



The Torah in One Word? “Ve’Ahavta”!

Dear Friends,

Parashat Va’Etchanan is a giant parasha. One could say that it contains the essence of the entire Torah. Even the Ten Commandments appear in it (in their later version, the first having appeared in Parashat Yitro, 40 years earlier, at Mount Sinai). It also includes the “Sh’ma”, that eternal phrase of Am Yisrael, followed by my favorite... “VeAhavta”.

But beyond the Ten Commandments, the Sh’ma and VeAhavta, the parasha also contains the essence of Israelite faith, the faith that gave Am Yisrael the title “the Chosen People” (an idea which also appears in the parasha), and a faith that changed the course of human discourse.

Important note: The idea of being a chosen people does not hint or suggest that we are any better or nicer. Smarter? Perhaps. More about this later.

It is also important to remember that the majority of Am Yisrael in the past and in the present does not truly grasp - not to mention practice - the deep dictum which is at the heart of this week’s parasha. Not the ultra-orthodox, not the religious, and not the secular. Those who do are few and far between, and cannot be identified (in my humble opinion) by the style of their head covering (and no, I am not one of those few, although I wish I were).

This parasha suggests that nothing external has power of its own, and therefore there is nothing that governs our lives - not money, not health, not the love of someone dear to us. Nothing!

The “God particle” - as it is nicknamed by the scientists at work near Geneva, Switzerland, at CERN - and not anything else, is the source of energy, vitality, and existence. Indeed, there is no other source.

This understanding was first introduced to the world by Avraham, the first Hebrew. “Hebrew” (Ivri) means, “he crossed over”, for he “crossed” the great river from the bank of human stupidity (pardon the directness) - the source of all human suffering and misery, enslavement and confusion (after all, he came from Bavel, or babble - confusion in Hebrew) - over to the other bank, that of total freedom, the Promised Land, the Land of Milk and Honey. Do not confuse geographic location with this metaphorical one! There is no more wisdom or less stupidity in the State of Israel than in any other place (in case you thought otherwise).

Avraham's great enlightenment dimmed over the years, and his descendants crossed back, albeit over a different river. But instead of returning back when the drought ended, they settled there, sinking into the fertile banks of the Nile, the land of materialism and abundance. Egypt is the archetype of all of human confusion and pain. Egypt symbolizes the belief in the eternity of corporeality and its idolatrous power.

This is not a drasha against materialism. God forbid. "If there is no flour (wordly occupation) there is no Torah", as it says in the Mishna. Material abundance is a great blessing. The confusion is that if you peel off the layers of moralistic training ("money isn't everything, you know"), you will find that deep inside, we all believe in the tremendous power of money, material wealth in general, and all external forces.

It is very difficult to extract oneself from such thinking. The pseudo abundance symbolized by Ur Kasdim, Avraham's birthplace, and by Egypt, the dwelling place of his descendents, is so alluring.

Unlike classic Christianity which hallowed poverty, monasticism, and asceticism, we are not being asked here to relinquish any of life's pleasures. On the contrary. Hallowing poverty is like hallowing money! Both sanctify the other side of the materialist coin.

Judaism has always praised abundance. The danger is in misunderstanding its expression. Abundance is not expressed in money, material goods, or any THING, for that matter. THINGS are just an external manifestation; perhaps a sweet one, but external nonetheless, and therefore never the essence.

And so we arrive at Parashat VaEtchanan, where Moshe pleads before God: **"Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country..."** (D'varim 3:25) God's response to him (in my words): "Be quiet! Haven't you understood anything? The good land is not beyond any river, it is in your consciousness. It resides within you - within everything, for that matter. Only within can it be found."

It is this sublime lesson that Moshe is teaching Bnei Yisrael. And he reminds the descendants of the freed slaves that freedom is not to be found in anything material. It is only to be found in the deep understanding that "the God particle", and only it, is the source of life, of all experiences, and all of reality. Any other understanding is enslavement: hence the first commandment, **"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage** [from the place of enslavement and confusion, enslavement to everyTHING that does not truly have any power]. **You will have no other gods before Me.**" Period. Not the gods of money, of etiquette, of health, fitness or diets, not the gods of degrees and careers; not even the gods of romance, family, and children.

And what about love? Yes, the God of love is real. But it's a different kind of love. Certainly not platonic. It can even be erotic (read the Song of Songs!). It is a love for the core essence upon which reality rests, the God particle: **"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might"** (D'varim 6:5). This is the love of the Divine spark which exists in everything - in the inanimate, in plants, animals, and people - all people. Oh, and in money and material goods too. This spark is the source of abundance. Not the money

itself and not the material wealth. Not the banknote, the coin, the bitcoin, the stocks, the real estate. Only the particle of God constitutes, sustains, upholds, and gives life to everything that is

This particle of the Divine cannot be seen in the normal sense of the word. One can only know that it exists, and that nothing could exist without it.

And it can be loved.

Actually, it should be loved! Because it is Life itself. Everything else is just a veneer. It may be more attractive or sparkling, it may be less, but when one loves the Divine particle within everything - the particle that is present and gives life to it all - even the veneer appears more beautiful.

A person who learns how to love the Divine spark is brought out of Egypt, on the wings of eagles, directly to the Promised Land. No need for forty years of wandering, no passport control. Directly home.

“Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God,” says Isaiah the prophet in this week’s haftorah, which is always read after Tisha B’Av. Sometimes there must be a terrible destruction of the external in order to reveal the Divine spark which hides deep within the ruins.

One of the great and unique philosophers who understood the ancient Israelite secret was - surprisingly - Spinoza, the great “heretic” whom the religious establishment - both Jewish and Christian - loathed. Spinoza, who is called the “father of secularism”, was the one who saw the Divine in all of creation, and proved its existence in his great treatise, “Ethics.” Spinoza rose from the ashes of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition, and pointed to the source of life for all to see. But, as usual, no one wanted to listen, let alone see. They were afraid, just as they were afraid of Avraham our forefather; just as today’s establishment fears those who point out the source of life. Establishments always fear for their organizations, religions and political parties. Lest everyone sees that they are all nothing but external veneers.

But there is nothing to fear, because every organization, religion, and party - as well as every single human being - is made up of this Divine particle, which is its essence, its source of life, and its sustenance.

That particle cannot be seen, but when it is understood, it is impossible not to love.

Ve'Ahavta!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha