to have been orphaned at an early age. He supported himself as an assistant in a *heder* (Hebrew religious school), as a synagogue watchman, as a quarry worker, and as an innkeeper. He gained a reputation as a miracle healer; hence the name Baal-Shem-Tov [Master of the good name, i.e., the Name of God]. Central to his teachings is the idea that one must worship and adhere to God in all activities, not only in acts of prescribed religious observance but in the affairs of daily life. He held that not in sorrow but in joy must one worship God, and that repentance is always possible. His reputation as a miracle healer and his all-encompassing view of religious life, which allowed the unschooled as well as the scholar to experience a sense of redemption, gained him a large circle of followers, which later developed into the several communities of contemporary Hasidim.

*(<http://www.slider.com/Enc/B/Ba/BaalShem.htm>)*

## **Yeshayahu Leibovitch**

**1903-1994**

Born in Riga, Yeshayahu Leibovitch was educated in Germany and Switzerland and immigrated to Israel in 1935. He joined the faculty of Hebrew University and taught chemistry, physiology, and history and philosophy of science. He authored many books and articles, lectured publicly, and was an editor of several volumes of the Encyclopedia Hebraica. Outspoken in his views on Judaism and Israel, he aroused a great deal of debate and antagonism among religious and non-religious circles. Leibovitch's notion of Judaism focused entirely on the importance of *halacha*, yet argued fiercely for the separation of religion from the state. The decision in 1992 to award him the Israel Prize sparked much controversy, and Leibovitch declined to receive it. He died in Jerusalem in 1994.

*(Excerpted from <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/yleib.html>)*

## **This Week's Teacher**

**Amos Hochstein** spent several years bouncing around different yeshivas in Israel. For the last several years he has been living in Washington, D.C. and is currently working at Cassidy & Associates. He can be reached at [ahochstein@cassidy.com](mailto:ahochstein@cassidy.com).

## **This Week's Food Sponsor**

Jeffrey Murphy in memory of his grandmother, Taube bat Moshe v'Bela, z"l.

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*Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? [jesse.grauman@aya.yale.edu](mailto:jesse.grauman@aya.yale.edu).*

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