

TORAHSCOPE: V'et'chanan (I pleaded)

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Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11
Isaiah 40:1-26

"Shema, O Israel!"

V'et'chanan is perhaps one of the more inspirational and instructional collections of statements that Moses conveys to Israel in any one Torah reading. Not only is the Decalogue reiterated, but also the *Shema*—which many consider to be Israel's pledge of allegiance—is articulated. As I read and meditated upon this motivating section of Scripture, many thoughts came to my mind about how the Lord is presently using many of these words to encourage His people to return to a disciplined and regular study of the Torah—as we are to all be instructed in His ways and in holiness. Today's generation of Messianic Believers possesses significant potential to make a concentrated difference in the lives of Jews and Christians today, if we are willing to submit ourselves to God's Word and allow it mold our hearts and minds for His purpose.

A Great Nation

One of the most profound things that is stated in *V'et'chanan*—that any person who has placed his or her trust in the God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua **must commit to memory**—summarizes how obedience to Him manifests itself as His wisdom. Others can then witness this wisdom, and see how awesome God truly is:

“So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons” (Deuteronomy 4:6-9).

Here, Moses reminded Ancient Israel that they were indeed “this great nation” or *ha'goy ha'gadol ha'zeh* (הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה), but that such a great nation likewise has serious responsibilities. In order to be a wise and understanding people that other nations recognize and turn to for spiritual answers, Israel could not disobey the Lord. The kind of impact that Israel was chosen to make on the world would not happen all at once either, as Moses' Teaching had to be taught to the succeeding generations. I think that one of the exciting features of the Book of Deuteronomy, is that readers get to not only be reminded of the things that were to make Ancient Israel great—but that they are the same things which are to make *all of God's people today great!*

Today via the growth and expansion of the Messianic movement, many thousands of born again Believers—both Jewish *and* non-Jewish—are making a concentrated effort to make the Torah a firm foundation for their faith. As the Holy Spirit moves upon them, they want to make the statutes and commandments Moses delivered to Ancient Israel a part of how they think and act too. Just as Ancient Israel was admonished to be, they want others to witness their obedience to God, and use it as an opportunity to testify of the Father's goodness *and* the salvation He has provided in His Son.

The Fundamentals Required

As you have been reading through *V'et'chanan*, you have no doubt seen how Moses is instructing the Israelites in how they can be a special, separated, holy nation unto God. One of the

main reasons for heeding the instructions of the Lord is very clear: Moses wants Israel to live and prosper in the Land that He has promised to them. He details,

“Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you” (Deuteronomy 4:1).

Moses knew that his days were numbered and that he would soon die. He also recognized that he had been used by the Holy One to communicate His words to the Israelites, which will allow them to ably take possession of Canaan. As he begins to reiterate many of the words and experiences from the previous forty years of Israel sojourning in the desert, he makes a strong admonition to remind his listeners about the imperative to follow God’s instructions already given:

“You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deuteronomy 4:2).

This terse statement carries weight. It not only carries weight in terms of how authoritative the instructions of God are, but how the Israelites are to make sure that they do not carelessly nullify them. These words do not prohibit how in further history, God’s Prophets would reveal more things to Israel, or that additional books of Scripture would be added to the canon. These words similarly do not prohibit how in later generations, religious authorities would need to make rulings and decisions on how the Torah was to be applied in complicated circumstances. What these words do more than anything else is to highlight how **God’s Instruction is to force His people to follow and serve Him alone**—versus any other gods—as further specified:

“Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you” (Deuteronomy 4:3-4).

As you read through *V'et'chanan*, the Israelites are reminded in summary form about many of their wilderness experiences. Moses specifies prohibitions against idolatry and making any idols of a created object for worship.¹ Moses restates the reality that the Lord is a jealous God and a consuming fire.² Following this, Moses prophesies about the future when the chosen people, through willful disobedience, are going to provoke God to scatter them among the nations of the Earth. But, in spite of this anticipated punishment, He will restore them to the Promised Land when they will seek Him with all their hearts and souls. This is one of the most sobering parts of our *parashah* that you will read:

“When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God *so as* to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you. There you will serve gods, the work of man’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find *Him* if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice. For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:25-31).

In spite of future judgment that will come, Moses continued to encourage Ancient Israel by reminding them of the great things God had done for them:

“Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and *inquire* from one end of the heavens to the other. Has *anything*

¹ Deuteronomy 4:15-20.

² Deuteronomy 4:23-24.

been done like this great thing, or has *anything* been heard like it? Has *any* people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard *it*, and survived? Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in *and* to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today. Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (Deuteronomy 4:32-40).

After this, Moses takes a break from the exhortative reminders, and chooses three cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan River.³ But, he quickly picks up where he left off, and reminds the Israelites about the words they received at Mount Horeb.⁴ In fact, he just goes ahead and restates the Ten Commandments for the entire assembly to hear. Most important, Moses wants the Israelites to know that these words were not only applicable to those who originally heard them, but to future generations also. The point is made that the covenant passes on to their descendants:

“Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: ‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *with* all those of us alive here today” (Deuteronomy 5:1-3).

Moses mentions the great fear that the people of Israel demonstrated when they first heard the words of God being declared from the smoking mountain.⁵ *The significance of the exhortations continues.* Moses encourages Israel with more instructions for those listening, and the generations to come:

“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded *me* to teach you, that you might do *them* in the land where you are going over to possess it, so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged” (Deuteronomy 6:1-2).

Following this, Moses gives Israel what is commonly referred to as the *Shema*, derived from the Hebrew verb *shama* (שמע) meaning “to hear.” Throughout Biblical history, the *Shema* is believed to be the quintessential statement declaring not only a person’s complete loyalty to the God of Israel, but also of monotheism. Observant Jews proclaim the *Shema* every day in their traditional prayers, and every *Shabbat* as the Torah scroll is pulled from the ark and ready to be canted. I personally like to refer to the *Shema* as Israel’s “pledge of allegiance”:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”⁶ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie

³ Deuteronomy 4:41-43.

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:1-21.

⁵ Deuteronomy 5:22-33.

⁶ Heb. *shema Yisrael ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad* (שמע ישראל יהוה אחד); also validly rendered as “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (NRSV/NJPS), emphasizing Israel’s exclusive worship of Him.

Consult the article “What Does the Shema Really Mean?” by J.K. McKee.

down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

As you can see, the positive encouragements just continue on statement after statement in the *Shema*. By a variety of educational actions, including impressing the significance of Moses’ Teaching on one’s heart and mind, frequently discussing it, and actually placing it on one’s hand, forehead, and doorposts (even if just figuratively, and not always literally)—people can be reminded to be loyal to God and to diligently follow after Him.

Finally in *V'et'chanan*, Moses tells Israel some of what they are to expect as they enter into Canaan, take the Promised Land, and defeat the seven nations which currently occupied it.⁷ Of notable importance is how these nations are stronger than Israel, but how God will deliver them over to be defeated:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).

In the last verses of our *parashah*, we see a significant reminder from Moses regarding God’s faithfulness to Israel and to His promises:

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face” (Deuteronomy 7:6-10).

Final Thoughts

As you read and consider *V'et'chanan*, Moses is delivering what is largely a very encouraging word to the people of Israel. Of course, the Israelites are being told of some of the challenges of disobedience to the Lord. But, the positive comments about the blessings they will experience *so outweigh the negative*—that any reader should walk away from this week’s Torah portion with a great sense of relief for the love that God has for His people. **We should all want to obey the Lord.**

Thinking about these encouraging words, I naturally reflected back on my remembrance of the Ninth of Av this past week—as I fasted in remembering the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Reflecting upon *V'et'chanan*, Moses’ words are quite uplifting and encouraging—especially for those who have been in mourning for the loss of the Temples. Those who are serious about their relationship with the God of Israel can be positively encouraged to seek Him with all of their being:

“But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find *Him* if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice. For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:29-31).

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:10-7:10.

Moses says that God will remember His people like this *b'acharit ha'yamim* (בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים), or “in the latter days.” For the generation that is alive today, many of the prophecies seen in the Bible have been fulfilled. In particular, in 1948 we witnessed the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish State of Israel, with the Jewish people being returned to the Land of their ancestors. The possibility of rebuilding a Temple on the Temple Mount is debated every year. People are waking up and being stirred all over the world as they sincerely seek the Lord with all their hearts and souls, and pay attention to the Scriptures. The covenants promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are being remembered. *And, we all know how this will culminate with the return of Yeshua the Messiah as King from Jerusalem.*⁸

We have much to be grateful for as we learn to listen and obey the admonitions given to Ancient Israel three millennia ago. But what is to befall us in the future? I think understanding this begins with each of us falling on our faces before the Lord, and crying out to Him with that simple declaration: *Shema Yisrael!* or “Hear, O Israel!” Then we can allow our Father to answer our pleadings...

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

⁸ For a further discussion, consult the book *When Will the Messiah Return?* by J.K. McKee.