

# Lesson 2 - Jewish Law at the Time of Yeshua

*Introduction - The Torah was never meant to be read, but rather, it was meant to be studied, discussed, and applied to our everyday lives.*

The Jewish law is not a drama about the salvation of the soul and the rescue of humanity from the lingering effects of original sin. Indeed there is nothing in the Hebrew Bible about original sin, nor does the idea accord with its theology, according to which we are punished for our own sins and not for those of distant ancestors like Adam and Eve.

Jewish law is NOT about "surrender to the will of "God". Surrender to the will of God, does not exist as a concept in Judaism at all. Strikingly in a religion that contains 613 commands, there is no Hebrew word that means obedience. The closest equivalent, "shema", means not obedience, but rather hearing, listening, striving to understand, internalizing, and responding in ones actions. The very tone and texture of Deuteronomy is directed not at blind obedience but at the contrary: it is a sustained attempt to help the people understand why it is that God wants them to behave in the way that He does, not for His sake, but for theirs.

Deuteronomy is in essence a detailed game plan for the creation of a moral society in which righteousness is the responsibility of all. The good society was to be, within the limits of the world as it was thirty-three centuries ago, an inclusive if not an entirely egalitarian one.

The Hebrew Bible is a sustained protest against political and social "empires" and their attempt to impose a human unity on God's created diversity. If freedom without order equals chaos, then order without freedom equals slavery. Hence the fundamental questions to which the Hebrew Bible attempts to answer are: How can you have order without slavery? How can you have freedom without chaos? How can you have law-governed liberty? How can we create structures of cooperation in a world of conflicting human wills?

The word "shema", is the single most important word in Deuteronomy; it occurs no less than ninety-two times. The use of this word, rather than any term that means to obey, is a clear signal that the Torah expects us to understand why certain things are commanded or forbidden. God is not a tyrant who rules our lives according to His whim. He is, rather, a teacher who expects us to understand as well as keep the rules.

## Deuteronomy

**6** And this is the Instruction—the laws and the rules—that the LORD your God has commanded [me] to impart to you, to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, **2**so that you, your children, and your children’s children may revere the LORD your God and follow, as long as you live, all His laws and commandments that I enjoin upon you, to the end that you may long endure. **3**Obey, O Israel, willingly and faithfully, that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly [in] a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, spoke to you.**4**Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. **5**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. **6**Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. **7**Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. **8**Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbolic on your forehead; **9**inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. **10**When the LORD your God brings you into the land that He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to you—great and flourishing cities that you did not build, **11**houses full of all good things that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and you eat your fill, **12**take heed that you do not forget the LORD who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. **13**Revere only the LORD your God and worship Him alone, and swear only by His name. **14**Do not follow other gods, any gods of the peoples about you **15**—for the LORD your God in your midst is an impassioned God—lest the anger of the LORD your God blaze forth against you and He wipe you off the face of the earth. **16**Do not try the LORD your God, as you did at Massah. **17**Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the LORD your God has enjoined upon you. **18**Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may go well with you and that you may be able to possess the good land that the LORD your God promised on oath to your fathers, **19**and that all your enemies may be driven out before you, as the LORD has spoken.**20**When, in time to come, your children ask you, “What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has enjoined upon you?” **21**you shall say to your children, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the LORD freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. **22**The LORD wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; **23**and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers.**24**Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. **25**It will be therefore to our merit before the LORD our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us.”

## The Teacher as Hero

He explains to them why the law is. There is nothing arbitrary about it. The law is as it is because of the people's experience of slavery and persecution in Egypt, which was their tutorial in why we need freedom and law-governed liberty.

All ancient peoples had gods. All ancient peoples had laws. But their laws were not from a god; they were from the king, pharaoh, or ruler

What Moses knew was that the most important battles are not military. They are spiritual, moral, cultural. Spiritual victories can – if their lesson is not forgotten – last forever.

In words engraved on Jewish hearts ever since, he tells the entire people that they must become a nation of educators. In Deuteronomy, a new word enters the biblical vocabulary: the verb L-M-D, meaning to learn or teach.

Jews became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. In truth, though, it is not poets but teachers who shape society, handing on the legacy of the past to those who build the future. That insight sustained Judaism for longer than any other civilization, and it began with Moses in the last month of his life.

## Devarim - Words

The book is not so much a "second" law as a reframing of the law as a whole, a vision of a society under the sovereignty of God and of Israel as an am kadosh, a "holy people," a phrase that appears four times in the book but nowhere else in Tanakh.

Devarim, "words," taken from the opening verse: "These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert, east of the Jordan."

At the highest point of the encounter with God, we do not speak: we are spoken. We open our mouths but the words we utter do not come from us, though they come through us. Prayer, like prophecy, is an extinction of the self (known in Jewish mysticism as bittul hayesh) in the presence of the One-who-is-all.

There are three fundamental types of political structure, differentiated by the way they come into existence.

1) by conquest. This produces hierarchical regimes: the conqueror on top, his agents in the middle, and the people underneath.

2) by organic development, from families to tribes to large national structures. In such societies, elites emerge and political power gravitates into their hands.

3) by covenant. Covenant societies “emphasize the deliberate coming together of humans as equals” to establish societies that “reaffirm their fundamental equality and retain their basic rights.”

If conquest represents the politics of power, and organic development the politics of the elite, covenant is the politics of the word. It involves a document, such as the American Declaration of Independence, to which all sides agree to be bound. Indeed, the very existence of nations defined by covenant depends on “devarim”, words. The American Founding Fathers “conceived of civil society in covenantal terms” and “wrote national covenants to which loyal members of the body politic subscribed.”

A covenant is a mutually binding promise. A society founded on the basis of a covenant, a text, a set of mutual promises, by which God and His people pledge themselves in loyalty to one another.

The history of Israel is unique. Other civilisations have come and gone. The people Israel has survived – under circumstances that rendered its survival improbable, seemingly impossible. No other nation has preserved its identity under conditions of exile and dispersion as a minority without power and often without rights. The relationship with God is based on words – the Torah that constitutes the covenant, the marriage contract, between Israel and its sovereign Lord. **Israel's existence as a nation, however, is not based on power or a land (though it longs for and is promised both) but on words – the words of God to Israel and the acceptance of those words by Israel. So long as the word exists, Israel exists; and because God is eternal and never revokes His word, Israel will always exist.**

## Tzedek: Justice Tempered by Compassion

Tzedek, “justice,” is a key word in the book of Deuteronomy – most famously in the verse, “Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 16:20).

Tzedek/tzedaka is almost impossible to translate, because of its many shadings of meaning: justice, charity, righteousness, integrity, equity, fairness, and innocence. It means more than strictly legal justice, for which the Bible uses words like mishpat and din.

In other words, tzedaka means doing what is morally right, rather than simply what the law strictly requires. It means justice tempered by compassion. “Justice and love therefore become inseparable.”

Why then is justice so central to Judaism? Because it is impartial. Law as envisaged by the Torah makes no distinction between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, home-born and stranger. Equality before the law is the translation into human terms of equality before God.

**Justice plus compassion equals tzedek, the first precondition of a decent society.**

**A great prophetic truth, that a society cannot flourish without honesty and justice. A flourishing society depends on the existence of trust and trustworthiness on the part of its members. A free society is a moral achievement.**

Few things, implies Isaiah, make God angrier than this:

“The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to Me?” says the Lord.... “When you come to appear before Me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of My courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me...I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts My soul hates. They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.” (Is. 1:11–15)

The corrupt not only believe they can fool their fellow humans; they believe they can fool God as well. When moral standards begin to break down in business, finance, trade, and politics, a kind of collective madness takes hold of people.

Isaiah's warning is as timely now as it was twenty-seven centuries ago. When morality is missing and economics and politics are driven by self-interest alone, trust fails and society's fabric unravels. That is how all great civilizations began their decline, and there is no exception.