

D'var Torah
Eric J. Ellman

Parashah Va'et'chanan
Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11
16 Av 5774 · Aug. 1, 2015
Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Gut Shabbos. As always, it is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence.

There are a number of powerful points in this week's parashah and I am going to touch on a few over the course of the next hour. I'll start at the beginning.

V'et'chanan. And I pleaded. This is the first of three farewell speeches Moses gives to the Israelites as we stand at the edge of the Promised Land ready to cross over the Jordan. What does this mean, and I pleaded?

I [Moses] pleaded (*v'eth'annan*) with the Lord at that time, saying, 'O Lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.' But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me.

Moses may be saying here,

"God, after all I have done for you. After all I have been through. I did not want this job in the first place, but I did it. I did everything you asked. With all the *tzuris*, I did it all. I deserve to enter the land of milk and honey."

And God, how did he react? God said "enough!" He said, "no." He said, "do not ever speak to Me about this matter again!"

Ouch. This dialogue sounds familiar to many parents and children and I am going to come back to that later in my hour. But, for now, let's look at this plea, *V'et'chanan*.

The root of interest here is chet nun, nun (*chanun*), which can mean to show favor or be gracious, like in Numbers 6:18 when God told Moses to bless Aaron thusly: “The Lord [will] deal kindly (*ve’khoo’necha*) and be gracious with you.” Rashi said the verb and its derivatives can also mean a free gift and that’s what’s happening here. Many commentators say that Moses thought God annulled God’s vow that Moses should not enter the land, and that this annulment was on account of Moses conquering Sichon and Og. Rashi tells us that righteous people can base their prayers on their good deeds, but they must also come from a place of humility and benevolence, deserving of God’s honor. We are told that we should pray for favor not because we deserve it, but because we walk humbly with God. It is the intention that counts. It’s not just the how, it’s also the why.

The Moroccan kabbalist, Or Ha’hayyim, said that Moses’ plea failed the third of a four-part criteria for prayer because the prayer did not come at a time of goodwill.ⁱ God had made up His mind and Moses knew or should have known that God was not going to change his mind. Maybe that’s why God reacted as He did when he said “*Rav-lach!*”, “Enough!” As my grandmother Sadie (*zikhronah livrakha*) might say “Genug shoyn (Enough, already).” When a child asks a parent for the 18th time for something knowing the parent will still say no, the parent may react harshly.

If we are good people who do good deeds, like Moses, who still do not get what they want, what the point of prayer? Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine and a renowned Torah scholar, said Moses’ prayer does not necessarily change God’s mind. What does prayer do? It changes us.

Maybe this is why we get the repetition of the Sh’ma in this *parashah*. We need God the most when God seems the most distant. Moses ultimately accepts God’s decision. Moses gets a reward, still, but not necessarily the one he wanted. Moses is commanded to climb to the top of Mount Nebo and from there he can see the Promised Land and its possibilities. Moses may be thinking that “even after all I have done, after all I have been through, after not getting my heart’s wish, I still love God. I love God with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all of my might.”

The Sh’ma says “you shall love the Lord, your God”, but you cannot command love. No one can force love. What the Sh’ma means, I think, is that when you come to know God, you will love God. We are reminded of that today from Moshe Rabbeinu’s words and deeds. God denied Moses’ desire to enter the Promised Land, but Moses still loves God.

When we are furthest away, we need God to be the closest. Look at the Mourner's Kaddish. When we are laid low by a death, what do we do in *Kaddish Yatom*? We praise, glorify, and sanctify God. In Jeremiah 23:23 God says "*ha'elohay mekarov ani*". "I am the God who is near".

Today is Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of comfort, so named because of a passage we read in Isaiah 40:1, *nachamu, nachamu, ami, omer Ehlochechem*. "Comfort, comfort, my people," says your God." This double comfort comes on the heels of Tisha v'Av, a dark day in the Hebrew calendar when the first and second Temples were destroyed, when the Inquisition began, when the Bar Kochba rebellion had ended, and when the Jews were expelled from England.

Here we are in the month of Av, the month of the parent. Some commentators suggest that this month of Av could also be called "*Menachem Av*", the comforting parent.ⁱⁱ These are days in our history when we as a people may have felt most disconnected from God. Yet, today we are twice comforted. We read the second *Sh'ma* and the second *aseret ha'dibrot*, the Ten Commandments. Even though we might not feel it, this is God's way of saying "*ha'elohay mekarov ani*".

God is often referred to as *Avinu*, our parent. Parents think they always know best and oftentimes they do. My parents, Richard and Sue, are here today and while they always thought they knew best, that was not always the case. Yet, it may shock them to know that I think they were mostly right, most of the time. Don't tell them that I said that; I'll never hear the end of it. My children, Sarah and Abby, are here and I'd like to think that I know best, but I also know that that might not always be the case. Parents are not God, but parents can often see things their children cannot. Parents take the long view.

No long view is longer than that of *Avinu*. God saw something that Moses could not see; the future. God saw a nation more numerous than the grains of sand in the desert and more plentiful than the stars in the sky. God knew that for us to succeed as a nation, Moses had to step aside and let the next generation, led by Joshua, take root. In order to take hold of the Land of Israel, the people of Israel had to let go of Moses.

Moses was not happy, but it is what was needed. To put it another way, "you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need." I did not make that up, by the way, those words were from Reb Jagger of Kent, or, if you will, the Kentziker Rabbi. Moses needed to die on the edge of the Promised Land and

we needed that to happen. It was sad for Moses and his people to see at the time, and hard for us to read several millennia later, but, when you take the long view, it makes perfect sense. It was not what was wanted, but it is exactly what was needed. This is what *Aviniu* saw and foresaw.

Moses being barred from the Promised Land is more than just about leadership change. Entering the land was not the end for our ancestors, nor was it for Moses, nor is it for us. We dream of Zion, literally and metaphorically. Like Moses before us, we long to see what is possible, not just what is now. The world and all of us in it are often breaking and we keep working to fix it. We may never reach our Promised Land, but we do not stop imagining it. That is a lesson I take from this *parashah* which this leads me back to where I began. With prayer.

But what if Moses' plea wasn't really a plea to enter the Promised Land? What if it was Moses asking for God to explain, but not alter his decision. Who among us has not been satisfied to hear or been frustrated to say "because I said so"? The Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev wrote that Moses was not pleading, but he was saying, through the seemingly superfluous repetition of "lemor" (to say) in the opening verses. Moses prayed not to annul the decree, but to request an explanation. Maybe Moses was saying, not pleading. Maybe his intention wasn't misplaced after all.

Whatever interpretation you take over the context behind "and I pleaded", Moses approaches God in this *parashah* through prayer. Prayer can take many forms. The author Anne Lamott suggests that prayer can be broken down in to three critical areas: asking for help, giving thanks, and saying "wow!" Sometimes prayer works, sometimes not, but prayer, whether it is a plea like Moses, a weep like Hannah, a complaint like Job, or with other means, by any of us, prayer connects us to an unbending line of our history from past, to present, to future. It's how we communicate with God and how He communicates with us. Prayer binds us to God and to each other. Prayer will not likely change God, but it will change us.

Some think prayer can bring many things, some may think it gives nothing, but I think what the one thing that prayer always provides is comfort, *nacham*. On this Shabbat Nachamu, may I be bold enough to bless you and be graceful enough to hope that you will bless me in return. May we be comforted by each other, our God, and our prayers. Unlike the psalmists in Psalm 19:15 who make a proposal in the singular, I

offer a wish for all of us: *Y'hiyu l'ratzon imray finu v'hegyonot libaynu l'fanekha, Adonai tzuraynu v'goalaynu*. May the words of our mouths and the prayers of our hearts be acceptable to God, our rock and our redeemer.

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom Aleichem.

ⁱ First, one must pray similar to a poor man who knocks on a door for a hand out, as "*the poor man speaks beseechingly*." (Prov. 18:23). Second, the prayer must be addressed to the source of Mercy [to G-d in His capacity of Mercy]. Third, it must be offered at a favorable time, "*May my prayer come to you at a time of goodwill*." Fourth, the prayer must be specific and incapable of improper interpretation.

http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1590696/jewish/Entreaties-and-Prayers.htm.

ⁱⁱ See, http://www.chabad.org/thejewishwoman/roshchodesh_cdo/aid/2263460/jewish/Av.htm.