

Va-Etchchanan

Divar Torah given by Sandra Glazier 8-1-15

This is the first week following Tisha B'Av, a day when we mourn the destruction of both Temples and our exile from the land promised to us through G-d's covenant with our forefathers. The period between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana is supposed to be one of self-examination as we attempt to strengthen and deepen our spiritual connection to G-d. I think that this week's parsha contains a formula intended to assist us in meeting this goal.

We're told to fear G-d and follow his commandments.

At least one commentator has indicated that to "fear G-d" is to revere him and hold him in awe.

In this week's parsha we are repeatedly told that we must follow G-d's commandments or face destruction and exile from the Promised Land. Just one week after Tisha B'Av this literally sounds more like "be afraid" as opposed to "hold in awe". But I think one needs to look below the surface.

The parsha starts out with Moses imploring G-d to reconsider his decree and permit him to enter the Promised Land. Moses' prayer is rejected. G-d declines to waiver from his decision to bar Moses from crossing the Jordan. Moses is permitted to see the land but not enter it.

If the only message here was one of literal fear of retribution or reward and punishment, it might engender compliance by some, but it wouldn't necessarily help forge a deep spiritual connection. Instead, it might create a dogmatic approach to Judaism. We are told that if we follow the commandments we'll be rewarded unto the thousandth generation, but if we fail to follow the commandments we and our descendants will be punished for multiple generations,

What does this mean? Does it mean that when bad things happened to me or people I love, it's my fault? If I pray for bad things to be alleviated, and they continue unabated, is G-d ignoring me or worse has he abandoned me?

This thought process can have only one outcome – the creation of a schism in my relationship with G-d. Who wants a relationship based on fear or to feel as if ones prayers are not heard?

In a Hertz's commentary, G-d appears to only punish the guilty –that truly turn away and **hate** him unto the 3rd and 4th generation, but to those that **love** him he rewards them unto the thousandth generation. He also rewards those who turn back to him in repentance. Could this connote that a better way to have a relationship with G-d is one premised upon love as opposed to one based upon fear?

I think, the true import of the parsha is really about core beliefs that form the basis for a **loving relationship with G-d.**

The 10 commandments and the Shema, take center stage in this week's portion. Both are about how G-d wishes us to interact with him and others. I'm going to focus however on those that related to interacting with G-d.

The Ten Commandments tell us G-d is to be our only G-d, we are to have no others before him. The Shema tells us that we are to love G-d with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might – meaning with all our being and to our very core in an unwavering fashion.

Commentaries illuminate instances when our martyrs viewed their tortures as welcome tests and opportunities to demonstrate their unconditional love for and belief in G-d and his greater purposes. These illustrations instruct us that we are to pray only for the strength to carry out G-d's will. While I hope none of have to endure torture, the message remains an important one – which is to strive for an unwavering belief in and love of G-d.

The parsha has a repetitive theme – it is that G-d's commandments and a love and belief in G-d is to be taught to our children and our children's children, so that future generations will derive the benefits of a special relationship with G-d.

We're told that we should not become complacent or take what we have for granted – this is because all that we have is as a result of what G-d has done for us in prior generations and because he remains present in our lives.

These messages, I believe, are intended to convey our need to experience gratitude as well as to formulate, connect and maintain a relationship with G-d, so that he remains relevant and integral to our lives.

This week, among other things, I'm grateful for the ability to pray in this beautiful serene setting – our rededicated sanctuary.

I believe that the crux of this week's portion is the message that through our observance and prayer we can formulate and maintain a close relationship with G-d

Moses tells the people that they must remember what G-d did for them. They should tell the generations to come what G-d did so that they recall these things as if they themselves were present when revelation occurred.

This, I believe, is intended to make the experience of revelation a personal one for each of us, whether we stood at Har Sinai or are members of a future generation.

We're told we were selected from among all the people of the world, not because of our numbers, but out of love and because of G-d's oath to our forefathers. We're reminded that G-d keeps his promises and because of his love for us he will show mercy to those of us who love him and keep his commandments, doing so for a thousand generations.

We are instructed and come to understand that the first 4 commandments relate to our relationship with G-d.

I believe Judaism is, by its very nature, about relationships- both personal and communal. Judaism is personal, in that, unlike other religions, we need no intermediary to communicate with G-d. What we need is an open heart and ability to observe and listen.

But why start the parsha with G-d declining to hear Moses' prayer?

Could it be that we need to understand, like Moses, that when we implore G-d for outcomes or things, sometimes the answer is "not now" or even "no". Perhaps the intended message is that we must trust in G-d, whether or not we like the answer or the outcome visited upon us.

When Moses pleads with G-d to be permitted to enter the land – G-d essentially tells him to stop asking. This isn't the first time Moses prays for an outcome, but it appears to be the first time G-d tells Moses to stop asking. He doesn't want to hear about it anymore. Could the difference be that here Moses prays for a personal benefit as opposed to interceding on behalf of others? Could it simply be that Moses has fulfilled what G-d had planned and compliance with such plans shouldn't be because we expect a reward or fear punishment, but simply because we need to just strive to fulfill G-d's will? Maybe it's both.

G-d had a plan for Moses. Moses didn't have to know or understand the plan. But, he had to be able to be open and to follow the path which G-d set out for him. For Moses, the path was not an easy one and Moses had to choose to participate. Moses didn't have ask why, but he did need to be open to G-d's will.

Moses and the people were repeatedly reminded from the beginning of Moses' life through this week's passage that G-d could do for them what they could not otherwise do for themselves. I believe this holds true for me today – G-d can perform miracles. We're reminded to remember that. This conveys to me that G-d can also do for me what I can't otherwise do for myself.

When the Israelites cried out for things different than G-d planned, there were consequences. Yearning for years past, as slaves in Egypt – resulted in 40 years of wandering. A lack of gratitude for the manna resulted in deliverance of meat accompanied

by a plague that killed off the multitudes who gorged themselves on it. Failure to follow G-d instructions – striking the rock, as opposed to speaking to it, precluded Moses' entrance to the land.

We don't need to understand the plan. We merely need the strength and ability to allow the plan to unfold and not get in the way.

When I pray for outcomes, aren't I trying to impose my will on G-d? Don't such prayers lack humility and indicate that I think I know better than G-d what the outcome should be?

Believing in something bigger and greater than ourselves can lift our burdens and elevate our spirit, because it can give us hope. Our preconceived notions of what the future holds aren't always accurate, or worse yet, can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Worries about the future and fretting over the past, can rob us of the ability to be present and enjoy what we have. Only G-d really knows what the future holds. The worst and best things that have happened in my life were not things that I had anticipated.

Some say there are no such things as coincidences. What some might call coincidence, may well be G-d's way of communicating. We (unlike Moses or the prophets), have to pay attention to hear G-d's messages. When we view prayer, **not as a means of communicating our desires** but rather as a quieting of our soul so that we can connect with G-d, we might be better able to accept outcomes.

When we look at the world as demonstrative of the wonders that only G-d can create, we can connect on a more spiritual level. Moreover, the belief that we are being guided by a power greater than ourselves, can result in a weight being lifted from our shoulders.

When we remember that G-d can perform miracles (both big and small) and that he chose us from among all the peoples in the world, because he loved us and wanted to have a relationship with us, we remember that we are not alone and that there is something bigger and greater than ourselves who cares what happens to us.

I leave you with this prayer, as we approach the high holidays, may we each be able to hear G-d's will and have the strength to carry it out.

Kain yehi ratson. – may it be G-d's will.

Shabbat shalom.