

“And I Pleaded”
Parashat Va’etchanan
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This parashah on *Shabbat Nachamu* (“Sabbath of comfort/ing”) takes its name from the haftarah from the Book of Isaiah 40:1-26 that opens with “comforting” the Jewish people for their suffering and is the first of seven haftarah readings that precede Rosh Hashanah, and it immediately follows Tisha B’Av, a day of deep mourning.

Va’etchanan is a parashah of particular significance.

One may ask: why was Moses not permitted to enter the Promised Land?

The parashah tells how Moses asked God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel. In response, God is very direct. He says: “Enough! Never speak to me of this again!”

Moses has asked God for forgiveness.

Moses admonished the people to obey the laws in perpetuity.

He sets up three Cities of Refuge within the land.

Then he summons all the Israelites before him and enunciates the Ten Commandments which had already been laid out in Exodus Ch. 20. and the first paragraph of the Shema.

He gives instructions for the Israelites’ conquest of the Land.

In Chapter 6, verse 3, he tells the people to guard all the laws and commandments “willingly and faithfully” in order to thrive in the land of milk and honey. They will move into a land with flourishing cities they did not build, with houses they did not furnish. The enormity of God’s gift to the Israelites is weighed against the risk of failing to obey “lest the anger of the Lord blazes forth and he wipes you off the face of the earth.”

This all happens after a long struggle leaving Egypt and wandering forty years in the desert, and now Moses is at the end of his life.

He has to pass the baton of leadership on to Joshua.

Over and over again the children of Israel are told by God to “make the commandments known to your children and to your children’s children,” which is the very underpinning of the Shema.

Also, “do not make for yourselves a sculpted image” is mentioned three times, and “when you see the sun, moon and stars, do not bow down and worship them.”



Thus it appears that Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised land for the transgression of the Israelites and for his arguing with the Almighty. This brings to mind that we all have aspirations which cannot be met, but we hope that we can pass those wishes on to our children and that they will be able to achieve them.

In the reading we are told the Almighty is magnanimous, and if we obey the tenets laid out in the Ten Commandments and do not worship idols or material things and are good and loyal to our heritage that all will be well and we will enter the Promised Land; if we veer off the path we will be “wiped off the face of the earth.”

This is a solemn time when we remember the destruction of the Temple, with the fast of Tisha B’Av. Following this we come to this Shabbat and start the seven week period of reflection that leads up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

This week there was an editorial in the New York Times by Roger Cohen entitled *American Catastrophe Through German Eyes*. As a child of German Jewish refugees, I feel very aligned with Black Lives Matter and am very disturbed by the news of the day.

We are now living in a divided country polarized by a divisive president with racist views. The lack of understanding of the terrible disparities between the black, other minorities, and uneducated whites and the lack of empathy for them and widening privilege gap in our society whether it be in health, housing, education, or opportunities. This brings me to the description of the destruction of the Idols and in our time, it leads to the discussion of the confederate monuments. I am of the view that they should be removed, although I think it would be appropriate to display them in museums where the true history is portrayed. Hitler came close to wiping out the Jewish people but was beaten at a great cost to the world.

I also pose the question as to how the Jewish people have survived and been so productive and yet making up such a small proportion of the world population

I thought it would be appropriate to end with a quote from Mark Twain written at the end of a long article in Harpers Magazine in 1899; the article was written in response to an earlier article, *Stirring Times in Austria*, that Mark Twain had written also in Harpers in 1898 of a remarkable scene in the Imperial Parliament in Vienna. Since then he received from Jews in America several letters of inquiry. They were difficult letters to answer, for they were not very definite. But at last he had received a definite one. It was from a lawyer, and he really asks the questions which the other writers probably believed they were asking. He posed the question:

“one point in particular of vital import to not few thousand people, including myself, being a point about which have often wanted to address a question to some disinterested person. The show of military force in the Austrian Parliament, which precipitated the riots, was not introduced by any Jew. No Jew was a member of that body. No Jewish question was involved in the Ausgleich or in the language proposition. No Jew was insulting anybody. In short, no Jew was doing

any mischief toward anybody whatsoever. In fact, the Jews were the only ones of the nineteen different races in Austria which did not have a party—they are absolutely non-participants. Yet in your article you say that in the rioting which followed, all classes of people, were unanimous only on one thing, viz., in being against the Jews. Now will you kindly tell me why, in your judgment, the Jews have thus ever been, and are even now, in those days of supposed intelligence, the butt of baseless, vicious animosities?”

“To conclude: If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one per cent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

The quote ends here.

Not everything Mark Twain wrote is correct. Jews do not make up 1% of the world population. Not all Jews have the attributes which Mark Twain ascribes to us. However, as we begin the 7 weeks of reflection leading up to Rosh Hashanah, maybe it is our remembering the history of our people that gives us the key to survival, even though the cost has been immense virtually in every generation.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs married us on August 7, 1966. On this shabbat in 1956 he gave a *drash* on this parashah. I would like to quote a short part of it as I consider it germane to the survival of the Jews.

The Talmud relates how four old, worn out teachers of Judaism were walking in ancient Palestine soon after the land had been laid in waste by the barbaric hordes of Roman invaders. The Temple lay in ruins, the glory of the ancient Jewish state was a thing of the past, the teachers of Judaism were in daily fear of their lives, there were grim forebodings of even more evil times to come, it seemed clear to most people that Judaism was dying and that it would not be

many years before its corpse would be buried without funeral orations. The broken-hearted Sages saw the holy of holies desecrated, the dirge of Jeremiah had once again been fulfilled, foxes played in the place where formally only the High Priest could enter on Yom Kippur, and at that moment they heard from miles afar the merrymaking of the victorious Romans who delighted in the downfall of Judea. Hearing their shouts of triumph and their songs of joy the wise men were unable to contain themselves and they gave vent to bitter weeping. But one of those men was R. Akiba and to the amazement of his friends he began to laugh. "How can you laugh, Akiba?" they asked him. "And why do you weep?" said he to them. "The Temple of our God is in ruins, the heathen mock at our sacred things, our destruction is imminent, and shall we not weep?" was their poignant answer. "That is why I laugh" answered R. Akiba, "if such is the joy of those who live at variance with God's will, how great will be the ultimate joy of those who fulfill His will?"