

Torah Study

From a poetic/ Literal point of view

Deep dive into the Hebrew mysteries in Moses' last blessing

Presented, translated, Annotated and interpreted by Iris Karlin

Moses' last blessing to the tribes before his passing

Part 1 – Annotated translation - Deuteronomy 33: 13-23		דברים ל"ג: יג-כג
Literal translation	My exegesis of the poetic meaning	מקור מהתנ"ך
13 And to Joseph he said	(I'll use direct language and not 3 rd person)	יג וליוסף אָמר,
Blessed (is) G!d's ¹ land	May the land G!d gave you, be blessed with the water of life, Blessed from above and from below.	מְבֹרָכַת יְהוָה אֶרֶצוֹ,
From the lavish ² sky, and dew,		מִמְגַּד שָׁמַיִם מָטֶל,
And from the abyss ³ that lies beneath it.		וּמִתְהוֹם רִבְצָת תַּחַת.

¹ **Grammatical issue** מְבֹרָכַת יְהוָה אֶרֶצוֹ is an unusual syntax, it begins with the verb instead of the subject, which is indicative that there's a poetic reason to G!d in the middle, and not to say מְבֹרָכַת אֶרֶץ יְהוָה. In my opinion the poetic reason is parallelism: A:Mevorechet, B:Adonai, C:Artzo = A':Mimeged, B':Shamayim, C':mital

² **A clue to meaning** מִמְגַּד is not common nor obvious, and it is repetitive and formulaic phrasing. I struggled a lot with finding the right word to translate it. On the one hand it means blessed and splendor, and I saw that several translations to English chose the word Bountiful, but bountiful is in quantity, and for a native Hebrew speaker, megadim is quality rather than quantity. I eventually chose "lavish", as most suitable. However, the way I understand the repetitiveness, its function is Poetic, almost song-like, so in my exegesis of the poetic meaning, I used the blessing terminology, and simply used the term blessed, following the poetic punctuation formulated in the original Hebrew phrasing.

³ **Concordance** - The word תְּהוֹם is an immediate reference to the creation, that sheds lights over the blessing here as parallel to the creation process and order. Looking in the concordance, I found that this phrase was used in Jacob's blessing to Joseph (Gen. 49:25) בְּרָכַת שָׁמַיִם מֵעַל בְּרָכַת תְּהוֹם רִבְצָת תַּחַת = blessing from the sky above, and blessings from the Tehom, the Abyss, where the flood water came from. This is clearly a reminder of the covenant, as well as a beautiful connection of Moses's blessing to Jacob's blessing. Moses here is blessing the tribes as if they were his own sons.

14 (and ⁴) With lavish sunny crops	Blessed, by the sun;	יָד וּמַמְגֵד, תְּבוּאֹת שֶׁמֶשׁ;
And with lavish monthly groats ⁵	And blessed, by the moon.	וּמַמְגֵד, גֶּרֶשׁ יָרְחִים.
15 (and) from the beginning ⁶ of the ancient mountains	From the beginning of time;	טו וּמֵרֵאשׁ, הֶרְרֵי-קֶדֶם;
(and) to lavish eternal hills. ⁷	Blessed, for eternity	וּמַמְגֵד, גְּבֻעוֹת עוֹלָם.
16 (and) with lavish land and all that it encompasses	Blessed, the land in its entirety,	טז וּמַמְגֵד, אֶרֶץ וּמְלָאָה,
And the will of G!d that inspirited ⁸ me, in the Bush.	With the shchina on earth and in the heavens above.	וְרִצּוֹן שְׁכֵנִי, סִנְה;
(May all this) come upon ⁹ the head of Joseph	All its blessings are for you (Bnei Yoseph)	תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף,

⁴ **Grammatical** - There is no grammatical justification for Vav Hachibur in here. I believe its purpose is formulaic phrasing, to mirror the beautiful poetic parallelism. I'll continue to put "and" words in brackets, when they are but a poetic structure, and have no literal significant meaning.

⁵ **A Clue to meaning** – The translation of Geresh as Groats is from a Hebrew-English dictionary. **Continued parallelism** – the crops and the groats, The sun and the moon. Alter chose to translate it according to the parallelism as moon However, יָרְחִים, is either the plural of moon, or the months. Logically I know of groats to grow in during the months, but not during the night, so I chose the word months for my translation, and will use moon in the poetic exegesis.

⁶ **Translation** – Alter referred to ש.א.ר as top, and not as beginning (time wise) parallel to the eternal hills, which he translated as everlasting. I was inspired by previous concordance reference of creation, and translated it as the Reshit (root ש.א.ר) the beginning.

⁷ **Literary feature** - Intertextual borrowing from Jacob's blessing to Joseph (Gen. 49:26) Moses reuse of the words eternal hills: עֲד־תִּפְאֹת גְּבֻעַת עוֹלָם: .

⁸ **Translation** - סִנְה - וְרִצּוֹן שְׁכֵנִי, Alter translated as "the favor of the bush-dwelling one" (*Alter*, 936). Which punctuate the verse differently than the way it's written. So I went to the tropes, to get another validation for the punctuation. The words וְרִצּוֹן שְׁכֵנִי are punctuated with Mercha Tipcha, and the Sne, separated as Etnachta. This comes to show that the construct state of the sentence, is not the will of "the bush dwelling one" but rather that the will / favor of the one who is **Shochni**. Either a word play on the shchina, or - the one who resides within me (as Moses is the speaker, this can relate to the former description of Moses as "Ish Ha'Elohim"). Rasag and unklus translate סִנְה as alias to the Heavens. Rabbi Wenig taught us that the word שְׁכֵנִי → He who resides in me, is equivalent to "bakol Mashala" and inspiriting. is I chose the translation of inspirited me in the encounter of the burning bush, However, for the poetic translation, this metamorphed into the blessing of the Shchina on the earth, and in the Heavens. It is interesting to follow the Intertextual reference. Moses refers here to his personal encounter with G!d in the bush, just like Jacob in his blessing referred to his own first encounter with G!d (Gen. 28) "רועה אבן ישראל" when he lay on a rock and G!d appeared to him. It feels to me that the reference to these encounters is to validate their power to bless, and the power of their blessings.

⁹ תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף וּלְקַדְקֹד נְגִיר אֶחָיו" Gen 49:26 I followed the sages' reference to the same wording at Gen 49:26 root תְּבוּאָתָהּ א.ב.ו. has no grammatical precedent.

(and) To the leader crowned over ¹⁰ his brothers	And may you lead your brothers with wisdom ¹¹	וּלְקַדֵּד נָזִיר אֶחָיו.
17 His first-born a bull ¹² (is) a glory to him	With the power of a bull	יֵז בְּכֹר שׁוֹרוֹ הֶדְר לּוֹ,
And (as) Ox's horns (are) his horns	And the strength of an Ox	וּמִרְנֵי רְאֵם קִרְנָיו—
With them, the nations he will gore together	To Act (fight) and win	בָּהֶם עַמִּים יִגְנַח יַחְדָּו,
From the edges of the world ¹³	All the world within your reach	אֶפְסִי-אֶרֶץ;
And they are the tens of thousands of (the tribe of) Efrayim	May the glory and strength be with your descendants - Ephraim & Menashe.	וְהֵם רַבּוֹת אֶפְרַיִם,
And they are the thousands of (the tribe of) Menashe.		וְהֵם אֲלֵפֵי מְנַשֶּׁה.
18 And to Zebulun he said	<i>And to Zebulun he said</i>	יֵח וּלְזִבְלוֹן אָמַר,
Rejoice Zebulun as you depart (as you journey)	May you find peace along your journey	שָׂמַח וּבֹלֵן בְּצֹאתָהּ;
And Issachar (rejoice as well) within your tents (as you stay)	And within your home	וַיִּשְׁשָׁכֶר, בְּאֶהְלֶיךָ
19 Nations, will be called to the mountain	And when you're called to the mountain	יֵש עַמִּים, הֵר-יִקְרָאוּ--
There, they will sacrifice offerings of integrity	Offer your integrity and your righteousness	שָׁם, יִזְבְּחוּ זִבְחֵי-צֶדֶק:
For an abundance of seas they will suckle (absorb) ¹⁴	And you'll be blessed by the water	כִּי יִשָּׁפַע יָמִים יִינָקוּ,

¹⁰ This is hard to translate. Plaut's and the women's commentary said "On the crown of the elect of his brother", Alter: "On the brow of him set apart from his brothers".

נָזִיר here is not in the form of religious ascetic, but rather from Nezer = crown, and קֹדֶד is a person at the top – a leader. But he was not elected or crowned by his brothers.

¹¹ **Interpretation** In my poetic interpretation, I used a reference of modern Hebrew. The idiom to use your "Kodkod" the top of your head, means act with wisdom. I found it very suitable in this blessing.

¹² **Literary feature** -Word/sound play - In Jacob's blessing to Joseph he calls him "שׂוֹר" which is a wall. It's interesting that here the word שׂוֹר looks similar ל'mar'it Ayin, when the different vowel is actually taking it to a different meaning.

¹³ **Concordance** - אֶפְסִי-אֶרֶץ is an idiom, I was familiar with in modern Hebrew with a negative connotation, but upon seeing it here, I was looking at the concordance, and found יִבְרַכְנוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּירָאוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל-אֶפְסֵי-אֶרֶץ (Psalm 67:8), which was indicative to me that in biblical Hebrew, this idiom is a positive one, and refers to a geographic wide distance and not to people.

¹⁴ **Grammatical Translation** – Tense choice. I wonder why Alter chose to translate in present tense rather than the future tense the words are: יִקְרָאוּ (Nif'al passive, ק.ר.א future tense, 3rd person masculine plural) and יִזְבְּחוּ (Pa'al kal ז.ב.ח future tense, 3rd person masculine plural) and יִינָקוּ (Pa'al kal י.נ.ק future tense, 3rd person masculine plural). I chose to follow the given tense in Hebrew in my translation.

And the concealed (matters) buried in the sand. ¹⁵	With the goods of its land	ושפני טמוני חול.
20 And to Gad he said, blessed who enlarges the tribe of Gad	& to Gad he said: Blessed be your expansion	כ ולגד אמר, ברוך מרחיב גד:
as a lion placed / dwells ¹⁶	May you always be prepared	פלביא שכו,
Who devoured an arm (and) even the head	To overcome the unexpected challenges	וטרף זרוע אף-קדקד
21 He looked/chose first for himself ¹⁷	And be able to make the right choices	כא וירא ראשית לו,
For there, a portion (for burial plot) where the lawmaker (the chieftain) will be concealed ¹⁸		כי-שם חלקת מחקק ספיו;
And (there) will come the leaders of the people		ויאתא, ראשי עם--
The righteousness of G!d he did.		צדקת יהוה עשה,
And his justice with Israel.		ומשפטיו עם-ישראל.
22 And to Dan he said, Dan lion cub	And to Dan he said:	כב ולדן אמר, דן גור אריה;
Will leap out of the Bashan ¹⁹	May you have the force of a lion cub gushing forth like the source of the river	יזנק, מן-הבשן
And to Naftali he said	And to Naftali he said:	כג ולנפתלי אמר--

¹⁵ **Translation** The Midrash (Daf 6:71) gives an explanation that ושפני טמוני חול refers to the treasures in Zebulun's land, the Snail, with which they colored their fabrics blue, and the sand- the white glass by its seas.

¹⁶ **Literary feature - Epithets** of the tribes from the animal world. Waiting prepared as a lion, for the trouble to come, and when the enemy attacks, devours/ destroy its leadership (kodkod) or rather tears it apart physically (arm) and cognitively (head).

¹⁷ Refers to choosing the land to conquer, Gad promised that in return to choosing this land for themselves, they will be the first to fight and help the other tribes conquer the land, and then they'll return to their own land.

¹⁸ **Literary feature** – We saw a lot of Intertextual borrowing, with Moses using ideas and epithets from Jacob's blessing. Here it could just be a Minhag, that comes along with a last blessing, but just like Jacob, Moses also gave instructions for his burial. I didn't continue the poetic exegesis here, as it seems he just switched a phase to talk about himself (he-Moses) and instructed his burial, which is not a part of the blessing. חלקה in modern Hebrew is a burial plot, but I used the word "Portion" given by other translation, and recommended by my teacher. The word מחקק in modern Hebrew refers to law-makers, not chieftains, but I included the common translation.

¹⁹ **Literary feature** – another Epithet of a tribes as an animal. The reference of leaping from the Bashan, is the river of Jordan, that is called after the tribe of Dan, as the water that came down (ד.י.ג) leaped from the Bashan - Dan's land. Nowadays the north part of the Bashan is within Syria while the south part is in Jordan.

23 Naftali sated with favor	May you find happiness	נַפְתָּלִי שָׂבַע רֵצוֹן,
And full of the blessing of G!d	With the blessing of G!d	וּמָלֵא בְרַכַּת יְהוָה;
Sea (west) and south, he inherited it.	And inherit the sea and the south.	יָם וְדָרוֹם, יִרְשֶׁהָ.

Bibliography used for the translation:

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A new concordance of the old testament by Abraham Even-Shoshan (editor). 1989.

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Part 2 – My suggested Interpretation (follow by discussion)

The big idea in our paragraphs is Moses final adieu before his department (death...). Just like Jacob's blessing to his children on his death bed, Moses also blesses his own children – All of Bnei (u'vnot) Israel, in a very poetic way (And very similar to that of Jacob). He also gives his burial instructions within the Poetic lines. The writer conveyed the message of a biblical poem characteristics by verbal parallelism, quantitative rhythm as well as Accentual rhythm. The biggest verbal challenge I had, was with the repetitive word מַגֵּד, which serves as a poetic expression and structure. Once I was able to identify that it serves as bountiful (all the goods), I was able to address it as a “blessing”/ “blessed”, and all the pieces of the poetic puzzle fell into place.

Moses' descriptions raise awareness of nature and are agricultural blessings fitting to Deuteronomy. At the same time this is a culmination of the Torah, and the last pages, that reflect and connect to the beginning, to the creation: water of life, above & below, from the sun to the moon, from the beginning of time till eternity, and the land in its entirety. From the schina on earth, to the heavens above – this blessed land, this blessed life, this blessed Torah is all for you, and may you lead your people with wisdom. Midway, the poem has a Literary feature - Epithets of the tribes from the animal world, as the bull's power, the ox strength, Lion cub force. At the conclusion, Moses' voice sound like it is God himself talking “I gave this land to your descendants”, as a reminder of the first covenant with Abraham – לך ולזרעך, (arguably there was a hint to the covenant with Noah with the reminder of the Tehom) and a reminder of the covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai.

I chose this particular topic, because I was mesmerized by its beauty. It wasn't just another biblical text, it was a poem waiting to be composed, and I felt a need to present a musical composition of "Moses's blessing", as somewhat of a counter offer to the cantorate regular Benediction which is Aaron's Birkat Cohanim. Maybe Moses blessing could be the future benediction, sealing the prayers of the reform synagogue High Holy Days one day.

Part III – Expansion on the text

I started looking for a song depicting Moses's blessing before I set down to translate it, thinking I'll find something inspiring to listen to while I'm working on the text. There was NOTHING. I found 20+ "Moses's blessings" by title, that were in matter of fact, Aaron's blessing – the priestly benediction. I don't believe in coincidents, but rather that there are opportunities waiting for us to find through life. And this was definitely an opportunity that waited for my composing and poetic skills. When I added the column of "my exegesis of the poetic meaning", I tried to create a modern midrash and make it as relevant as I can to the way we would give a blessing today, still holding on to Moses's ideas, with as little filtering as possible. But in order to transform it to a song, I had to sieve the text into a "lyrics form" and weave the words in rhythm, and with somewhat a rhyming patterns. It is not the first time I'm taking a biblical text and making it into a song, but this time was the hardest, as I felt strongly this was so poetic before, that I wanted to do justice by it. After many attempts I got to this final product: (sheet music and recording attached as well)

Moses' Blessing

May the land G!d gave you be blessed,
With what you'll be, with what you'll give.
May the world G!d gave you be blessed,
Wherever you'll be & you'll achieve.

May your days be blessed by the sun.
May your nights be blessed by the moon.
From the beginning of time
to eternity – Blessed.

The land and its entirety –

Blessed.

May goodwill encompass your actions,

All your work and all your art.

May you lead with wit and compassion,

With all your might, with all your heart.

May your days be blessed with strength and triumph.

May your nights be blessed with peace of mind.

All the world within your reach,

May you dare to dream boldly.

May love be your guide to happiness -

Blessed.

May your eyes be open to see

and your mind to understand.

May your path be safe and your heart free,

To feel the water and the sand.

May your days be blessed with health.

May your nights be blessed with eternal breath.

And may you never lose hope.

May you be prepared – always.

May you believe in good and righteousness.

Blessed.

May the life G!d gave you be blessed - with you!

Analysis of interpretive choices

The transition of the poem into “song lyrics” requires some non-intuitive adaptations. Some of which are additions that require an explanation. The song imitates the original parallelism, of מנגד. I started with taking the blessing of the land a step forward. Moses said “with the water of life”, and I took it to mean the life full of water – the human being. And so the poem asks to bless the land with the human being, and by what it will give and achieve. The blessing is of course not to a third person, but rather a second person, the referee. I took the crops out, to make it more relevant to nowadays, and held on to the sun and moon motive in reference of “May your days be blessed by the sun, may your nights be blessed by the moon”. I broke the rhyming pattern here, as I really wanted to hold on to Moses’s notions. I kept “from the beginning of time to eternity”, slowing down the melody, making a surprising harmonic transition, emphasizing creation is not obvious, and not constrained by rules of time as we perceive it nowadays. I couldn’t have just let it be an overseen obvious chord. We will never understand it, so the least I could do, is emphasis in the delivery that this is not to simple harmony.

For the second verse, I wanted to adhere to Joseph’s references. This is the blessing to his kids, but I feel that with the crops, and the stars, this is a reminder of Joseph’s dreams. So while his brothers threw him in the pit without goodwill, My second verse, wishes this second person that “goodwill will encompass your actions”. The text addition of “All your work and your art” with an association to the multicolored dream coat, and then back to the text – Moses wished Joseph’s kids to lead the brothers with wisdom and power, and my contemporary educator’s mind gave it a 21st century “correction” – Lead with wit AND COMPASSION. With all your might AND YOUR HEART. Strength and triumph, and peace of mind. The night and the day had become a repetitive motive. And a reminder to dare to dream big like Joseph, and let love be a guide to Happiness. Moses wished Zebulun happiness, but did not mention love. However a quick concordance look for אהבה reminded me that just in Deuteronomy 30:20 we had love mentioned as the path to being blessed. Nor can we forget that in the beginning of Deuteronomy we find the famous “v’Ahavta”. There is no doubt that love is the way, and it needs to appear here. Why didn’t Moses mention love in his final blessing? At this point in our story Tziporah is not with him, and his 2 sons don’t appear here either. So perhaps he didn’t feel loved at this point. Or perhaps he didn’t see it or understood it.

Third verse is referencing to Ma'amad Har Sinai, as Moses said - when they are called to the mountain. Rather than talking about offerings, which we, in the reform world, stay away from, I referred to what Moses offered them, when he brought the Torah down from the mountain, and I wished them to be able to see and understand the holiness of the mountain and its eventfulness. Stepping a bit back to where he wished them peace on their way and within their homes, I transformed it to "May your path be safe and your heart free" and finalized the verse with the end of Moses's blessing to Zebulun and Issachar – blessed by the water and the land (in order to avoid over use of the word "Land" I went to – water and sand. For the song purposes I left out the burial instructions, but the word חול (sand) is there, and supporting my choice of words). The last chorus is Gad's blessing. In the song Health and eternal breath colored the idea of birth and continuity, which Gad was blessed with. The conclusion of the song is with an alteration of the first 4 bars. Reaching from the macro of the world in the beginning of the song, to the micro – the individual life. The very precious thing Moses wished for himself to extend, but couldn't.

How does the medium influence the message or interpretation?

I reached out to my small surrounding circle, all scholars in Israel, who grew up learning the Torah for 12 years of school, and asked them if they remember Moses's blessing and how poetic it is. None of them knew what I'm referring to. Upon further explanation, my sister (who is a high school teacher, who did her Master's in Literature) told me this is most definitely not what I would use for a blessing' "song" (knowing me, she already suspected I'm asking because I want to compose it). When I showed her my translation and the English, she needed a double take – "and you're saying all these parallels were in the text?" decoding biblical Hebrew, is sometimes challenging to Israelis who were born with the language too. The repetition of מנגד threw her off, because of modern Hebrew, in which it is used as "On the other hand/ another option". It looked to her more as a shopping list, as we get closer to the end of the book.

The way I see it, having the blessing set to music will influence public's awareness. Bringing to people's acknowledgment that before his departure, Moses blessed us all, so beautifully, and we should hold on to his blessing. He suggested to us how to nurture nature, and referenced agriculture. We should try to fulfil it, and do better, for the land, for the world, for ourselves. We take Moses' words of Ve'Ahavta with us every day. Know we need to love G!d. I think we should add to our repertoire his blessing as well. To emphasize that we need to love life and the many gifts we were blessed with too, starting with the land and ending with ourselves. By taking his ideas, who were spread and divided to different tribes, and aiming them at one receiver – one nation (עם), the message is changing, within the scope of equity and equality.

The different parts and elements of the blessings were not given equally, some tribes got more, and others less, the volume of some of the blessing was more royal, or more triumphant. By merging the different blessings of the different tribes into one, I'm offering an equal opportunity to whoever would like to hear, whoever would accept, regardless of who their ancestors are. Unconditionally. Everyone has the chance to rise and succeed in their paths. Everyone has the ability to choose the path they want. They are not bound by only one element of the blessing, that sets them apart and limits what they can be.

How does the additional commentary add to your own ideas about the passage? Does it reinforce your thesis or force you to modify it?

Through the natural process of adaptation to the medium, I needed to modify the language and expand the ideas, but I kept on going back to the original Hebrew, to gain affirmation that I'm on the right track, and not creating something completely new / completely different. However, there is no doubt that every artist creating an interpretive art, is bringing from their own world, and their own character is inherently within the scope of the work. So being transparent about it, my modifications are fortifying my thesis, and adjusting it to my belief, and my world, through a modern lens, with modern wording, notion, and notation.

Conclusion

I think this might have been one of the most significant works I've done in my life, and that it grew up to be much more than a final semester paper. As I was applying the tools I gained in our studies, to give a new life and relevancy to the text, I understood the importance of making it available to the world, bringing it to people's awareness, and perhaps even possibly making it popular, reaching out to more people, and adding to their lives something very special - a blessing from Moses to us, one that we didn't have before. Not at this form. Aaron's priestly blessing took main stage throughout history, in both Judaism and Christianity, leaving a part of Moses' legacy in the dark, or literally just on paper, in the book. Going through the process of annotating Moses' blessing, and into interpreting it and rewriting it as a song, taught me a lot about Moses, and got me closer to him, understanding a soft wise, righteous and generous side in his character. I tried to give his gentle personality a voice through the simple and sweet melody that started the verse, into several non obvious musical choices, the very way that Moses had to make some non obvious choices in his encounters. Throughout the process of composing, I kept in mind following chazzanic elements and maintaining word painting, to honor the musical tradition, as means to honor a great man, and his legacy.

12/16/2021

Moses' Blessing

Based on Moses's final blessing to the tribes of Israel
Deuteronomy 33

Iris Karlin

May the land G!d gave you be bles-sed with what you'll be with what you'll
May good-will en-com-pass your ac-tions all your work and all your
May your eyes be o-pen to see & your mind to un-der-
May the life G!d gave you be bles-sed with you...

4 give. May the world G!d gave you be bles-sed where-e-ver you'll
art May you lead with wit and com-pa-ssion with all your
stand May your path be safe and your heart free to feel the wa-

7 be & you'll a-chieve May your days be blessed by the sun may your
might with all your heart. May your days be blessed with strength & triumph may your
ter & the sand May your days be blessed with health May your

13 nights be blessed by the moon From the be-gin-ning of time to e-
nights be blessed with peace of mind. All the world within your reach May you
nights be blessed with-et-er-nal breath & may you ne-ver lose hope May you

19 ter-ni-ty ble-ssed the land & its en-ti-re-ty bles-sed
dare to dream bold-ly May love be your guide to ha-ppi-ness bles-sed
be pre-pared al-ways May you be-lieve in good and right-eous-ness bles-sed