

Once again our parashah contains material we have read earlier in the Torah, but with some crucial differences. Moses continues instructing the people on how to live in the new land, beginning with an elaborate ritual to honor the first produce of the season. This ritual is especially important, because it is the living proof of the people's ability to sustain themselves. However, this depends on their willingness to obey the commandments, all of which in some way large or small, are integral to their success. The ritual of the first fruits is to be accompanied by a formal recitation beginning with our history: why we went to Egypt, why we were eventually enslaved, and how HaShem delivered us, brought us to the Promised Land, and gave us our commandments. We know it well, because we recite the beginning at every Pesach Seder. But the Haggadah deals only with the Exodus, omitting the rest of the formula, which encompasses settling the land and declarations concerning tithing. Because the Seder as we know it emerged after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, the rabbis who created it naturally focused solely on the Exodus, which is, after all, our founding story. The ambiguous text "My father was a wandering Aramean ... / An Aramean sought to destroy my forefather ..." (26:5), which we quote at the outset of our Pesach recitation, is highly significant because it is written in the first person singular, implying that it is not enough to simply recite it. Like our ancestors who heard these words from the mouth of Moses, we are supposed to live them viscerally, as though we personally had experienced nomadic life in Mesopotamia, prosperity and subsequent slavery in Egypt, and miraculous rescue by HaShem. In our TaNaKh and in our liturgy, this powerful narrative is augmented by countless calls to remember: Remember slavery in Egypt, remember (and the paradoxical remember to forget) Amalek, remember the successes and failures of past generations, remember what happened to Miriam, remember HaShem's countless miracles – remember and remember, so that the constant repetition will instill these memories in our innermost being, through which from generation to generation they will continue to define us as a people. Moses makes it clear that if the people forget the past, they will lose their vision and ultimately lose their identity and disappear. After the text of this long recitation is completed, Moses makes sure the people understand that they have willingly entered into a covenant with all the responsibilities it entails. "You have declared the Lord this day, to be your God, and to walk in His ways ... And the Lord has declared you this day to be His treasured people ..." (26: 17-18). Both verses end with the importance of observing the commandments. The dire warnings and terrifying predictions of chapter 28, which we first encountered in Parashah Bechukotai (Leviticus 26), depict the horrific consequences of abandoning our covenant. In Parashah Bechukotai, which we read around the time of Shavuot, HaShem addresses the people collectively, but in our parashah, which falls close to Rosh HaShanah, Moses addresses each person individually. Shavuot, which in Temple times marked the bringing of the first fruits, became the festival of *matan torah*, our receiving the Torah. Standing at the foot of the mountain a mere three months after their delivery from Egypt, these newly freed slaves could hardly be expected to understand personal responsibility. Therefore, they are addressed as a group. Now, 40 years and a generation removed, the people are beginning to grasp what this entails, and like sections of the *shema Yisrael* and the commands in Parashah Shoftim, this new generation is now addressed individually. Prefacing the recitation of the blessings the people will enjoy if they adhere to the commandments and the curses they will endure for noncompliance (27:11-26) are instructions, both for setting the stage for this event and for ensuring that the people know exactly what they will be hearing. They are to set up an altar made of huge stones plastered with lime, and "write upon them all the words of this Torah." (27:3, and repeated in 27:8, with the added instruction to write clearly) Like future kings, who are commanded to write two copies of the entire Torah for himself, the people are given a potent memory device. Of course, not everyone wrote, but the words were there for everyone to plainly see. And then, "Moses and the Levite priests spoke to all Israel, saying, 'Pay attention and listen, O Israel! This day, you have become a people to the Lord, your God.'" (27:9) No longer are they *b'nei Yisrael*, children of Israel; they are now *am Yisrael*, a people. They are adults, with adult responsibilities. Tractate Berachot 63b stresses that this is not the day the Torah was first given to the people. That happened 40 years earlier. "Rather, it comes to teach that each and every day the Torah is as dear to those who study it, as it was on the day it was given from Mount Sinai." In other words, as Rashi teaches, every time we study a bit of Torah, which ideally we should do daily, we are actively renewing our covenant. However, being human, we occasionally slip up. But we know that the time between Elul and Yom Kippur affords us ample opportunity to take stock of our behavior and make the necessary corrections. In Midrash Devarim Rabbah, Rabbi Pinchas teaches that the *mitzvot* accompany us wherever we go, and whatever we do. It is our responsibility to heed them, and to make amends when we fall short. We are *am Yisrael!*

Shabbat shalom!