

## Parashat Va'etchanan 5780, Rabbi James Proops

As we begin the *parasha* of *Va'etchanan* we read of Moshe's prayer to God that he be granted any opportunity to enter into the Land of Israel. We can feel in Moshe's words, his desperation and longing to cross the Jordan and see with his own eyes the land, the mountains, its scenery, landscape and beauty. Yet we are told that Hashem replied, “אֶל־תִּדְבַר אֵלַי עוֹד בְּדִבְרֵי הַזֶּה - Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter”. It was a resounding no, followed by a clear and definitive instruction, “וְצַו אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְחִזְקֵהוּ וְאַמְצָהוּ כִּי־הוּא יַעֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהוּא יִנְחִיל - But you shall command Yehoshua and strengthen him and give him resolve, for he shall cross before this people and shall cause them to inherit the Land that you will see.” Having recorded this conversation Moshe proceeds to describe the various happenings that took place in the *midbar* and exhorts the people to be mindful of their obligations to both God and man.

It would seem that the baton of leadership has been passed on and Moshe's duties are all but over. However, he then seemingly interrupts his farewell monologue to fulfil one more duty which has no connection to the preceding or subsequent remarks. We are told “אֵז יבְדִיל מֹשֶׁה שְׁלֹשׁ עָרִים בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן מִזְרְקָה שֶׁמֶשׁ - Then Moshe set aside three cities on the bank of the Jordan, towards the rising sun”, referring to the establishment of the three *Arei Miklat*, cities of refuge, which would serve as safe-havens for accidental killers. We are familiar with the details of the cities of refuge from *parasht Masei* in which we learnt that there would be six *Arei Miklat* altogether, three in Eretz Yisrael itself and three on the other side of the Jordan. Rashi points out that Moshe's designation of the three cities before he died is curious as we know that they would not come into effect until all six had been established. Rashi points out that despite this, Moshe had such a deep love for the commandments of Hashem, he wished to fulfil as many as possible in his lifetime.

However, despite his apparent love for *mitzvot*, we can still ask what Moshe really achieved by establishing these cities? Until all of Eretz Yisrael had been conquered fully, these three cities carried no halakhic significance and served no purpose, yet he chose to establish them anyway but to what benefit. From his actions, Moshe

was imparting to us a fundamental and profound lesson which continues to be extremely valuable and relevant today. Moshe lived the principle most aptly portrayed in *Pirkei Avot* “לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרֵיין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה” - It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to neglect it”. Moshe saw his duty as doing all he could in the fulfillment of a mitzvah and leaving the rest to destiny.

To refrain from embarking on a *mitzvah* because we don't think we will be able to complete or perfect it, is not how we are to approach Torah observance. We do what we can and leave the rest to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. If one lives life with an attitude of ‘all or nothing’, then we will soon find that we achieve very little. We would never adopt this policy in our business dealings, refusing one hour’s work because it is not a full day or refusing a small profit because we only accept the larger dividends. Yet, when it comes to spiritual pursuits we can often fall into the trap of thinking that if I’m not able to do something ‘properly’ then there is no point. To give nothing to *Tzedaka* because one cannot give much, to never attend a *minyan* because one can’t always attend, to not serve in a voluntary capacity because one cannot give up *all* their time - would surely lead to an eventual abandonment of our religious duty and serve untold spiritual decline. Hashem is interested in the sincerity of our actions and our purity of intention. Whether we are able to complete the task is a great bonus.

Unfortunately for all of us, the amount of time isolated at home has taken its toll on our ability to connect spirituality and perform a number of mitzvot. Yet we see in those around us very different attitudes. For some the situation has posed challenges to their Jewish life that they are determined to overcome. They expend effort and creativity as they try to fulfil as many mitzvot as possible to whatever limited degree is open to them. Not fazed by the fact that they are not counted in the minyan, unable to receive an aliyah or say kaddish - they join the zoom meeting to be as present as possible. While we are not able to visit a *shiva* house in person, some are fervent in their attempts to call, email or send carefully composed text messages to fulfil the *mitzvah* of *nichum aveilim*, comforting mourners. However, there are those who view the inability to perform a *mitzvah* in the

optimal and regular way as a reason to abandon any effort and rely on the excuse 'if I'm not able to do it properly, I might as well not do it at all'.

Moshe's establishment of the three *Arei Miklat*, following his recounting of Hashem's defiant response that Moshe will never see the inside of *Eretz Yisrael*, shows us that even when there is no hope of completion there is still great benefit to trying to fulfil the commandments of Hashem. May we all pay careful attention to the example of Moshe and not be deterred by an 'all or nothing' attitude.