

פרשת ואתחנן

OVERVIEW

The review of the past continues. Moshe admonishes his brethren to maintain uncompromising loyalty to Him Who is the source of all their blessings, material and spiritual. He warns them of the dangers which threaten from without. He reminds them of the unforgettable day at the Sinai, the overwhelming voice, the flames and the thunder of the decalogue. Moshe ends his review with the plea never to tolerate a trace of idolatry and heathen cult in the Jewish land and he calls for total dedication to the unadulterated worship of G-d.

COMMENTARY

"And now, O Israel" (4:1)

Israel is expected to draw the consequences from its past experiences. The thread which runs through them all is the intimate bond between G-d and His people. Moshe never ceases to emphasize this bond that is the sole guarantee for the continued survival of this long-suffering people.

"Do not add anything to that which I am commanding you and do not subtract anything from it..." (4:2)

This verse contains numerous ramifications of a practical and also moral nature, First and foremost, no falsification or tampering with any aspect of the Torah must be tolerated. This applies, for example, to the manner of putting on the Tefillin or performing the act of Shechita. This apparent inflexibility must not be taken as a fossilized attitude that causes the atrophy of the human intellect. Every aspect of every divine law has its specific role and purpose. Any change, however well intentioned, deprives them of their intrinsic value and effect.

Maimonides interprets the verse as a warning, addressed to the religious authorities, to make a clear distinction between the original Torah law and any measure they might take to "safeguard and uphold" the law. While the decisions of the sages affecting the practice of the Torah law are as binding as the law itself, the Talmud and the later "Poskim" always stipulate "of the Torah" or "of the sages".

The most important condition prior to the faithful fulfillment of the law is the thorough familiarity with every facet of its concepts. "You shall live through them". Israel's very existence, its happiness and fulfillment, which are to blossom and flow from the Mitzvot are crystallized in these two words: **והי בהם**, the highest conception of having positively and truly lived.

"Neither add nor subtract" (4:2). Aside from the purely technical implications - such as adding one more thread to the four threads of the Tiztzit or adding a fifth plant to the Lulab - there is a deeper meaning to this admonition. The Revelation - as the Torah law itself - is an indivisible manifestation. To alter it in any fashion is to destroy it. Every attempt of a change in the law is by definition an expression of doubt as to the validity of its origin and application. Thus both the spirit and the form of the law require equal respect. For it does not need much effort to dethrone G-d in the minds of men.

"See, I have taught your statutes and social ordinances.... to practice them in the midst of the land to which you are coming to take possession of" (4:5). This verse analyzes the unique character of Israel's law as opposed to that of other laws. You, the sons of Israel, are the only nation to receive its law prior to entering the promised land. Thus its law did not serve as a means to complement and perfect its individual

structure, but became its purpose and its goal. Every nation owes its existence to its common land, and the laws it creates are to administer the country. Israel became a nation through the Torah given to it in the desert, the most inhospitable of all places, as a symbol of the timelessness of Torah that is bound neither to place nor circumstance.

This law will occupy your thinking and feeling during every moment of your existence. However, you must never go to the excess of inflicting pain and deprivation on yourself, for "you should take heed exceedingly for (the sake of) your souls" (4:15), meaning that we must take care of our health and wellbeing.

"As G-d's presence fills the universe, so the soul fills the body. As G-d sees all and cannot be seen, so the soul observes all and cannot be observed. As G-d sustains the world, so the soul sustains the body. As G-d is unattainable, so the soul is unattainable. As G-d is pure, so the soul is pure. Let him (man) who is the bearer of the soul and possessor of these five attributes, pay homage to Him Who possesses these same five attributes."

Thus the Midrash. It is the most apt description of the bond between G-d and the human being. Nothing can destroy it.

Moshe's testament must be the daily guide for every conscientious member of the Jewish people. It enjoins and encourages us to strive ever upward in our Torah studies and our practicing Jewish lives. In times of uncertainty and acute danger it gives us the courage and inner firmness we need to surmount all obstacles.

G-d did not choose our people as His own because of the special Jewish character or its numerical significance. "For you are a holy people to G-d..... G-d has chosen you to be a people belonging exclusively to Him...." (7:6). Let us remember that "holy" in this context means

total devotion to the realization of the G-d willed goals. "Holy", "kadosh" is related to its exact opposite: "kadesh", immoral. For us there is no alternative. We are not made for the middle road. Either we are worthy of our task and then we are summoned to attain the summit, or we are found unworthy of the challenge and are cast in the depths of the sea. "Kadosh" or "Kadesh" - this is the choice before every one of us. Let us "choose life for our well-being and that of our children and children's children".

"And you will have grown old in the land...."
(4:25)

With remarkable foresight Moshe cautions his people of the danger of premature "aging" in the Jewish land. After two or three generations its citizens will consider themselves old-established owners of the land and absolute masters of their own fate. They will have forgotten the time when they, without soil or homeland, owed their survival solely to the ongoing care and protection of G-d. This very real danger of bourgeois attitudes, the loss of youthful vigor and of the enthusiasm that led them to G-d, seems to Moshe to be the real enemy. (This may also be the reason why the daily sacrifices in the temple consisted of very young animals, symbols of a youthful and vigorous nation).

"You have been made to know by sight...."
(4:35)

The entire Jewish world view is enshrined in this one lapidary verse: our awareness of G-d is based not on belief but on knowledge. This knowledge is not founded on conclusions derived from a logical association of ideas but is based on the certainty of personal direct experience presented to the entire nation at one time. From our eventful past there emerges the one overwhelming visual evidence to know that G-d is the sole true G-d: our "seeing" is the basis for our "knowing".

Repetition of the Decalogue

Here there are certain variations from the earlier text of the ten commandments in Shemot (Ch. 20). Thus the Sabbath law which is introduced here with the imperative "keep the Sabbath", begins in Shemot with the words "remember the Sabbath". You are to uphold the discipline and rules of the Sabbath and deepen your understanding of its vital significance for our people. In other words: it is not enough to keep the Sabbath in a routine manner; it must be experienced as a day of complete regeneration of one's Jewish personality.

"Hear, O Israel" (6:4)

The introductory sentence of the most prominent statement of our Jewish thinking contains two capital letters: Ayin and dalet. Together they form the word "eyd" (עד) – "witness". Turned around the letters become "da" (דא) – a "know, be aware". Every Jew who recites the Sh'ma realizes that it is the leitmotif of his life. In ringing words of majestic simplicity it carves on his conscience the timeless mission of the Jew: through a life dedicated to the wholehearted service of G-d he becomes a true witness to the Presence of a free G-d Who bestows upon free man the ability to recognize him and serve Him.

The Sh'ma is the declaration of the Jewish awareness of G-d's uniqueness that also serves to unite all aspects of our personality. All our faculties, feelings and possessions are devoted to the same purpose: to "love" G-d, to serve Him and to make us worthy of His nearness. "These words that I command you today shall remain engraved in your heart. You shall impress them sharply upon your children

and speak of them, when you dwell in your house and when you walk on the way, when you lay down and when you get up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be a thought-provoking ornament for your head, between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house....." (6: 6-9). In short, every moment of our existence, every undertaking, every thought shall be marked by the indelible stamp of the divine presence. Then you will become a nation of priests, a beacon of light and hope unto the nations of the world.

Mixed marriages (7:3)

The Jewish law is strictly opposed to any move that may endanger the purity of the Jewish family. Not only is marriage between Jew and gentile strictly prohibited, but there are categories of persons of Jewish origin who are ineligible for marriage to a Jewish partner (such as prostitutes, divorcees to a Kohen, a. o.). Above all it is the Jewish home that provides the soil on which the young generation thrives. For the seed is sown in vain if the soil lacks the vital nourishment. Conversion requires utmost caution and a thorough investigation as to the true motives of the applicant. If there is no evidence of ulterior motives and after exhaustive preparation, conversion may be performed under strict rabbinical auspices.

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