

PARASHAT VA'ETCHANAN

Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11

Parashat Va'etchanan continues Moses' speeches to the Israelites just before his death. He pleads with God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, but he is refused. He warns the people against falling into idolatry; reminds them to observe all the commandments given to them; and recalls their awesome experience at Mount Horeb, where they received the Ten Commandments. Moses also sets aside Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan as refuge cities for those who commit unintentional homicide. Proclaiming that God made a covenant with the Israelites at Mount Horeb, Moses recites the Ten Commandments. The people are overwhelmed and ask Moses to recite the rest of the commandments, promising to obey them. Afterwards, Moses tells them, "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One. You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Warning them against repeating their rebelliousness at Massah, Moses tells them, "Do what is right and good in the sight of *Adonai*, that it may go well with you. . . ." Finally, Moses informs the Israelites that they are not to spare the people who occupy their land nor intermarry with them. The Israelites are God's chosen and treasured people who will be loved by God if they remain loyal to God's covenant and commandments.

OUR TARGUM

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Moses continues his last speeches to the Israelites while they are camped in a valley near Beth-peor on the east side

of the Jordan River. He tells of pleading with God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel and of his disappointment at being refused. God instructs Moses to view the land from Pisgah, a high place on the east side of the Jordan River, and to advise Joshua about conquering the land.

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Moses tells the Israelites that God has given them laws and commandments by which to live when they enter the Land of Israel. They are to observe them faithfully and to teach them to their children. That will prove that they are a “wise and discerning people . . . a great nation.”

He reminds the people of the time they stood with him at Mount Horeb (Sinai). The mountain was “ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with the densest clouds,” and God “commanded you to observe the Ten Commandments” and avoid making or worshiping idols. Moses warns them that failure to observe God’s commandments will result in their being driven from their land and scattered among the nations. If they search for God with their hearts and souls, God will not fail them or forsake the covenant made with their ancestors.

Moses speaks of the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people. God spoke to them out of the fire at Mount Horeb, liberated them from bondage, and gave them the Land of Israel. “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that *Adonai* alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Observe God’s laws and commandments . . . that you may long remain in the land that *Adonai* your God is giving you for all time.”

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Moses sets aside three cities—Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan—as refuge places where those who have committed unintentional homicide may flee for justice.

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Moses continues by declaring that “God made a covenant with us at Horeb . . . out of the fire.” He then repeats God’s words to the people, the Ten Commandments: (1) I *Adonai* am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (2) You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image. . . . (3) You shall not swear falsely by the name of *Adonai*. . . . (4) Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. . . . (5) Honor your father and your mother. . . . (6) You shall not murder. (7) You shall not commit adultery.



(8) You shall not steal. (9) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (10) You shall not covet.

Recalling the revelation at Mount Horeb, Moses reminds the people of their fear of the fire and their request that he receive the Ten Commandments for them. He agreed and warned them to follow God’s commandments. He told them, “Do not turn aside to the right or to the left; follow only the path that God has given you.”

Moses then instructs them: “Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One. You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these commandments. . . . Impress them upon your children. . . . Recite them when you are at home and when you are away. . . . Bind them between your eyes . . . inscribe them on the doorposts of your house.”

To parents he adds, “When your child asks, ‘What is the meaning of these laws and commandments?’ explain: ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God freed us . . . that we might be given the land promised to our ancestors. We are to observe these commandments for our survival.’”

· 5 ·

Moses speaks of the Israelites entering the Land of Israel and dislodging the Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. He cautions the Israelites against inter-

marriage with these foreign people, reminding them that "God chose you to be a treasured people. . . ." Those who observe the commandments will be rewarded and those who do not will suffer destruction.

THEMES

Parashat Va'etchanan contains two important themes:

1. Deciphering the meaning of the *Shema*.
2. Loving God.

PEREK ALEF: *Can We Decipher the Meaning of the Shema?*

Of the 4,875 verses in the Torah, one stands out as the code of faith for Jews. Since the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, the words *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One," have been recited twice daily by pious Jews. They are among the first words taught to a young child and the last words recited at the time of death. Jewish martyrs have proudly pronounced them against forces of tyranny, and, through the centuries, they have constituted the most universally known Hebrew phrase in Jewish tradition.



Hertz

In evaluating the words of the *Shema*, Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, once the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, writes: "Throughout the entire realm of literature . . . there is probably no utterance to be found that can be compared in its intellectual and spiritual force, or in the influence it exerted upon the whole thinking and feeling of civilized humanity, than the six words that have become the battle cry of the Jewish people for more than twenty-five centuries." (*Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, Bloch Publishing Co., 1948, p. 269)

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, author of *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, characterizes the *Shema* as "a precious gem . . . a diamond set into a

crown of faith and proven true and enduring in human history." (pp. 1369–1370)

Despite these testimonials to the importance of the *Shema*, commentators of Torah raise questions about its meaning. And, as with other portions of Torah, they differ in their interpretations.

Rabbi Pinchas ben Hama claims that the Israelites first said the *Shema* as they were standing at Sinai; the early rabbis teach that it is an affirmation of the Jewish people's partnership with God. Other rabbis argue that the phrase "*Adonai* our God" means "God is our Source." In other words, human beings derive from God and are made "in the image of God." (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2:31, 35)



Rashi

Rashi offers a different approach. Living in eleventh-century France, in a world of conflicting faiths, he hopes that in time human thought will evolve to the point where all human beings embrace one notion of God and achieve peace. For him the words "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* our God, *Adonai* is One" translate into "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai*, whom we recognize as our God, will one day be accepted by all people as One, and their belief in one God will unite us as one human family."

In this view, Rashi reflects the perspective of the *Alenu* prayer recited at the conclusion of Jewish worship services. In the words of Deu-