

Parashat Va'etkhanan 5780

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat's Torah portion has so much in it, it's difficult to pick one element to focus on. It contains within it the *Sh'ma* and the Ten Commandments (which also appeared in the book of Exodus). That alone is an enormous amount.

The portion begins with Moses telling the people that he had pleaded with G!d (*va'etkhanan*) to let him enter the land and G!d essentially responded that he should stop *hoken a chainik*. (which literally means knocking a tea kettle in Yiddish, but colloquially means stop pestering) and that he wasn't going in to the land, but he could see it in its entirety in its splendor from the mountain top. Moses blames the people for his misfortune, saying it's their fault that he wasn't allowed in, but I think he comes to accept the situation over the course of the *Parashah*. In general over the course of the Torah, we see Moses evolve a great deal. He begins in the Book of Exodus at the Burning Bush as a person who is "heavy of tongue," who cannot speak well. Now at the book of Deuteronomy he gives his farewell address to the Jewish people which pretty much takes the entire book. That's a pretty dramatic change. His acceptance of G!d's decree makes me think of the *brakha*, the blessing, we make, upon hearing of someone's death. Though this is a very painful moment, our tradition asks us to accept the mystery of life and of death and to be grateful to G!d for the life we have been granted and to accept that G!d is still the Blessed One even when our (or someone else's) time in this life is concluded. There is a Talmudic saying: *Barukh Hashem batov, uvarukh Hashem barah* : Blessed is the Eternal One in the good and Blessed is the Eternal One in the bad. In other words we recognize the Omnipresent One, the Eternal One, the Source of All in every situation whether we are happy with the situation or not. Obviously it's much easier to say "blessed is the Eternal One in or with the Good." In keeping with this theme, part of the power of reciting the mourner's kaddish (which never mentions death), is that it is a prayer of pure praise that we recite even in our most vulnerable bereft moments. This Shabbat's torah portion, *Va'etkhanan*, always comes on the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av – the 9th Day of the Hebrew month of Av which commemorates the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem in ancient days – an extremely sad day in the Jewish calendar.

To return to what I was saying above, the traditional blessing recited upon hearing of a death is *Barukh Dayan Ha'emet*: Blessed is the Judge of Truth. In essence we acknowledge that

there is much that is beyond our comprehension, that we as finite beings cannot fathom an Infinite Being. This reminds me of the well-known “Serenity Prayer”: grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Moses has come to accept what he cannot change. *Barukh Dayan Ha’emet* is the recognition of how much is beyond our comprehension.

Humans in some ways are so great and in some ways so miniscule. We can be so resilient and so fragile. We can produce an Einstein and, G!d forbid, a Hitler. We can be so loving and accepting and so hateful and bigoted. We can build marvels and destroy our very planet. We can have such incredible insights and we can be so obtuse.

As Shakespeare phrased it in the words he gave his character Hamlet:

“What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?”

So what do we do with all of this? With our faculties we try to make sense of the world. We philosophize, we create systems of thought, try to comprehend the world and our place in it, and the meaning of life. We try to figure out what is the good and how should we live. Every civilization does this. Some of the key elements of this are found in this week’s torah portion. The *Sh’ma Yisrael*, which is probably our best known prayer is taken directly from this portion. It declares that G!d is one and that we should love G!d with all of our heart, soul, and might. And that we should teach these words of Torah and Mitzvot to the coming generations and these teachings should guide our life.

In fact there are other verses in this Shabbat’s Torah portion that have been incorporated in our liturgy. I’ll just mention one more. It’s in Deuteronomy 4:4: “*V’atem Had’vekim B’Adonai Elo-heikhem Khayyim Kulkhem Hayom* (And you who hold close to the Eternal One your G!d are all alive today!) It could also be translated as “are fully alive today.” This phrase is recited by the congregation at the beginning of the reading of the Torah at a service when the first person has been called up to make the blessings over the Torah, but has not made the blessings yet. After the congregation recites this line, the Gabbai who calls up the people to make the Torah blessings repeats the line after which the first person called up makes the blessing before the first *Aliyah*. The original context for this verse in this Shabbat’s portion is Moses telling the

people that all who stayed connected to the Eternal remained alive. Most of the prayer book adapts or incorporates verses from the *Tanakh* (the Bible), some of them from many different sources, some quoting a longer section of the *Tanakh*. Those who composed our prayer books (*siddurim*) in ancient times knew the *Tanakh* extremely well. So I would like to read this verse (*V'atem had'vekim...*) to mean that staying connected to G!d takes our lives to a higher level, a level more fully alive because it vivifies not only our physical selves, but our spiritual selves as well.

Wishing you all Shabbat Shalom.