

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN--SHABBAT NACHAMU

August 1, 2020 – 11 Av 5780

Annual: Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11 (Hertz p. 755)

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:1 – 26 (Hertz p. 776)

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Torah Portion Summary

Moshe continues his review of the history of the wilderness years, describing how he pleaded with God to be allowed to enter the land and how God rejected his plea. Moshe then issues to the Israelites the first of several exhortations found in this parsha. This one is about the importance of obeying God's commandments, and particularly emphasizes the prohibition of idolatry. Moshe sets aside three cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan. If someone commits manslaughter, he could flee to one of these cities and be safe from the relatives of the person he unwittingly killed. Moshe again exhorts the people to study and observe all of God's laws and rules. He reminds them of the revelation at Sinai and reviews the Ten Statements. He recalls their reaction to hearing the voice of God and encourages them to retain that feeling of reverence so that they may thrive in the land. Next, he teaches the first paragraph of the Shema. He tells the people yet again that they must keep God's commandments and shun idolatry. They are to teach their children about the covenant – that God brought Israel out of Egypt and into the land so that they might worship God and keep His commandments. Finally, Moshe warns the people against intermarriage, pointing out the danger that it might lead to idolatry.

I. Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (Devarim 6:4)

1. Alternate translations:
 - a. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Hertz Chumash)
 - b. Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our God, Hashem is the One and Only. (Artscroll Stone Chumash)
 - c. Hearken O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One! (Schocken, Everett Fox translation)
 - d. Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God. YHWH is one. (Commentary on the Torah, Richard Friedman translation)
2. The precise meaning of the Shema is uncertain. The four Hebrew words "YHVH Eloheinu, YHVH echad" literally mean "YHVH our God YHVH one." Since Hebrew does not have a present-tense verb meaning "is" to link subject and predicate, the link must be supplied by the listener or reader. Where to do so depends on context and sometimes is uncertain. Grammatically, "YHVH our God YHVH one" could be rendered in several ways such as (1) "YHVH is our God, YHVH alone"; (2) "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (literally "YHVH our God, YHVH is one"); (3) "YHVH our God is one YHVH." (Dr. Jeffrey Tigay, "The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy," Excursus 10)
3. Another interpretation: "The Lord, our God," over us (the children of Israel); "the Lord is one," over all the creatures of the world. "The Lord, our God" in this world; "the Lord is one," in the world to come, as it is said, "The Lord shall be king over all the earth. In that day shall the Lord be one and His name one." ([Zechariah 14:9] Sifrei, Piska 31)
4. "The Lord is our God" The Lord alone is our God, there is no other kind of divinity that is a partner to Him... "The Lord alone" He alone, and Him we will serve without resorting to any man-made intermediary such as charms, etc. (Rashbam--Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080-1158, France, Rashi's grandson)

5. "The Lord" Who gives existence and is the Creator. "Our God" He is the Chosen One of all who are separated (from matter), and Him (alone), not through any intermediary... "The Lord alone" Now, being that He granted existence from total nothingness, it is understood that there does not exist any kind similar to Him and that He is separated in kind from all that exists in the world... (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
6. The rabbis say: God said to Israel: My children, all that I have created I have created in pairs; heaven and earth are a pair; the sun and the moon are a pair; Adam and Eve are a pair; this world and the world to come are a pair; but My glory is one, and unique in the world. (Devarim Rabbah 2:31)
7. We perceive God in many ways – He is kind, angry, merciful, wise, judgmental – and these apparently contradictory manifestations convinced some ancient and medieval philosophers that there must be many gods, one of mercy, one of judgment, and so on. But the Torah says that Hashem is the One and Only – there is an inner harmony for all that He does, though human intelligence cannot comprehend what it is. This, too, will be understood at the End of Days, when God's ways are illuminated. (Rabbi Nossan Scherman, "The Stone Edition Chumash," Artscroll)

Sparks for Discussion

This verse is at once perhaps the best known in the Torah and one of the most difficult to translate and interpret. How do you usually translate it? Which of the alternate translations or explanations to you find appealing? Do you find any of them unsettling? What exactly do you mean when you say Shema?

II. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you and that you may be able to possess the good land that the Lord your God promised on oath to your fathers. (Devarim 6:18)

1. This implies a compromise beyond the letter of the law. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. Our rabbis have a beautiful midrash on this verse. They have said: "[what is right and good] refers to a compromise and going beyond the requirement of the letter of the law." The intent of this is as follows: At first he [Moshe] stated that you are to keep His statutes and His testimonies which He commanded you, and now he is stating that even where He has not commanded you, give thought, as well, to do what is good and right in His eyes, for He loves the good and the right. Now this is a great principle, for it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man's conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries. But since He mentioned many of them – such as, You shall not go about as a talebearer, You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge, Do not profit by the blood of your fellow, You shall not insult the deaf, You shall rise before the aged and the like – he reverted to state in a general way that, in all matters, one should do what is good and right, including even compromise and going beyond the requirements of the law. (Ramban--Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain)
3. "For you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God" (12:28): That which is good in the sight of heaven and right in the sight of man; so taught Rabbi Akiva. ...Rabbi Ishmael, however, says "and right" – likewise in the sight of heaven. (Sifrei, Piska 79)

Sparks for Discussion

What does it mean to do what is "right and good in the sight of the Lord"? Does it mean, as Rashi and Ramban say, that in interpersonal matters we should not insist on our full legal rights but instead should compromise, following the spirit rather than the letter of the law? What else might it mean? The verse does not say, "Do what is right and good," but "Do what is right and good in the sight of God." What is the difference? How can we know what is right and good in the sight of God?