



**Parashat Vaetchanan**

**VeAhavta -- And You Shall Love**

by Chaim Moshe haLevi on Saturday July 28, 2007

11 Av, 5767

Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11, Shabbat

Last week's Torah portion, Parashat Devarim, is perfectly placed in the liturgical calendar just prior to Tisha B'Av, the annual day of mourning that marks the destruction of the first and second Temples, along with several other calamities suffered by the Jewish people. In Devarim, the Israelites are reminded of the episode of the 12 spies, when Moses sent representatives of each of the 12 tribes to scope out the land "flowing with milk and honey." They bring back a very mixed report, with all but one of the spies, Caleb, fixating on the dangers ahead of them. The Israelites are chastised by God for trusting in the spies who "cried wolf," and as a result of this transgression, they are left with a promise that this shall be a day of mourning for all generations. "See, if you wanna cry. . .I'll give you something to cry about!" says a frustrated and indignant God. The Mishnah teaches us that the episode of the spies is the first of the calamities to fall on Tisha B'Av, this historical day of sorrow and suffering.

Continuing this theme, in the haftarah reading for Shabbat Chazon (the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av), the prophet Isaiah offers a vision of the destruction of the Temple: This is what you get for following your own selfish interests rather than living according to the word of God! In both of these readings, we see the prototypical Deuteronomic God exacting punishment and retribution. What happened to the loving deity of the Book of Exodus?

Parashat Va'etchanan and the accompanying haftarah reading for this Shabbat Nachamu offer us consolation from Tisha B'Av and from divine censure and haunting prophecy. Yet, they also tender so much more. In the parasha, we are presented with the statements of the very tenets of our faith: the Shema, the VeAhavta, and the Aseret HaDibrot (the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments). In the haftarah reading, we are reminded that God cannot be compared to any image or any idol. "The grass withers; the flower fades; The word of God shall stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8) It is as if, in anticipation of Tu B'Av<sup>1</sup>, we are gifted with the covenantal relationship of love between God and the Jewish people.

As Parashat Va'etchanan opens, we find Moses pleading for forgiveness from any transgressions that may have upset God in order that he be permitted to enter into the promised land along with the rest of the Israelites. While Moses's request is unconditionally



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denied, he is given a counter offer. Climb to the top of Mount Pisgah and survey the land. Needless to say, Moses is frustrated and probably overwrought. After all of his hard work in leading this kvetching motley crew throughout 40 years of wandering, how is he repaid? With a bird's eye view of a land he will never set foot upon.

Despite his personal disappointment, Moses the leader reminds the people that it is imperative that they keep God's *mitzvot* (commandments) and uphold all of the details laid out in the Torah. Why? Because God is a jealous, punishing deity who never forgets the sins of His enemies, repaying them by devouring them or ultimately destroying them. I can only wonder, is this really what Moses believes or is he *broigus* (disgruntled) because HaShem (God) has denied his request to enter the land? I don't think it is either of these. Rather it is a scare tactic by one of the authors of Deuteronomy to get the people to toe the line, i.e. if one wishes to remain alive, s/he must fulfill God's commandments. As intercessor between God and layperson, offering sacrifices on the behalf of the populace, the Deuteronomist *Kohen* (priest) would have a personal investment in instilling *yirat HaShem* (fear of God) into the people. Otherwise, who would come to make guilt offerings? How's that for motivation?

The reader soon discovers another Deuteronomist voice, one that seems as discontented to portray God in this fire and brimstone manner as we are to hear it. Thus, we are made aware of the loving nature of God: a deity who is merciful, who remembers the covenant made with the biblical ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to provide the chosen people with a homeland of their own, who never fails them, who redeemed them from bondage in Egypt, who brought them to the holy mountain to reveal the divine law to them, and who has assisted them in preparing for their conquest of the land.

Moses reminds the people that God revealed Himself to each one individually at Mount Sinai NOT just to the ancestral forefathers. Each individual has a personal relationship with God, and thus, is personally responsible to uphold the promise of *Naaseh v'Nishma* (We will do and we will listen) made at that historical moment. To concretize that memory, Moses repeats the *Aseret HaDibrot*.

Tying together all of the lessons, the principles, and the statutes, the people are offered a summary statement of their relationship to God, in the form of the Shema. This is coupled with the instructive passage of how to demonstrate one's love to God, the *VeAhavta*. The people who, not long after leaving Egypt, had once stood at Sinai and proclaimed *Naaseh v'Nishma*, have matured to the point that now they truly can *Shema* (listen) and *Oseh* (do), in the form of *Ahavah* (love). In phrasing the Shema in the plural, Moses has acknowledged and accepted God's decision that he not enter into the land. Moses is now one of the people. He is no longer separated out as their leader, for even Moses must submit to the will of God, and to affirm God's supremacy with love, even if a request of God was not granted him.



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The children of Israel acknowledge God's singularity and promise to show their love for God, with all of their core, essence, and power. They will do so by teaching future generations, demonstrating their love in every setting (at home or away, from arising in the morning to retiring at night) and through outward signs on their bodies and their homes. When their children ask why these things are done, they promise to recount their history as slaves in Egypt and explain how keeping the mitzvot has ensured their survival as a people.

So, if it all comes down to affirming God's Oneness, and proving our love for God, did the first Deuteronomist have it all wrong? Well, for me as a queer Jew, the implacable parent in the sky is so passé. My personal theology does not include a God who is irate, spiteful, and unforgiving. I believe in a God of pure and endless benevolence, compassion, and truth. There is nothing in the Shema or the VeAhavta that speaks of *yirat HaShem*. I do not believe fear is the way to a healthy relationship with God. By contrast, I do believe one ought to have a mindful respect for God and God's awesomeness.

Created in the image of God, we testify to God's Oneness through acts of love, for loving is Godly. Whether it is teaching one's children, wrapping oneself in tefillin, or affixing a mezuzah, these are all expressions of our connection to the Divine Spirit. Likewise, by living and loving openly as LGBTIQ people, each of us is an *ayd* (a witness) to the *Ein Sof* (the Infinite Divine Oneness).

This Shabbat find your personal connection to God. Reach out in love to the Divine. Celebrate this connection and share it with others, especially with your beloved this coming Monday on Tu B'Av under the light of the full moon. And if you're single and looking? You know the drill.

<sup>1</sup>Tu B'Av is a joyous holiday that contrasts with the mourning of Tisha B'Av for various historical reasons. A minor holiday, it is connected with dating rituals. For further information do a websearch or contact the author of this article.



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