

## **Parsha Va-etchanan Deuteronomy 3.23-7.11**

Congratulations. We have just entered the 5<sup>th</sup> and final book of the Torah and it is called Deuteronomy. Some scholars believe that Deuteronomy was not part of the original Torah. It was “discovered” by the High Priest in the Southern Kingdom during the reign of King Josiah around 620 BCE. During his rule, Josiah realized that the People of Judah were straying from the laws of the Torah, so he began a concerted effort to return to God’s way. He removed all forms of idol worship that had been put in place by his father King Manasseh, who ruled for the previous 50 years, and began following the teachings of Moses. The writer of the book that we now call Deuteronomy was so impressed by Josiah that he sought to place him on a level equal to Moses. Unfortunately, Josiah was killed in a battle to prevent the Egyptians from attacking the Babylonians, so Deuteronomy was modified to remove Josiah’s name and put Moses’ name back in. When Deuteronomy was added later to the first four books, it helped reinforce to a wayward people their attachment to the Torah and God.

This week’s portion, Va-etchanan, is truly powerful reading material. It is the second parsha in Deuteronomy and begins as a continuation of Moses’ 1<sup>st</sup> Discourse and follows with his 2<sup>nd</sup>. It contains several key verses that we read every Friday night. Most of Moses’ 1<sup>st</sup> Discourse was presented in last week’s parsha. The end of the discourse finds Moses pleading with God to let him cross over the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. But God concludes the plea with “Speak no more unto me of this matter”, and it is done! Joshua has been charged with leading the people into the Holy Land, while Moses may see the land from the top of Mount Pisgah.

Bimbam.com says that Moses must look to the future and have faith that Joshua will lead the people into the Promised Land. While Moses may have been old, he obviously still had the stamina to take the people across the Jordan. Moses was possibly the first visionary who died before seeing the conclusion of his dreams, but there have been other leaders throughout history whose lives were cut short. The history of the Jews is filled with similar stories. We must remind ourselves that when we recite the Sh’ma, the V’ahavtah, the V’shamru and other prayers that we have a contract with the Almighty that says if we LOVE God and have FAITH in God that he will see us to our rightful destiny.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Discourse has several major elements. Moses begins by reminding the people of the wonders of their God. He recalls the events at Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets where the people had earlier beheld the presence of God on the mountain. He goes into great detail concerning the evils of idol worship and God’s wrath at those Israelites who fall prey to it. And he concludes in Chapter 4, verse 39, the words from the conclusion of the Aleynu, “know this day, and lay it to thy heart, that the Lord, he is God in heaven above and in the earth beneath; there is none else.”

The next major element is the review of the Ten Commandments, which are meant to be the religious foundation for the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Several verses are devoted to the 1<sup>st</sup> (I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt), the 2<sup>nd</sup> (thou shalt have no other gods before me), and the 4<sup>th</sup> (observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy) commandments, but all are reinforced by Moses. Then in order to further emphasize the significance of following God’s law, in Chapter 6, starting with verse 4, Moses concludes the 2<sup>nd</sup> discourse by reciting, FOR THE FIRST TIME, the Sh’ma and the V’ahavtah.

The chapter continues by reminding the people of the evils of those nations that they will encounter on the other side of the Jordan – the Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Hivites, Perizzites and Jebusites – and that God will help the Israelites to utterly destroy them. A final warning about intermarriage is also given.

The parsha concludes in Chapter 7 when Moses again reminds the people of Israel that they have an obligation to serve God and obey God’s commandments, and that they were chosen for that very reason. As long as they follow his instructions, God will protect them, whereas those nations (and wayward Israelites) who do otherwise will face his wrath and likely be destroyed.

There is also great significance in the Haftorah selections, as this week's is the first of seven "Haftorahs of Consolation" that follow Tishe B'Av, the holiday that commemorates the double destructions of the temples in Jerusalem in 586 BC and 70 AD. This year Tishe B'Av begins tomorrow, Saturday, July 17<sup>th</sup>. We also begin the transition to the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which begin extremely early this year on Monday evening, September 6<sup>th</sup>. The week's Haftorah comes from the prophet Isaiah and is the first that follows Tishe B'Av. While Isaiah lived before 586 BCE (actually he wrote between 740 BC and 701 BC), his writings discuss the redemption of the Kingdom of Judah after its destruction. God will forgive the Israelites and restore the Temple. The key feature is that God is Supreme over all peoples, and all life follows his will. In keeping with the parsha, FAITH in God is essential.

If there is one word that summarizes this parsha, as well as the rest of the Old Testament, it is FAITH. Starting with Abram, those who placed their faith in God were rewarded for doing so. Moses wavered once and was denied the Holy Land. Most of the Kings of Israel (Northern Kingdom) did not follow in God's ways, and the 10 tribes were dispersed in 721 BCE. Less than half of the Kings of Judah were righteous in God's eyes, and they were lucky to survive until 586 BC. Fortunately, they were released from Babylonian exile in 530 BC and returned to Israel to rebuild the temple by 520 BCE.

The Old Testament is a compilation of writings that attest to having FAITH in God. We may be the "chosen people", but we still need to follow the Golden Rule and have FAITH in God in order to achieve our ultimate reward. The Book of Deuteronomy is the best example we have of the need to maintain that FAITH.