

Va'etchanan

וַאֲתַחֲנֶן "I pleaded"

Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11

Torah Together



As Moses continues his last words to the Israelites, this *Torah* portion contains the Hebrew *Shema*, the important statement of monotheism and the declaration of God's supremacy. Moses also restates the Ten Commandments as a reminder of the covenant that the Israelites entered into with God. God, through Moses, continues to encourage the Israelites to be obedient and keep His commands.

1. Moses Forbidden to Cross the Jordan - 3:23-29

a) What request did Moses make of God in this passage? What was God's response? Why did God respond this way? What did God allow Moses to do?

Moses requested that God allow him to cross over the Jordan and see the land of Israel. God said, "No," based on Moses' actions at Meribah (Numbers 20:1-13). However, Moses was allowed to go up on Mount Pisgah and view the land from there.

b) Who did Moses blame for this situation? Do you think this was fair?

Moses blamed the Israelites for his not being allowed to enter the land. Although it was his actions that provoked God, it seems that Moses blamed the people for making him angry so that he disobeyed God. He has a point! (But it is God who sees the heart.)

2. Obedience Commanded - 4:1-14

a) In verses 1 and 2, what specifically does Moses command the Israelites to do? What will the Israelites gain by following God's command?

The Israelites were to follow the commands, decrees, and laws Moses gave them, neither adding to them nor subtracting from them. If they were obedient, then they would be able to go in and take possession of the land of Israel.

b) What incident do you think Moses is referring to in verses 3 and 4?

The incident referred to is the episode when the Moabite women seduced the men of Israel into sexual immorality and Baal worship (Numbers 25). At that time, 24,000 Israelite men died in the plague caused by God's anger.

Scripture Link:

Numbers 20:1-13 records the event that led to Moses being denied the privilege of leading the Israelites into the land of Israel. Note that *Pisgah* is another name for Mount Nebo.

Scripture Link:

Numbers 25 tells the story of how Balak and the Moabites led the Israelites into the worship of their pagan god, Baal of Peor. This was a good example of why it is important to be obedient to God's commands.

c) In verses 5 - 8, Moses gives the Israelites another reason for following the commands of God. What is this reason?

By observing God's laws, other nations will see the nature of the true God and will esteem Israel as a "wise and understanding people." Israel will be respected among the nations and God's righteousness will be promoted.

d) What event does Moses ask the people to remember in verses 9 - 14? What did the Israelites do when they heard God's voice at Mount Sinai?

Moses is referring to the handing down of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb). At that time, the people were afraid to hear God's words and asked Moses to speak with God and tell them what He said. They asked Moses to be an intermediary between God and themselves. They also promised to obey God's commands; they entered into covenant with Him.

3. Idolatry Forbidden - 4:15-31

a) What specific sin does Moses address in this passage? What things might the Israelites do in committing this sin? Why do you think this was of such importance to Moses?

Israel is warned against idolatry. This would include making idols of any kind (images of humans or animals) or the worship of the heavenly bodies (astrology). This is the second commandment and is most offensive to God.

b) In light of the history of Israel, verses 25 - 31 seem very prophetic. Can you describe how some of these things have come to pass? Do you think more is still to come?

The book of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles all detail the many times that Israel engaged in idolatry. As punishment, God allowed them to be destroyed and scattered among the peoples on more than one occasion. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered and dispersed by the Assyrians between 750 and 720 bc, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 bc and the reconstituted nation of Judah was conquered and dispersed by the Romans in 70 ad.

4. YHWH is God - 4:32-40

In this passage, Moses asks the Israelites to consider the things God has done for them. What are some of these things? What conclusion does Moses draw from these things? Based on this, what then does Moses encourage the people to do in verses 39 - 40?

God spoke directly to the Israelites and they lived to tell about it. God chose the Israelites from among all nations. God miraculously brought them out of Egypt. The Israelites were shown these things that they might believe that YHWH is God and is able to do what He has promised. Therefore, the Israelites should keep His commands that they may prosper in the land.

Scripture Link:

Moses asks that the Israelites remember when they were at the foot of Mt. Sinai, to receive the Ten Commandments. This dramatic scene is described in **Exodus 19 and 20**. Note that Mt. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai.

As history has shown, the Israelites did indeed engage in idolatry. They were subsequently destroyed and scattered among the peoples. Only a few survived (today's Jews). Even today, however, if we seek God with all our heart and soul, and obey Him, then He will not abandon us and will fulfill His covenant.

5. Cities of Refuge - 4:41-43

What three cities did Moses name as cities of refuge east of the Jordan river? Where were these cities? What was the purpose of a city of refuge?

The three cities named east of the Jordan (there were also 3 west of the Jordan) were Bezer in Reuben's territory, Ramoth (in Gilead) in Gad's territory, and Golan (in Bashan) in Manasseh's territory. These were cities to which one could flee for safety after accidentally killing someone.

6. Introduction to the Law - 4:44-49

As Moses prepares to present the Ten Commandments to the Israelites a second time, he records exactly where they were, both physically and in history. Physically, where were the Israelites at this time? Exactly what land did they control? From whom was this land taken?

The Israelites were encamped just east of the Jordan river across from Jericho. They controlled the land from there north through the Golan Heights and east to the border with the Ammonites. They took this land from the Amorites (Og, king of Bashan, and Sihon, king of Heshbon).

7. The Ten Commandments - 5:1-33

a) As a preamble to reading the Ten Commandments, Moses reminds the Israelites of what fact in verses 2 - 3? Why is this important?

Moses reminds the Israelites that they themselves made a covenant with God. Covenants should not be broken, certainly not those made with God.

b) As you reread the Ten Commandments, has the Holy Spirit given you any new insight into either the commandments themselves or their Author?

Open discussion

c) Verses 22 - 30 is Moses' recollection of the events described in Exodus 20:18-21. What additional information is added here? What words does God speak to Moses that reveal His heart for the people of Israel? What does Moses exhort the people to do? Why?

The description in Deuteronomy adds detail. It also says that God thought that what the people said was good. It appears that God, knowing what would follow for the Israelites, wished that they would fear him and obey his commands for their own benefit. Moses exhorts the people to be obedient.

Scripture Link:

Numbers 35:6-28 tells about the "cities of refuge," their purpose and the names and location of three of them. The others and more about the "cities of refuge" can be found in **Joshua 20**.

Note the emotion in God's voice in verse 5:29 as He says about his people the Israelites: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" God, in his omniscience, knew that the Israelites would not keep his commandments and it truly saddened Him.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 are probably the most important verses in Judaism (and Christianity for that matter). The last four Hebrew words of verse 4 can be translated in several different ways: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one," or "The LORD our God the LORD is one God, or "The LORD our God, the LORD alone." Each conveys a slightly different meaning but each is equally true. Note that the words "The LORD" are translated from the name God gives himself in **Exodus 3:14**, יהוה or yod-hay-vav-hay.

Scripture Link:
Matthew 22:35-37 record *Yeshua's* words about the *Shema*. Notice how his focus is on the second part of the *Shema*, **Deuteronomy 6:5** and how he expands on them.

8. Love YHWH your God - 6:1-25

a) Moses gives several reasons why the Israelites should obey God's commands, decrees, and laws. What are they?

By obeying God's commands, the Israelites would enjoy long life in the land (vs 2) and things would go well for them and they would increase greatly.

"Love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Deuteronomy 6:5

b) Verses 4 and 5 are the famous *Shema*. What important attribute of God is stated in verse 4? What did *Yeshua* say about verse 5?

The last two words in verse 4 in Hebrew are Adonai Echad or YHWH Echad, which means "God is one" or "God alone." This is a strong and famous statement of monotheism: There are no other gods besides YHWH. Yeshua said that verse 5 is "the greatest commandment." If we obey this commandment, then the others would come naturally.

c) Other than to obey them, what responsibilities do we have concerning God's commandments? What is the result of doing this?

These commandments are to be written on our hearts. We are commanded to teach them to our children, talk about them, bind them on our hands and foreheads, and use them to remember what God has done for us. If we do this, then God will prosper us.

d) What Jewish traditions have come from the commands in verses 8 and 9?

Jewish phylacteries (telfillin in Hebrew) are the result of verse 8 ("tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads."). The mezuzah is how the Jews "write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

9. Driving out the Nations - 7:1-11

a) What seven nations did God say that the Israelites would drive out of the land of Israel? What do you know about any of these nations? Were they larger or smaller than Israel?

The nations that the Israelites were to drive out were the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Some of the Amorites were already defeated when the Israelites defeated Og, king of Bashan, and Sihon, king of Heshbon. The Jebusites were the inhabitants of what later became Jerusalem. (Additional research can be done here.) Verse 1 states that all seven of these nations were "larger and stronger" than the Israelites.

b) After God had “delivered them over to” the Israelites, what was to be done with these nations? Specifically why were the Israelites forbidden to intermarry with them? What was to be done with the various religious items left by these nations?

The Israelites were to “destroy them totally.” Intermarriage was forbidden because the pagan women would turn the hearts of the sons of Israel away from YHWH, causing them to worship other gods. All religious altars, sacred stones, and other such items were to be torn down and smashed and idols were to be burned. No vestiges of pagan worship were to be allowed to remain.

c) According to verses 7 - 11, why did God choose the Israelites to be his “treasured possession”? Based on this, what did Moses exhort the Israelites to do?

God chose Israel to be his “treasured possession” as an act of his free will. It was not because of anything that they had done or were worthy of. God loved them and remembered his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Given this fact, the Israelites were admonished to keep their end of their covenant with God and obey his commands.

It can be reassuring to note why God chose to love and to bless the Israelites. Verses 7 and 8 make it clear that God chose the Israelites to honor His promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. For us as well, God chose to love us not based on anything inherently good about us, but just as an act of His free will.

Digging deeper

1. In the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), we are commanded to “love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Is this an emotional response that we feel or is it a conscious act on our part? What’s the difference? Does this reveal anything to you about God’s character?

It appears from this statement that love is an act of our will, not an emotion we feel (although this is certainly also the case). So when we are commanded to love God, it is to be an act of our will: we choose to hold Him above all else in our lives, caring more about His well-being (so to speak) and His desires than our own. Thus love is a choice, much as God chose to love Israel and to love us.

2. According to Deuteronomy 7:1-2, after the Israelites defeated the current occupants of the land of Israel, they were to totally destroy them, and “show them no mercy.” Does this seem consistent with God’s character to you? Why do you think a loving God might act in this way?

Because of his omniscience, God knows the future of each individual person. This does not mean that they do not have free will - God just knows beforehand what choices they will make. Thus, he knows the future of seemingly innocent people born into a godless society. It may be that an early death is indeed the act of a merciful and loving God. In any case, as finite creatures of God’s creation, there are things about him we cannot know. But we can trust that He is both a just and righteous God, as well as a loving and merciful God, and his actions are true and good.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Isaiah 40:1-26

Brit Hadashah : Matthew 4:1-11; 22:33-40; Mark 12:28-34;

Luke 4:1-13; 10:25-37; Acts 13:13-43;

Romans 3:27-31; I Timothy 2:4-6; James 2:14-26