

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Va'etchanan

If one ever sought a singular Parsha that summarizes all the fundamentals of Judaism, this week's portion, Va'etchanan, would certainly be a serious contender. Aside from containing the Ten Commandments, the Shma and even the famous question of the Wise Son as it appears in the Passover Hagaddah, we are told that we cannot add or subtract from the commandments, we cannot intermarry and we must form a symbiotic relationship with the Land of Israel. There is one fundamental idea that forms a centerpiece of the Parsha that certainly deserves special attention.

As Moses continues his monologue (which forms the lion share of the Book of Devarim), he touches on the core tenets of Jewish belief and actually sets us apart from all other religions. In fact, a part of this week's Parsha was just read publicly in synagogues across the globe as we mourned for the loss of the Jewish Temples in Jerusalem and several other tragedies that befell our people. Ironically, what begins as a disheartening and tragic description of exile ends with Moses's proof for the authenticity of the Jewish experience.

In Chapter 4, verse 25, we are warned that when the Jewish people will grow comfortable in the Land of Israel, they will become corrupt. The statement seems rather harsh and definite, but one can easily understand it as a condition. If they become corrupted, then the following will be the consequence: They will begin to make graven images and statues to worship which will anger G-d. The result will be destruction and exile. In fact, at this point, Moses called on Heaven and Earth to bear witness to the disaster that will ensue. The people will be scattered amongst other nations and remain few in number. They will continue to worship other gods that will essentially be meaningless. Eventually, they will realize that their only hope is to seek out G-d Himself.

The verses continue with some words of comfort. "You will seek G-d from there and you will find Him if you search for him with all your heart and all your soul."(verse 29) There is an interesting grammatical anomaly that takes place in the Hebrew. The pronoun "you" switches from plural to singular in the middle of the verse. It seems that a collective "you" will seek G-d, but that only an individual "you" will find him. Could it be that Moses is hinting to the reality that the relationship that one forms with G-d truly is unique to each and every person? The verses continue with the second person in the singular. We are told that G-d will ultimately not forsake us and eventually allow us to return to Him because he acknowledges the covenant that he made with our forefathers.

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In hindsight, it is easy for us to see that the description of exile and return certainly came to pass. What seems to be astounding, however, is the next assertion that Moses makes. “For ask of the first days that were before you, from the day that G-d created man on the earth - and from one end of the Heaven to the other end - has there ever been anything as great as this or anything that even sounds like it? Has a nation even heard the voice of G-d speak from the midst of a fire as you have heard and lived? Or has G-d ever tried to take for himself a nation from within another nation with miracles, signs, wonders and war, and with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with great awesomeness as everything that the Lord, your G-d, did in front of your eyes in Egypt?” In other words, Moses is challenging the people to find anyone else who could make either of these two claims. First, that an entire nation experienced a national revelation. Second, that we came from within another nation and miraculously left them and developed our own unique identity. These two features of the Jewish people are definitely not shared with anyone else through history. In fact, no one has ever made such a claim - even a false one. Moses then continues by telling us that we have been shown to know that our G-d is unique and singular. He does not suggest that we must therefore believe in G-d. He is certain that these two proofs will make G-d existence a reality for all of us.

The Exodus from Egypt and Revelation at Mount Sinai are the two seminal events in the formation of the Jewish people as a nation. Moses reminds us of where we came from so that we can trust in our special bond with G-d. In fact, it is specifically while we are confronted with disaster and devastation that we need to be reminded that ultimately we will not be forsaken. Once that is established, Moses can then continue to remind the people of the Ten Commandments that were revealed on Sinai collectively and our pledge of loyalty to Monotheism through the recitation of the Shma. It is our hope that we will eventually see a total salvation so that we will no longer be witness to anti semitism and we can live with complete security in the Land of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!

