

# DEUTERONOMY'S DEFINITION OF JEWISH LEARNING

CHARLES ISBELL

The bulk of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, that includes the phrases *Hear O Israel . . .* and *You shall love . . .*, is straightforward language that can be understood easily, but one phrase is widely misunderstood. An apparently common perception is that *לְבַנֵּיךָ לְשׁוֹנְנָתָם* [*ve-shinnantam le-vanekha*] in Verse 7 refers to a method of teaching Judaism by simple repetition, repeating lessons to children<sup>1</sup> often enough to establish them in the young minds. The NJPS renders the term *impress them on your children* but this implies a mechanistic method of rote very similar to simple repetition. The most common English rendition is *you shall teach them diligently to your children* which leaves open the question of the specific "method" by which children should be taught. This view, which interprets the biblical word *shinnantam* as if it were derived from the verbal root "*sh-n-h*" [to repeat], is traditionally based on an extended talmudic discussion of Deuteronomy 6 which assumes just such a derivation.<sup>2</sup> The relevant portion of Kiddushin 30a reads:

Rav Safra asked in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananyah: What does the verse *veshinnantam levanekha* (6:7) mean? Don't read *veshinnantam* ("repeat"), but rather *veshilashtam* ("three-peat"). One should always divide his years in three – a third for Torah, a third for Mishnah, a third for Talmud. But who knows how long he will live? The meaning is each day.

The wish to emphasize the importance of multiple repetitions as the method by which to teach Jewish "children" is underscored by the injunction to increase from "re-peating" [*shinnantam*] to "three-peating" [*shilashtam*]. Nowhere in the discussion is consideration given to anything other than mere repetition. For example, nothing is said about debate, discussion, illustration, questions and answers, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> As noted, however, such a movement from "two" to "three," with its emphasis upon repetition alone, is possible only by assuming that the root of the biblical term is "*sh-n-h*."

*Charles Isbell has a Ph.D. in Hebrew and Biblical Studies from Brandeis University and has written four books and over 100 articles on biblical and liturgical themes. He is currently a professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at Louisiana State University and Scholar in Residence at Temple B'nai Israel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.*

The problem with such a view is that *shinnantam* does not derive from this root, but from "ןן" [*sh-n-n* – to sharpen]. Although this morphological distinction was already explained by Rashi 1,000 years ago, many modern commentators still have argued that *sh-n-n* in Deuteronomy 6:7 "is probably an alternate form of *sh-n-h*, 'repeat,' 'teach.'"<sup>4</sup> However, there are problems with such an equation. First, the root *sh-n-n* is easily distinguished morphologically from *sh-n-h*. Second, *sh-n-n* is well attested elsewhere in biblical literature, with a plain sense of the root encompassing a referential field that is important to the context of Deuteronomy 6. Thus, I believe it is overly simplistic to assume that the occurrence of *sh-n-n* in Verse 7 was accidental or intended merely as an allomorph for *sh-n-h*. To the contrary, I believe that recognizing the significance of *sh-n-n* is essential to an appropriate understanding of the text.

It is important to note that the two roots in question would not have been confused even in an earlier unpointed text. Even with no vowel points, the consonants of *sh-n-n-t-m* are distinct from the hypothetical form *sh-n-y-t-m* derived from *sh-n-h*.

In addition to this morphological distinction, the root *sh-n-n* in biblical Hebrew also denotes a range of meaning that is clearly distinguishable from *sh-n-h*. In its literal sense describing physical objects, *sh-n-n* refers to the sharp arrows of a ferocious enemy army (Isa. 5:28, Ps. 45:6). One of the two nominal formations from the verbal root is "*shin*" [tooth], which also conveys this basic idea of sharpness.

Metaphorically, *sh-n-n* describes the utterance of words that are as sharp as a sword, producing bitter speech (Ps. 64:4), or language that is as sharp and poisonous as a serpent or viper (Ps. 140:4). The literal and the metaphorical are combined in Psalm 120:4-5, where *a tongue of deceit* [lashon remiyyah] is compared to the *sharp arrows of the warrior* [hitzey gibbor shenunim]. This combination is also attested in Proverbs 25:18, where the person who gives *false testimony* against his neighbor is compared to *a club, a sword, or a sharpened arrow* [hetz shanun]. A second nominal formation from the root, *sheninah*, falls within this same metaphorical referential framework, denoting a "taunt"; that is, a sharp or cutting word.<sup>5</sup>

By far the most intriguing function of the root *sh-n-n* occurs in "The Song of Moses" recorded in Deuteronomy 32, where almost all of the metaphorical

## DEUTERONOMY'S DEFINITION OF JEWISH LEARNING

referents cited above in other biblical texts are found grouped together in a single passage describing the vengeance of the Lord to be meted out upon His enemies. *Arrows* (32:23, 42), *beastly teeth* (32:24), *sword* (32:25, 41, 42), *venom* and *poison* (32:33) are linked together as the backdrop for the action of the Lord, described in 32:41 as the *sharpening of My flashing sword* [shannoti beraq harbi] for justice and vengeance.

From the foregoing examples, it is clear that the Deuteronomy uses the powerful word images conveyed by *sh-n-n*, and thus it may plausibly be argued that these images cannot be separated from attempts to interpret correctly the meaning of *shinnantam* in 6:7. To achieve such an interpretation, our attention must be given to the specific formulation of the word in its contextual home, and this means that we must attend to the nominal antecedent of the pronominal suffix – *am*, which can only be the *devarim* in Verse 6. We must ask what it is that 6:7 expects to have clarified or sharpened for the children.

To answer such a question, we must notice the function of *devarim* elsewhere, particularly in the Book of Deuteronomy, where *devarim* and *torah* (not "The Torah" but "a teaching") are linked together in a single phrase *divrey torah* no less than nine times.<sup>6</sup> The relationship of the community to this *torah* and its understanding is expressed in a wide variety of ways. It is *commanded* to everyone (33:4); it is to be *explained* (1:5); *taught* (17:11, 33:10); copied in writing by the king (17:18); read regularly in public (31:11); made a permanent part of the sanctuary (31:26).

But *torah* is not the only word linked with *devarim* in Deuteronomy. *Huqim* [laws], *mishpatim* [norms], *'edot* [testimonies], and *mitzvot* [commandments] fall within the same general context, and once again we learn a variety of ways in which they are to be transmitted within the community. They too are *commanded*, and the community is given the responsibility to *teach* them (4:5, 14), to *perform* them (6:24; 17:19; 26:16, *inter alia*), to *guard* them (*passim*). Above all, it is understood that none of these things can happen unless the community first "hears" them.

## A SEXTET OF THE *SHEMA*

The best-known *shema* is found in 6:4. It is actually the third *shema* in the immediate context, and is itself followed three more times in Deuteronomy

by *shema Yisra'el*.<sup>7</sup> The first of this sextet occurs in 4:1, which contains the imperative to *hear the huqim and the mishpatim which I [Moses] am teaching you to do*. This first *shema* is followed by a long discourse on the appropriate ways in which the Divine imperative may be obeyed. In 4:2 comes the instruction not to add or subtract from the *davar* [singular of *devarim*] which is Divinely commanded. Thus a prerequisite for learning must be the clear delineation between what is essential and what is not. And the essentials are determined in part by reference to the actual observation of the Divine response to apostasy (4:3), as well as by careful comparison of the Divine legislation of Israel with the legal codes of other nations and peoples (4:7). In addition, strict care must be taken not only to remember (*do not forget*) the ways of the Divine One throughout the life of each human member of the community, but also to *make them known* to successive generations (4:9-10).

Also included is the warning about dire consequences should future generations be lured into idolatry because they have forgotten the basic Divine-human relationship (Covenant) defined at Sinai (4:10-20, 25-28). Coupled with this warning is the promise of the compassion of God on which an obedient community may depend (4:29-31). Finally, a method is explained by which every generation must keep clear in its thinking about obedience or disobedience, steadfast worship or apostasy, punishment or reward. *Ask questions about the past* (4:32); a past that stretches all the way back to the beginning of Creation!

The second *shema* is in 5:1, which commands: *Hear, O Israel, the huqim and the mishpatim which I [Moses] am speaking in your hearing today*. Once again an imperative is accompanied by elaboration. This is the chapter in which the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 are reiterated and expanded. Tigay suggests: "Most of the differences from the wording of Exodus are minor but some, especially in the Sabbath commandment, are substantial."<sup>8</sup> The fact that there are any differences at all, no matter how slight, indicates a crucial element of education and training of subsequent generations. Even with regard to the most basic *torah*, subsequent generations must continue to confront original formulations, to parse them, to shape them to specific problems and issues confronting a later era, to own them for themselves.

This also is the context in which another important concept is introduced. The original Covenant between God and Israel is not to be perceived as a

one-time only historical occurrence, but as a phenomenon that each generation must weave into its own corporate identity. The experience at Sinai must not be relegated to the status of a dusty literary artifact that is studied by later generations as a relic from the past – interesting, perhaps, but hardly relevant. Rather, each generation must actualize the experience of Sinai for itself, bringing it out of the past and into the present, preserving it not merely as the experience of ancient ancestors now long dead, but learning to respect it as an essential element of the present: *The Lord made this covenant with us* (5:3). Of course, we inquire about the past, as Chapter 4 advises. But our inquiry must lead from that past directly into the living, breathing reality of daily life now.

Just as the text elaborates on the nature of what the people are commanded to do after the first and second *shema*, so also does elaboration swirl around the commandment of the third *shema* in Chapter 6. The chapter begins with the assertion that what will follow is **the** Commandment, clearly to be understood as an exposition on the first of the Ten Commandments, teaching the exclusivity of God alone. This third injunction to *hear*, this quintessential *mitzva*, is then followed by an astonishing array of requirements.

An essential element of the *mitzva* par excellence is to love God (6:5). However odd it may seem to the modern mind that love should be commanded, such a concept is not foreign at all in Scripture. But the love envisioned here is far broader than the popular use of the modern word implies. "Love of God in Deuteronomy is not only an emotional attachment to Him, but something that expresses itself in action."<sup>9</sup> Loving God includes speaking privately yet openly of His ways and of Him without being self-conscious (6:7), creating physical reminders of God and His teachings for oneself,<sup>10</sup> as exemplified in the commandment of *tzitzit* [fringes] as a reminder to observe His commandments *and to be holy to your God* (Num. 15:40), and ensuring the public awareness of Divine teachings.<sup>11</sup>

What could be more natural than that children observing their parents doing such things would be curious? Their questions, prompted by activities that they do not fully understand but which they sense to be terribly important to their parents, are to become the launching point for true teaching and learning. The narrative in Exodus (12:26, 13:14) assumes that children will be curious about the customs of Pessah that differ from everyday routine. The

narrative in Deuteronomy assumes that children will be curious about the day-to-day lifestyle of their parents. Their learning will come about not only from the words and stories they are told, but far more from the parental models they observe every day.

The *shema Yisrael* in 9:1 – *Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan* – initiates a new line of reasoning. Israel must know that its election by God, its deliverance, its success, its very life all depend upon the compassion of God rather than upon its own merit. It seems strange that after making such a point about the necessity of appropriate behavior, meaningful lifestyle, *doing* and *observing*, and so forth, Deuteronomy would ultimately conclude that even Israel's best would not be enough to demand that God give it a land and His blessing: *It is not because of your virtues or your moral rectitude* (9:5, and see also vv. 4, 6).

Even at the base of Sinai itself, the people had lacked the ability to obey, and 9:6-21 reviews this sorry chapter in Israel's corporate life. Only the faithfulness of God in remembering His promise to the patriarchs had allowed a later generation to enter Canaan with an opportunity to create a society of justice and obedience to God (9:27). This too is part of the responsibility of the true educator, for teaching must not be only about the positive and the exemplary, but must also face honestly the failures of the past.

The fifth *Shema* is found in 20:3, where an entirely new subject is being examined, the rules of war. These include deferment status for certain men (vv. 5-9), and treatment of defeated populations (vv. 10-18) and food-bearing trees in enemy territory (vv. 19-20).

The sixth *shema* in Deuteronomy calls attention to a remarkable statement: *This day you have become the people of The Lord your God* (27:9). Yet several earlier situations in the pentateuchal text have been depicted as the moment at which Israel became the people of God. Exodus 4:22 describes Israel as the son, yea the heir, of God. Even earlier, beginning with Exodus 3:7, God had consistently referred to the enslaved Hebrews as *My people*. The entire narrative of the plagues and the crossing of the Sea of Reeds is built on the presumption that He is acting on behalf of people whom He considers as His own *special possession* (19:5). The Book of Deuteronomy itself perceived the peoplehood of Israel as one of the cornerstones of its own exhortations (Deut. 4:20).

## DEUTERONOMY'S DEFINITION OF JEWISH LEARNING

What the *shema* in Chapter 27 is denoting, then, must be the actualization, the movement to ownership by a later generation of a transforming relationship to God known by those who had lived much earlier. Here the importance of effective learning becomes clear. Children must be taught how to build a bridge from the present of every generation back to the defining moments from the past – the Divine decision to become involved in liberation from Egypt, to declare at Sinai an unshakeable foundation for communal and personal life, to issue a Divine imperative not only to conquer a territory but to build therein a society whose values reflected the values of their Deity. Without a proper grasp of these defining moments, it would be impossible for any subsequent generation to understand the nature of its own responsibilities to God and to each other.

## CONCLUSION

Our examination of *shinnantam* in Deuteronomy 6:7, and within its larger context of the whole book, emphasizes its unique and distinct literary function. It is not calling for mere repetition as the only appropriate method for inter-generational transmission of Jewish tradition. The teaching of Judaism may not be compared with other kinds of religious or secular instruction that seek to have students learn by rote. Education that is "Jewish" must be done by teachers who are willing to engage their students in the difficult task of "sharpening," of "clarification." And the methods suggested throughout Deuteronomy are multi-faceted: stories and illustrations, music and poetry, historical examples, predictions of results for experiments performed under defined and controlled conditions, questions and answers, debate, attempts to update and improve classical formulations.

The recommendations of Deuteronomy thus span the centuries to reach into our own era of modernity. In an age when Jewish education faces a dizzying array of competitors, from lavish television productions to a worldwide web that can take children across continents in seconds, the wisdom of Deuteronomy stands unchallenged. By all methods and by every reasonable medium, we must allow the most important words ever uttered to take their rightful place of honor in the lives of our "children." Both we and they must not only know the words, they must be clear to us, and we must also understand how to incorporate the truth that they express within our hearts and daily lives.

NOTES

1. Rashi thinks the reference is to "students" [*talmidim*] generally, and the context surely implies more than one's own biological children.
2. It is probable that the rabbis shaped their discussion of Deuteronomy 6:7 with reference to Deuteronomy 11:19, where the phrase *limadtem 'otam* serves the same syntactic function intended by *shinnantam*. Yet surely the word *lelamed* itself also implies more than simple repetition, as the context of Deuteronomy 6 itself makes clear. Thus Verse 20 anticipates that children will ask questions upon hearing the "decrees [*'edot*], statutes [*huqim*] and regulations [*mishpatim*]" that the fathers or teachers have recited in their hearing. And it is significant that in response to these questions, it is inadequate merely to repeat the rules once again. They must be clarified by reference to and recall of the sacred and foundational narrative of the Exodus (Deut. 6:21-25).
3. The passage quoted here is followed immediately by a discussion about counting the letters and verses of the Torah scroll.
4. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) p. 78.
5. See Deuteronomy 28:37; I Kings 9:7 (II Chronicles 7:20); and Jeremiah 24:9.
6. See 17:19, 27:3, 8:26, 28:58, 29:28, 31:12, 24, 32:46.
7. Only here is the phrase *Yisra'el, shema*. In 5:1, 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; and 27:9, the order is the more familiar *shema Yisra'el*.
8. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 62.
9. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 77.
10. "Many commentators suggest that the comparison refers to the practice of tying a string around the finger to remember something" (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 79).
11. The reference to "gates" in 6:9 implies publication at the very center of public activity.

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