

For thousands of years, people have known that the best way to understand a concept is to explain it to someone else. “While we teach, we learn,” said the Roman philosopher Seneca. Now, scientists are bringing this ancient wisdom up to date, documenting exactly why teaching is such a fruitful way to learn — and designing innovative ways for young people to engage in instruction.

Students enlisted to tutor others, these researchers have found, work harder to understand the material, recall it more accurately, and apply it more effectively. In what scientists have dubbed “the protégé effect,” student teachers score higher on tests than pupils who are learning only for their own sake.¹

As we begin a new book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, we understand how effective repetition and teaching are in retaining knowledge, especially communal knowledge. The Sages initially called Devarim “Mishneh Torah,” meaning a “second law.” Hence, the Latin name “Deuteronomy” means the second law. This is an apt description of Devarim because much of the biblical narrative and laws from the former books of the Torah are repeated throughout Deuteronomy, all done through a series of Moses’ speeches and reflections.

An interesting question to pose is: to whom is Moses speaking? Most often, Moses is talking to the Israelites. But which Israelites? At times, Moses directs his speeches to the Israelites who are no longer there, the Israelite generation who escaped from slavery in Egypt, often referred to as the First Generation. At other times, Moses speaks to the second generation of Israelites, those who are preparing to enter the Land of Israel.

At times, Moses addresses a select group or an individual. However, we, the readers, are, more often than not, the intended audience. This is evident in the frequent use of “you,” which appears 100 times in 100 verses. But why is it so crucial for us to internalize this text? Why does Moses go to such lengths to repeat what has already been said? These questions underscore the reader’s importance in understanding Deuteronomy’s teachings.

This speaks to the power of teaching as a memory mnemonic. Throughout rabbinical school, we were often graded on our abilities to teach a class on a particular topic that was difficult to understand and explain. For example, in our class about Nevi’im and Ketuvim, called the “Nakh Class,” I was assigned the first half of the Book of Daniel. I remember focusing on the importance of the Writing on the Wall episode.

In Daniel, Belshazzar hosted a grand feast and drank from the vessels taken during the destruction of the First Temple. During the feast, a hand appeared and wrote on the wall, frightening Belshazzar.

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/how-to-be-brilliant/201206/the-protége-effect#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWhile%20we%20teach%2C%20we%20learn,still%20learning%20themselves%2C%20teach%20others?>

He called for his wise men, who could not interpret the writing. At the queen's advice, Belshazzar sent for Daniel, a man known for his wisdom. Daniel reminded Belshazzar that his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had been humbled by God's sovereignty over the kingdom of men when he became arrogant.

The words adorning the wall are: *mene, mene, tekel upharsin*.

דְּנָה פְּשָׁר־מִלְתָּא מִנָּא מְנֵה־אֱלֹהֵא מַלְכוּתְךָ וְהַשְׁלֵמָה:

And this is its meaning: MENE—God has numbered [the days of] your kingdom and brought it to an end;

תֵּקֵל תְּקִילָתְךָ בְּמֵאזְזֵינָא וְהַשְׁתַּכַּחְתָּ חֲסִיר:

TEKEL—you have been weighed-c in the balance and found wanting;

פְּרִס פְּרִיסֵת מַלְכוּתְךָ וַיְהִיבַת לְמַדְי וּפְרִס:

PERES—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”

Teaching this information always prepared me to recall this somewhat obscure biblical text. So imagine my delighted surprise when I first heard the Johnny Cash song, Belshazzar.

In the chorus of the song, Cash sings:

For he was weighed in the balance and found wanting
His kingdom was divided, couldn't stand
He was weighed in the balance and found wanting
His houses were built upon the sand

This journey of learning about the Book of Daniel, from reading to teaching and then singing the text, is a testament to the depth and richness of the Book of Deuteronomy. By exploring this single text in such detail, we can truly appreciate its majesty and the learning process it entails.

The book of Deuteronomy is brimming with text, teaching, and a powerful song. Moses wrote three biblical songs:

- One was sung after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15).
- One is recorded in Psalm 90.
- The other was written in the last days of Moses' life, in Deuteronomy 32.

Deuteronomy is one of the most effective teaching exercises in human history. And what does it communicate?

How to live as a society, individuals, Jews, members of the human family, and beyond. Perhaps the most critical lesson is remembering, an instruction we can carry throughout our lives. The tool of memory aids us in recalling the essential moments and people in our lives, holding close

to those who are no longer with us, and profoundly appreciating those who are. Memory is how we retain a personal history and a communal history, both of which are essential to forging who we are. And that may be where Deuteronomy truly succeeds, namely in helping us to understand who we are in the world and what we can do.