

5780 – Deuteronomy 3-7 - V'etchanan (And I pleaded)

Parashat Va'etchanan contains some of the most sublime theological passages in the whole of Judaism. Moses tells the people that their laws and history are unique, and will be seen as such by other nations. Their laws were given by God; their history was written by God—there is no other nation of which either can be said.

Moses then begins his second great speech. He reminds the people of the Ten Commandments and the revelation at Mount Sinai and commands them to set God at the centre of their lives in the passage that became the first paragraph of the *Shema*, the supreme expression of the love of God. This was to be more than an emotion. It was to be constantly spoken of to children, worn by men in the form of tefillin, and placed as *mezuzot* “on the doorposts of your house” (Deut. 6:9).

The first of the following essays looks at Moses' declaration that the Torah would be Israel's “wisdom ... in the eyes of the nations” (Deut. 4:6), and how it came true. The second looks at the distinctive politics of Deuteronomy, namely, its concept of a nation formed by covenant. This too had great impact on the formative history of the free societies of the West. The third and fourth are about the word *shema*, central to our *Parashat Va'etchanan* and to Deuteronomy as a whole. One is about its dimensions of meaning, focusing on the fact that **it is the word the Torah uses instead of a verb meaning “to obey.”** The other is about **Judaism as a culture of listening more than seeing, of the ear rather than the eye.** The fifth is about the unexpected statement by Moses that the Israelites are “the fewest of all peoples.”

*The Meanings of Shema*¹

“Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). These words are the supreme testimony of Jewish faith. Each word in this sentence needs careful study, but in this and the next essay I want to focus on only one, the first: the verb *Shema*. In the next essay I ask why we are commanded to listen, rather than to see. In this I want to understand the range of meanings of the verb itself. **This will prove fundamental to our understanding of Judaism.**

The Mosaic books are, among other things, a set of commandments, 613 of them. That is the primary meaning of the word Torah—law. **The Torah is not fundamentally about the salvation of the soul. It is about the redemption of society.** It is about how to construct a social order that will honour the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of life, and the

twin imperatives of justice and compassion. It is about our life together, not about the inner life of the soul, for which we have the book of Psalms.

Hence the Torah's emphasis on law: not secular law, such as every society has, but *Torah min hashamayim*, law as prescribed **by Heaven itself**. As Psalm 147 puts it: “He has revealed His word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation” (Ps.147:19-20). Law is the basis of liberty. Without it, there is chaos, violence, injustice, and the will to power. Judaism is a religion of law not because it is solely concerned with justice rather than love. To the contrary, **Torah is the source of the three great love commands in Western civilisation: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, might, and soul** (Deu 6:4-5); **you shall love your neighbour as yourself** (Lev 19:18); **you shall love the stranger for you were once strangers** (Lev 19:34). But love alone cannot structure grace in society.

1. Mark 12:28-34

²⁸“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” ²⁹“The most important one,” answered Yeshua, “is this: **'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'** (Deu 6:4-5). ³¹The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:18). There is no commandment greater than these.” ³²“Well said, teacher,” the man replied ...

a. Matthew 22:34-40

³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷Yeshua replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ (Deu 6:4). ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev 19:18). ⁴⁰**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**”

b. Makkot (Lashes) 24a

David came and **reduced (the Torah) to eleven** [principles],⁽³⁾ as it is written, A Psalm of David.⁽⁴⁾ Lord, who shall sojourn in Thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy holy mountain?—[i] He that walketh uprightly, and [ii] worketh righteousness, and [iii] speaketh truth in his heart; that [iv] hath no slander upon his tongue, [v] nor doeth evil to his fellow, [vi] nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour, [vii] in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but [viii] he honoureth them that fear the Lord, [ix] He sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not, [x] He putteth not out his money on interest, [xi] nor taketh a bribe against the innocent ...

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation, Deuteronomy*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 65-69.

Isaiah came and **reduced them to six** [principles],⁽¹⁹⁾ as it is written, [i] He that walketh righteously, and [ii] speaketh uprightly, [iii] He that despiseth the gain of oppressions, [iv] that shaketh his hand from holding of bribes, [v] that stoppeth his ear from hearing of blood, [vi] and shutteth his eyes from looking upon evil; he shall dwell on high ...

Micah came and **reduced them to three** [principles], as it is written, It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: [i] only to do justly, and [ii] to love mercy and [iii] to walk humbly before thy God.⁽²⁸⁾

Again came **Isaiah** and **reduced them to two** [principles], as it is said, Thus saith the Lord, [i] Keep ye justice and [ii] do righteousness [etc.].⁽³⁰⁾ **Amos** came and **reduced them to one** [principle], as it is said, For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye Me and live⁽³¹⁾ To this R. Nahman b. Isaac ... (said): [Might it not be taken as,] Seek Me by observing the whole Torah and live?—**But it is Habakuk who came and based them all on one [principle], as it is said, But the righteous shall live by his faith.**⁽³²⁾

(3) I.e., reduced them to eleven leading virtues.

(4) Ps. XV.

(19) Isa. XXXIII, 15-16.

(28) Micah VI, 8.

(30) Isa. LVI, 1.

(31) Amos V, 4.

(32) Hab. II, 4.

1) Romans 1:16-17

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷For **in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."**

c. Matthew 7:12

¹²So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, **for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**

d. Luke 10:25-28

²⁵"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He answered, "'**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind**'; and, '**Love your neighbor as yourself.**'"

e. Romans 13:9

⁹**and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."**

1) Acts 22:3

³"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. **I studied under Gamaliel**² and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors ...

f. Galatians 5:14

For **the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."**

g. James 2:8

If you really keep **the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"** you are doing right.

h. 1Corinthians 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But **the greatest of these is love.**

i. Shabbat 31a

It happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, "Take me as a proselyte, but on condition that you teach me the entire Torah, all of it, while I stand on one foot." Shammai instantly drove him away with a builder's measuring rod he happened to have in his hand. When the heathen came before Hillel, Hillel agreed to make him a proselyte, saying **"What you don't like, don't do to your neighbor—this is the entire [substance of] Torah, all of it; the rest is commentary.** Go and study it."

It would seem to follow logically that a book of commands must have a verb that means "to obey." That is the whole purpose of an imperative. Obedience stands in relation to command as truth does to making a statement. *Yet there is no verb in biblical Hebrew that means to obey.* This is an astonishing fact.

So glaring is the lacuna (i.e., *an unfilled space or interval; a gap*) that when Hebrew was revived in modern times a verb had to be found that meant "to obey." It was obviously necessary, for example, in the case of Israel's defence forces. An army depends on obedience to the command of a superior officer. **The word chosen was *letzayet*. But this is an Aramaic word that does not appear in this sense anywhere in the Hebrew Bible.** The Torah itself uses a quite different word, namely, *shema*, meaning, "to hear, to listen," and several other things besides.

The root SH-M-A is absolutely fundamental to the book of Deuteronomy, where it appears in one or other forms some ninety-two times (by way of comparison, it appears only six times in the whole of Leviticus). It conveys a wide range of meanings, clustered around five primary senses:

² Gamaliel was a Pharisee and grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel.

1. **to listen**, to pay focused attention, as in “Be silent, Israel, and listen [*ushema*]” (Deut. 27:9);
2. **to hear**, as in “I heard [*shamati*] Your voice in the garden and I was afraid” (Gen. 3:10);
3. **to understand**, as in “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand [*yishme'u*] each other” (Gen. 11:7);
4. **to internalise**, register, take to heart, as in “And as for Ishmael I have heard you [*shmatikha*]” (Gen. 17:20), meaning, “I have taken into account what you have said; I will bear it in mind; it is a consideration that weighs with Me”;
5. **to respond in action**, as in “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you [*shema bekolah*]” (Gen. 21:12).

It is this last sense in which *shema* comes closest to meaning “to obey.”

It has yet other meanings in rabbinic Hebrew, such as “to infer,” “to accept,” “to take into account as evidence,” and “to receive as part of the Oral Tradition.” No English word has this range of meanings. Perhaps the closest are “to hearken” and “to heed”—neither of them terms in common use today. Psychotherapists nowadays sometimes speak of “active listening,” and this is part of what is meant by *shema*.

The best way to discover what is unique about a civilisation is to search for words in its lexicon that are untranslatable into other languages. It is said that the Bedouin have many words for sand and the Inuit many terms for snow. The Greek word *megalopsuchos*—literally, the “great-souled” person, one blessed with wealth, status, and effortless superiority—has no equivalent in either Judaism or Christianity, two cultures that valued, as Greece did not, humility. *Shema* is untranslatable—understandably so **since it belongs to biblical Hebrew, the world’s supreme example of a culture of the ear** (on this, see the next essay).

This is a fact of great consequence and should affect our entire understanding of Judaism. **The existence of the verb *lishmo'a* and the absence of the verb *letzayet* tells us that biblical Israel, despite its intense focus on divine commandments, is not a faith that values blind, unthinking, unquestioning obedience.** Though there were those who disagreed, for the most part Jews understood the commands as more, and other, than the arbitrary will of God. To the contrary, they were given by God for our benefit, not His.

There is a reason for the commands. In some cases they are rooted in the fact that God created the universe and the laws that govern it; therefore we must respect the integrity of nature. In other cases they are grounded in history. Our ancestors were slaves in Egypt. They knew from indelible personal experience what it is to live in an unjust, tyrannical

regime. Therefore a society based on Torah must be just, compassionate, generous. Slaves must rest one day in seven. One year in seven, debts must be cancelled. The landless poor should not go without food at harvest time—and so on.

The God of revelation is also the God of creation and redemption. Therefore when God commands us to do certain things and refrain from others, **it is not because His will is arbitrary but because He cares for the integrity of the world as His work (creation), and for the dignity of the human person as His image (redemption).** There is a profound congruence between the commandments and the laws that govern nature and history. **An arbitrary ruler demands blind obedience. God is not an arbitrary ruler** (Avoda Zara 3a); therefore He does not demand blind obedience. Instead, He wishes us as far as possible to understand why He has commanded what He has commanded.

Hence the emphasis, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, on children asking questions. **In an authoritarian culture, questions are discouraged:** “Theirs (is) not to reason why/Theirs (is) but to do and die,” as Tennyson put it.⁽¹⁾ Had this been the case in Judaism, the Torah would have had a verb that meant the same as *letzayet*, not one with the meanings of *shema*.

On Passover the least mature child, not the most, is “one who does not know how to ask.” Indeed we are commanded to teach him or her to ask. Even the verb three lines after “Hear O Israel”—usually translated as “You shall teach these things diligently to your children”—means, according to Rashi, **“You shall sharpen your children”—meaning, teach them the full depth of their meaning, rather than superficially** (Rashi to Deut. 6:7).

To be sure—this should go without saying—**obedience to the commandments should never be conditional on understanding them.** It is a contradiction in terms to say that one who does not understand or agree with a law is free to break it. Anyone who thinks this has not understood what a law is. But ours is certainly a searching, questioning, rational, intellectual faith, one that calls for the full exercise of the mind.

2. Avot 5:21

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah³ says: *If there is no Torah, there is no worldly occupation; if there is no worldly occupation, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God; if there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. If there is no knowledge, there is no understanding; if there is no understanding, there is no knowledge ...*

a. R' Yonah⁴ explains: **Fear of God must precede the acquisition of**

3 R' Elazar ben Azariah (c. 70-135 CE) was a tenth-generation descendant of Ezra the Scribe and a third-generation Tanna. He served temporarily as nasi of the Sanhedrin at Yavne after the deposition of Rabban Gamliel II. When the latter was restored to his position, ben Azariah became vice president of the council.

4 Rabbi Yonah was an Amora (*Expounder*) of the 4th-generation (320-350 CE).

wisdom. If one does not first imbue his conduct with a fear of God, he will find the Divine wisdom despicable and reject it.

b. Psalm 111:10 (cf. Prov 1:7; 9:10)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom ...

c. Berachot 13a

R. JOSHUA B. KORHAH SAID: WHY WAS THE SECTION OF 'HEAR' PLACED BEFORE THAT OF 'AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS'? SO THAT ONE SHOULD FIRST ACCEPT UPON HIMSELF **THE YOKE OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**⁽¹⁹⁾ AND THEN TAKE UPON HIMSELF **THE YOKE OF THE COMMANDMENTS**.⁽²⁰⁾

(19) By proclaiming the unity of God.

(20) By saying the words, if ye shall diligently hearken to all My commandments.

Shema Yisrael does not mean "Hear, O Israel." It means something like: "Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of God your most focused attention. Strive to understand. Engage all your faculties, intellectual and emotional. Make His will your own. For what He commands you to do is not irrational or arbitrary but for your welfare, the welfare of your people, and ultimately for the benefit of all humanity."

In Judaism faith is a form of listening—to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says time and again in Deuteronomy: **Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen.** Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself—and then you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In God's unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown.

(1) Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," found in *The Charge of the Light Brigade and Other Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1992), 52.

3. Exodus 19:5

⁵Now if you **obey me fully** (שְׂמַעְתָּ תִּשְׁמָעוּ [sha-moa tish-m'u]) and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine ...

4. 1Samuel 15:22

²²But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in **obeying** (שָׁמַעַתָּ [sha-moa]) the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

5. Matthew 8:27

²⁷The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves **obey** (ὕπακούω [hupakouo]) him!"

a. *hupakouo*—to listen, to harken, of one who on the knock at the door comes to listen who it is, the duty of a porter, to harken to a command, to obey, be obedient to, submit to.

b. גַּם הַרוּחוֹת וְהַיָּם אֵלָיו יִשְׁמָעוּן: (gam ha-ru-chot v'ha-yam yish-ma-un) lit., "also the winds and the seas to him listen (or respond in action)."

6. Mark 1:27

²⁷The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they **obey** him."

a. *hupakouo*—to listen, to harken ... submit to.

b. וְהֵנָּה שֹׁמְעוֹת לוֹ (v'hei-na shom-ot lo) lit., "and they listen or respond in action to him."

7. Luke 11:28

²⁸He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and **obey** it."

a. φυλάσσω (phulasso)—to guard, watch, guard, keep, maintain, observe, preserve.

b. בֵּי־אַשְׁרֵי הַשְּׁמָעִים וְהַשְּׁמָרִים אֶת דְּבַר הָאֱלֹהִים: (ki ashrei ha-shom-im v'ha-shom-rim et d'var ha-elohim) lit., "for blessed are those who hear and **keep** the word of God."

1) שָׁמַר (shamar)—keep, guard, observe, give heed

a. Genesis 37:10-11

¹⁰When (Joseph) told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹His brothers were jealous of him, but his father **kept** the matter in mind.

b. Deuteronomy 12:28 (NAS)

²⁸"Be **careful** (sh'mor) to **listen** (v'sha-ma-ta) to all these words which I command you, in order that it may be well with you and your sons after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.

c. 1Kings 8:22-26

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward

heaven ²³and said: "LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who **keep** (*sho-mer*) your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. ²⁴You have **kept** (*sha-mar-ta*) your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it-- as it is today. ²⁵"Now LORD, the God of Israel, **keep** (*sha-mor*) for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done.' ²⁶And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.