

Do It For Yourself: Why Your Bar Mitzvah Should Be Difficult

Shabbat Eikev - 1 August 2026

Ethan, it's been a long journey. It's been difficult.

You knew I had set you a very long parashah, with many verses for you to learn as your Torah portion. You knew that, but did you know *why*?

After all, in this community, we ask you not only to read Torah but also to be able to lead some of the morning service. Each time, you may have thought, "I've arrived!"

We also set limits on how you could write your D'var Torah. No using AI to reach a sort of synthetic perfection, where your thoughts become so polished that they end up looking like the thoughts of anyone else.

You may have asked yourself why. But did you really think *why*?

Did you wonder why anyone would want you to struggle?

Wouldn't it be easier to be like our ancestors who agreed to make the Golden Calf? They handed over their jewellery to Moses' brother Aaron at the foot of Mount Sinai. Once the calf was made, all that was needed was for people to dance and sing around it. No one was required to do anything more. The Golden Calf was simply there for comfort and pleasure.

A Golden Calf cannot ask you to do anything. It cannot ask you to follow difficult commandments, change the way you behave, change how you eat or how you spend your time. It doesn't impact your identity or put you in difficult situations at

times of antisemitism and risk. It would never ask you to think for yourself.

Because a Golden Calf cannot change.

But Torah must always adapt when it, or we, meet difficult new realities.

In fact, Torah did change.

Your parashah is in the book of Deuteronomy, and so it is the second telling of the story from the Exodus to the borders of Canaan, Eretz Yisrael, in Moses' own words. The *first* time the Ten Commandments are given, in the book of Exodus, they are slightly *different* in the second telling here in Devarim, Moses' own account of what happened at Sinai.

What are those important small differences?

Think about the fourth of the Ten Commandments: keeping Shabbat.

זְכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת

In the book of Exodus, the word is *zachor* - "remember Shabbat".

Why?

Because the seventh day is a cyclical reliving of the experience of Creation itself. You, like the Creator, work for six days, and on the seventh day you rest.

But here in Devarim, in Deuteronomy, the commandment is:

שָׁמֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

Shamor - keep it, guard it.

You were once slaves, and in this second telling, Shabbat is a re-enactment of freedom and a connection to the story of our liberation from slavery.

But there are deeper questions as well.

Something happens in Devarim. Moses is retelling the story. It is *his* experience, what *he* knew and how *he* felt.

Remember him coming down the mountain holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments in his hands. He hears and sees the people in the distance. There is the sound of a party in the camp – and there they are, already breaking the second commandment.

They have made a Golden Calf.

What does Moses do?

He takes those heavy stones in his hands and hurls them down the mountainside, smashing them. He sees the people go through a radical punishment. And then he goes through it all over again.

There is going to be a second set of tablets.

In the story written down in the book of Exodus:

וְהָלַחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הָמָּה וְהַמִּכְתָּב מִכְתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא

(Exodus 32:16)

“The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God.”

This is the second set, ready for a new beginning.

Here in Devarim, there is a significant difference.

Because in Moses’ own telling, God says to him:

פֶּסֶל־לָךְ שְׁנֵי־לַחַת אֲבָנִים כְּרִאשֵׁינִים

"Carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones."

Climb up to Me and make yourself an ark of wood to put them in.

And then:

וְאָכַתְבָּ עַל־הַלַּחַת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלַּחַת הָרִאשֵׁינִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ
וְשָׂמְתָם בְּאֲרוֹן

"You carve them and **I will write** the words on them that were on the first set of tablets that you broke, and you will put them in the ark."

Last night I asked a question: is it harder to climb **up** a mountain or to walk **down**?

This morning my question is: is it harder to carve a set of stone tablets out of the rock, or to write words on them?

Think about it.

The words of Torah must very slightly change as they meet the challenges of history. But they must also be grounded in reality. They must be written into the real world, onto real rock.

And cutting stone is difficult.

This is the answer to the question:

Why is this so difficult?

Why would you choose something that asks so much of you instead of making a Golden Calf that only asks you to dance and sing around it?

Why wouldn't you choose something that asks nothing more of you than to enjoy and admire something that someone else has already made for you?

Why wouldn't I, your Rabbi, say, "Just go online. You'll find something better than you could ever write"?

Why would I prefer *your own words*, with all their imperfections? Why would I prefer the difficulty of writing down your own thoughts, knowing that they are going to be full of imperfections?

What's the answer?

Here it is:

פֶּסֶל־לָךְ שְׁנֵי־לַחַת אֲבָנִים כְּרָאשֵׁי

Carve for yourself these stones like the first set.

Do it yourself.

Do it for yourself.

If there were significant differences between the first and second sets, between the story of Exodus and the story of Deuteronomy, how much more so today, some 250 generations after we first stood at Sinai.

That is why your Bar Mitzvah should be difficult.

Because it is not meant to be something that someone else makes for you.

It is yours.

You have to carve it for yourself.

