

# Parashat Va'yeilekh וילך

Torah: Deuteronomy 31

Haftarah: Isaiah 55:6–56:8

## The Transmission of the Covenant

### General Overview

In this parasha, which is only one chapter, Moshe is told by the Lord to prepare to die. The preparations he must undertake constitute the essence of this chapter's contents.

### Exposition

Our commentary outline will reflect these preparations. Here is how we will proceed:

- I. The Transmission of the Covenant
- II. The Transmission of the Leadership

In this excerpt from Parashat Va'yeilekh, we will focus on section I, The Transmission of the Covenant.

#### I. The Transmission of the Covenant

As the Torah was given by the Lord as the sacred, national covenant between Himself and Israel, then what provisions were to be made for the transmission or passing on of that covenant to future generations so that they could also participate in it? This chapter mentions at least three such provisions.

##### A. A Prophetic Warning

The first provision for continuance of the covenant is in the form of what we are calling a prophetic warning. It functions much like chapter 28 did. Starting in 31:16 the Lord called Moshe and Joshua to meet privately with Him. Here God solemnly explained to the leaders of this covenant people that, “this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land.”

##### 1. Participation with Harlots

The Hebrew phrase translated “stray after” in some English translations contains a very graphic word, *zannah* (זנה). It is used quite often in the sense of committing fornication with harlots.<sup>1</sup> The thrust of this gloomy prediction is that Israel will not just have a mere intellectual fascination with other religions. Instead, it tells us that they will actually sinfully participate in the gods of the residents of Canaan, complete with sexual, as well as, spiritual fornication.

##### 2. Forsaken

Because of their eventual unfaithfulness to the covenant, the Holy One warns them that He will “forsake them and conceal My face from them” (31:17). This

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (“BDB”), 275.

word rendered “forsake” has been used in cases where one spouse leaves the other. Based on this, then, we can say that when Israel becomes unfaithful to the Holy One, He leaves the home to allow her to be alone in her sin. The word has also been used to describe a temporary abandonment and not a permanent one.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the use of this word “forsake,” does not necessarily mean a permanent separation or a divorce, but it could just have reference to a temporary condition with no specified time limit. This is how we understand the word in this context.

Nevertheless, Israel would certainly feel the full impact of the abandonment, for the Lord says, “I will hide my face from them” (31:17). To emphasize the impact these words would have had on Israel, Rashi suggests that the Lord is saying, “I will hide My face from them as if I do not see their distress.”<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Write This Song**

Because of His endless compassion, the Lord tells Moshe to write this prophetic warning into a song and teach it to Israel (31:19). We will more fully analyze this song in next week's commentary. For now, however, suffice it to say that words are more easily memorized by singing them. We are sure that at least part of the reason for having this song, therefore, was for Israel to have a continuously memorized witness against their actions. It would also serve as a deterrent against idolatrous actions.

#### ***B. A National Reminder***

The second step the Lord took to help in the continuance of the covenant was to instruct Moshe to place a copy of the Torah into the Ark. The actual wording of this command in 31:24–26 is a little ambiguous. The text says to place it “next to the Ark,” translating it directly from the Hebrew. However, the question is, where was the “next to”? Was it inside or outside of the Ark? Rashi suggests that it could have been either.<sup>4</sup> In reality, it does not make a lot of difference, although it seems that if the Lord wanted it to be placed outside the Ark, He would have given specific instructions to this effect in the original construction of the Ark.

What is important is that by this command, a very tangible provision was made for Israel to always have a copy of the Torah with them at their national worship center, wherever the Lord chose to place His Name. A very vivid example of how having the Torah in the Ark served as a witness, can be seen from the days of King Josiah when “this book of the Torah was found in the Temple; it was indeed a witness for God in Israel and instrumental in bringing Israel back to her Father Who is in heaven.”<sup>5</sup>

#### ***C. A National Torah Reading***

The final provision for the transmittance of the covenant is found in 31:10–13. Here Moshe commanded that every seven years, during Sukkot, all Israel was to come to where the Lord would place His Name and hear the Torah being read “so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear the Lord.”

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<sup>2</sup> BDB, 737.

<sup>3</sup> *Rashi: Devarim*, ArtScroll Edition, 324.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 890–891.

Just as the Hittite political treaties made stipulations for their public reading from time to time, so too the written document of the covenant between God and His people was to be publicly read on certain occasions.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, as clear as the command seems to be, it is nevertheless, difficult to ascertain whether the reading of the whole Torah was in view, or just the Ten Commandments, a summary of the Torah, the Song, or the book of Deuteronomy. The Rabbis have traditionally settled on the reading of certain key passages representing Deuteronomy: 1:1–6:9 and 14:22–28:69.

In addition, there is also some difference of opinion as to the specific time the Torah was to be read. The text seems to suggest that the reading be done during the Shemittah Year at Sukkot. However, the Rabbis have insisted that it be read at Sukkot following the Shemittah Year. The reason for this viewpoint is stated clearly by Hertz,

The Feast of Tabernacles referred to is that immediately following the conclusion of the Sabbatical Year. And there seems to be a special reason why that period was chosen for this public reading of the Law. It was in order to testify that, although there had been neither sowing nor reaping during that year, the Israelites were nevertheless sustained by the mercies of God, to whose word they were resolved to remain loyal, whether in prosperity or adversity.<sup>7</sup>

In some places, this custom is still observed, just as the tradition calls for it. In times past, the king would read, (when he did so), the Torah from the Temple. The passages read today are the same ones that the king traditionally read, the passages from Deuteronomy stated above.

One of the great emphases of this passage is the stress placed on teaching the children of each generation the words of the Torah. Because of this stress, this passage has served as a great impetus for Jewish biblical study and teaching, especially to the young ones. Jewish society has always had a high rate of literacy just so people could read and learn the Torah. So great is the stress on Torah study that the Talmud relates the story of the mother of one of the early rabbinic sages who used to bring that sage in his cradle to the hall of learning so that he could take in even the sounds of Torah study in his infancy. Moreover,

in modern times, it has become acknowledged that the time to inculcate values in children is from their earliest youth, and especially by the example of parents and others who sincerely strive for the ideals they preach.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, Jewish society teaches the Torah both formally and within the home to its children, even from a very young age. What better way to transmit the covenant than to make sure that the children of each generation are in the hearing of the Torah, especially in the company of others in that society? That undoubtedly, is one of the main reasons that Moshe commanded the Torah to be read in these verses.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Craige, *Deuteronomy* (NICOT), 370.

<sup>7</sup> Hertz, op. cit., 888.

<sup>8</sup> *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 1096.