

## Vaetchanan 5782/2022

This week we read Parsha Vaetchanan. Vaetchanan means, "I pleaded with" or "I beseeched". The Parsha begins with Moses telling the people that he pleaded with G-d to be allowed to enter the land of Israel, even though G-d had already prohibited that. Moses continues, "But the Lord was angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me, and the Lord said to me, 'It is enough for you; speak to Me no more regarding this matter.'" (Deut. 3:23-26).

Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik suggests that what Moses meant when he said that G-d was angry with Moses "**because of you**" was that had the people beseeched G-d to change his mind about Moses' punishment, G-d would have relented. But because they did not, Moses' plea was not headed and he was not permitted to enter the Land of Israel. (1)

Moses' personal drama in our Parsha quickly fades as he takes on the role of our greatest teacher, a role that continues until he dies. Moses teaches some of the most important texts of Judaism, including the Ten Commandments and the Shema which proclaims the oneness of G-d; the duty to love G-d, and to study His Torah and teach it to our children; and the mitzvot of tefillin and mezuzah.

The people Moses is now teaching likely were not present for the liberation from Egypt, the miracles that transpired during the Exodus or the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. For most of his students, all his teaching is new.

The Shema, the most well known prayer in Judaism, is the prayer that made Judaism unique at its time. We read in Chapter 6, verse 1, "Hear oh Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one." Let's examine two parts of this, starting with the second, the oneness of G-d. The end of the first sentence of the Shema teaches the concept of monotheism, that there is only one god. Centuries later, this concept was adopted by both Christianity and Islam.

As Winston Churchill commented, "This wandering tribe, in many respects indistinguishable from numberless nomadic communities, grasped and proclaimed an idea of which all the genius of Greece and all the power of Rome were incapable. There was to be only one God, a universal God, a God of nations, a just God.... (1)

The beginning of the sentence is equally striking because of the verb it uses. When G-d told us that He is our one and only G-d, shouldn't we be commanded to obey? But the Hebrew verb "Shema" does not mean "obey". It means to "hear" or to "listen" or to "comprehend."

The Torah is a book of laws—613 commandments. The purpose of these commandments is not for Jews to achieve salvation of our souls after we have lived our lives. The Psalms give comfort to our souls.

Rather, Torah teaches us how to build our communities, how to honor and preserve the dignity of each individual, and about the sometimes competing concepts of justice and compassion. It teaches us how to live our lives with each other. These laws allow us to structure our societies so they can function and at the same time honor and value the individuals who form our societies.

One would think then that we would be commanded to "obey" these important commandments. But according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, there is no word in biblical Hebrew that means "obey". When the Hebrew language was revived, a word for "obey" was needed. The word "letazyet", an Aramaic word, was chosen. (2)

It is no coincidence that in D'Varim, the book of Torah called "words", that our most fundamental prayer begins with the word, "Shema", to hear or to listen.

Our ancestors' experience as slaves in Egypt taught us a lesson imbedded in our DNA. Authoritarian, autocratic, dictatorial regimes demand blind obedience. They demand that their subjects "obey". And there are times in our own lives when this is required: as Tennyson wrote of the soldiers fighting in the Crimean war, "Theirs is not to reason why/theirs is but to do and die." (3)

But that is not what is required under Jewish law. G-d is not an autocratic ruler. If we have seen anything during the Exodus, it is that we can question G-d. Moses did so frequently and reminds us of this at the beginning of this week's Parsha. We are to do our best to understand and follow G-d's laws. In the Shema, we are commanded to "hear" to "listen" to "comprehend", but not to obey blindly.

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Thank G-d that as I do a final edit of this D'Var Torah, there is a truce in Israel and the rockets have stopped being fired for now.

### **SOURCES**

Torah Reading for Vaetchanan, Chabad.org (<https://www.chabad.org/parshah/torahreading.asp?aid=2495794&jewish=Vaetchanan-Torah-Reading.htm&p=complete>)

(1) See, Soloveichic, Meir, Deuteronomy Weekly ([https://meirsoloveichik.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Deuteronomy-Weekly-1\\_FI.pdf?kx=dbXkl0P7lXl4qBIHy02vEpJf\\_E929iRLF3M-vd1PwSw%3D.LFdrfw](https://meirsoloveichik.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Deuteronomy-Weekly-1_FI.pdf?kx=dbXkl0P7lXl4qBIHy02vEpJf_E929iRLF3M-vd1PwSw%3D.LFdrfw))

(2) Sacks, Jonathan. Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant (Covenant & Conversation Book 5) (p. 62). The Toby Press. Kindle Edition.

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(3) Tennyson, Lord Alfred, The Charge of the Light Brigade,  
(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45319/the-charge-of-the-light-brigade>)