

# UNSCROLLED

**54 WRITERS  
AND ARTISTS  
WRESTLE WITH  
THE TORAH**

*a REBOOT book*

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אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ הטובה אשר  
 בעבר הירדן החר הטוב הזה והלבנון:  
 ויתעבר יהוה בי למענכם ולא שמע אלי ויאמר יהוה  
 אלי רב לך אל תוסף דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה:

“Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon. But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, ‘Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!’” —Deuteronomy 3:25–26

## VA-ETHANNAN (“*And I pleaded*”)

DEUTERONOMY 3:23–7:11

**M**OSSES PLEADS WITH THE LORD TO BE allowed to cross into the promised land, but the Lord furiously denies his request and commands Moses to climb Mount Pisgah, survey the region from a distance, and prepare Joshua to be his successor.

Moses then urges the Israelites to follow the entirety of God’s commandments, reminding them of the cruel deaths suffered in the past by those tempted to worship the Moabite idol Baal-peor. Fidelity to the legal system will ensure that the Israelites become renowned as a wise and discerning people to their neighbors in the region.

flames and articulated the commandments on two stone tablets. Although they had heard God’s voice only at Sinai, Moses begs them to resist the urge to craft idols of the Lord’s image. Such an act will cause God to destroy them and scatter survivors across the earth.

Moses reminds the Israelites of their experience at the foot of Mount Sinai when the Lord spoke to them amid the

The upside of the covenant is briefly restated: God will never desert the Israelites or let them perish. Moses

reminds the people of their exalted status. Only they have heard God speak in a fire and survived. No other people have been led into war by the Lord, or freed from Egypt as they have.

#### I AM THE LAW

God's laws are recounted so the Israelites know to study and observe them faithfully. Moses reminds the community that the covenant is not a relic of history, but something that binds every one of them in the present. He then restates the Ten Commandments, conjuring the fearsome specter of the scene at Sinai to ensure that the Israelites and their children always maintain them.

#### THE SHEMA

The Israelites are exhorted to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might; to remember the laws and teach them to their children; and to recite the laws continually, bind them on their hands and foreheads, and inscribe them on their doorposts. They should never forget the Lord who freed them from Egypt and should worship no other

gods, unless they want to be wiped off the face of the earth. Indeed, they are to tell the stories of the Exodus and Sinai to their children so they develop a keen appreciation of the commandments' origins.

#### APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

The Israelites are informed that once they enter the land, they will encounter seven nations who greatly outnumber them—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. God will deliver victory, but the Israelites must destroy their enemies and smash their temples. Any form of intermarriage is strictly forbidden, as it is a gateway step toward idolatry, which will ultimately force God to obliterate them all.

Finally, Moses reinforces an evident truth: God sees the Israelites as a sacred people. Out of all the nations on earth, they have been chosen as the Lord's treasures. The decision was made not on the basis of size—the Israelites are one of the smallest tribes—but on account of the covenant.

# ARIEL KAMINER

That's it?" he asked, when Moses finished speaking. From a rocky outcropping toward the back of the crowd, he hadn't been able to quite hear the whole speech. He had missed some of the interminable dos and don'ts. But the part about Moses' fate had come through loud and clear. "That's what Moses gets for the forty years in the desert with God's chosen pains in the ass? For forty years of hassle?"

"For forty years of manna," his wife said with a slight shudder. Yes, the manna was a miracle. But try eating the same damn miracle for four decades. "Man, I never thought I'd miss those matzohs we made the night we first fled."

"But you never heard Moses complain. He was always, *What's for dinner tonight? Ooh, manna? I love manna!*"

"Actually, I find that routine a bit tiresome," she said.

"Me, too. Him, too, I bet! But what's his reward? 'Thanks for your efforts on behalf of the tribes of Israel. Request to enter promised land denied.'"

"Was he working on our behalf? Or God's? To be honest, I was never entirely sure," she replied. "And I got the feeling he wasn't always that sure who he was working for either. Or why."

Another round of hosannahs rose up from the crowd. *It's always hosannahs with them*, he thought. Except at the first sound of trouble. Then they start crying that they were better off with Pharaoh.

"I dunno," he said. "His sandals got good and wet before the waters parted, and the guy didn't look down once. Just kept marching into the sea like that broad sandy path had been there all along. I don't think you can do that if you're less than a hundred percent."

"No one's really that confident," she said with a wave of her hand, "not even when you've got the Lord whispering in your ear. *Especially* when you've got the Lord whispering in your ear."

"Still," he said. "Seems like a hell of a way to thank him. He never gets to see the promised land."

"He did see it," she reminded him. "That one time, from the top of Mount Pisgah."

"I forgot." He thought for a moment. "So he got to see it but not enter it. That seems almost worse, somehow."

"Maybe it was supposed to be a consolation prize."

"Doesn't seem very consoling to me," he said. "Seems kind of sadistic. But think about it—he knew he'd never make it across the finish line, but he stuck around anyway, for all that thankless go-betweening."

"*Hey, God, could you move the awesome fire just a bit farther from the tent?*" she said. She could still crack him up with a good Moses impression. "*You're singeing the chosen people's hair. Also, maybe could You go easy with the smiting? Thanks.*"

"Seriously. He didn't let on for a minute, just kept right on selling the word of God. Even now, after giving this humiliating speech, he's right back with the commandments. That is some unbelievable devotion." They were both silent for a while. Finally he asked, "So, what now?"

The sleeping bundle strapped to her back squirmed a bit, then nestled back down again. She sighed. Having a baby when she was eighty-nine didn't feel like it had when she was seventeen, that's for sure. "Let's get back to camp. It's almost dark."

"Great. I'm starved," he said. "What's for dinner tonight?"

"Very funny," she said.