

D'var Torah
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Parashah Va'Etchanan
Deuteronomy 5:1 - 6:25
16 Av 5778 · July 28, 2018
Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Shalom Aleichem. Gut Shabbos.

AhSeer Todah HaYom. Today, I am grateful.

First, I want to thank Rabbi Weinblatt for giving me this honor. I want to also thank Cantor Kapell for helping me to elevate my prayer with such beautiful music. And I want to say again, as I always do, that it is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence.

There is so much to work with in this parashah, I hardly know where to begin. The ready availability of material is both a blessing and a curse. Look at this Parashah. Holy Moses! We have Moses. We have the Ten Commandments. We have the Sh'ma. We have the Ve'ahavta. We even have references to Pesach. I struggled with how to unpack this and then I decided to cut down my d'var Torah to about an hour to make it easier to understand.

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל Vayikra Moshe el kol Yisrael (and Moses called to all of Israel) and told them to study and observe the laws that he proclaimed to them. That's how the parashah starts in Deut. 5:1. Then Moses recites the Ten Commandments for all of Israel. In verses 27 and 28 Moses tells Israel "go back to your tents" and follow the path I have given. To me, God is saying to Israel, through Moses: "go home, stick with me, we got this."

This parashah shows us a path of law and justice. We cannot just follow this path; we must teach this path. We must teach it to our children. We must put it on the doorpost of our homes. We must put them between our eyes. If God was talking to Moses today God would tell Moses to tweet, and to blog, and to Instagram. Follow God internally with your heart, with your soul, and with your might. Follow God externally by teaching and by posting. Follow this path and we inherit a land that we were promised and the riches that come along with that land. I see the use of the phrase land more metaphorically so what I think God is saying is not that we just get Eretz Israel, but that we also get a life filled with goodness and mercy.

The law we must follow is not just the blackletter law of the Torah. Look closely at Deut. 6:18. Here the Torah says “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...”

Va'aseetah Hayashar V'hatov B'eynai Adonai וַעֲשֵׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינַי יְהוָה

Do what it is right and good in the sight of Adonai.

This passage seems to come out of the blue. Before we get to this phrase, we are given a long list of very specific obligations: honor your parents, do not steal, have no other gods before Me, and more specific obligations. Yet here we have the entreaty to do right and to do good and the promise of reward if we take up this cause.

Going above and beyond the law is so important that Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses, our teacher) said it himself. Both Rashi and the Ramban understand this verse to denote a level of behavior that is *lifnim mishuras hadin*, above the letter of the law. Going above and beyond is the difference between *pshat* (text) and *drash* (commentary).

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Saks said that it is the “saints and heroes of the moral life [that] go beyond” what they are commanded to do.ⁱ Maimonides in *Laws of Character Traits* notes a wide array of human characteristics and wrote that the most desirable trait was what he called the “upright way” *Ha'derech Ha'Yesharah*.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe recognized the need for Jews to not limit themselves to the “strict letter of God’s law”, but to act in way that is “proper and good in the eyes of the Lord.” The Rebbe said that we must act in this way “without concern for reward”.ⁱⁱ Look closely here. God says in the text that if we do right and do good we are

rewarded, but the Rebbe says we should act without concern for reward. This makes perfect sense. Sometimes the best rewards that we receive are the ones we get when we are not looking for reward.

When I gave a d'var Torah three years ago, I talked about the power of prayer. I alluded to how prayer can sometimes be a one-way, but highly important street. I looked to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine and a renowned Torah scholar, who said prayer does not necessarily change God's mind, but prayer has the power to change us. Unlike the sometimes one-lane road of prayer, going above and beyond what we are supposed to do is a multilane highway. Maybe it's what Aretha meant when she sang of the "freeway of love."ⁱⁱⁱ Giving more than what's expected not only helps the recipient, it helps the giver. It is what allows us to reach what Lincoln called "the better angles of our nature." Giving of ourselves changes us.

Study after study has proven the power of giving to the giver. Some have called it a "helper's high." Dr. Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist and founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, said that "[w]hen we do things for ourselves, those experiences of positive emotions are more fleeting. They are dependent on external circumstances...When we engage in acts of generosity, those experiences of positive emotion may be more enduring and outlast the specific episode in which we are engaged."^{iv}

I said earlier, *AhSeer Todah HaYom*, today, I am grateful. Modern Hebrew doesn't have a single proper word for grateful. Rather, we use an expression that means, literally, bound by thanks – אָסִיר תּוֹדָה (*AhSeer Todah*).^v Think about that. Being bound in thanks. It is as if expressing gratitude is itself a commandment. Being grateful is not an option, it is an extension of doing what it is right and good in the sight of Adonai.

A study published last month in the journal, [Psychological Science](#) adds to the growing field of gratitude research. [Numerous studies](#) have documented a range of benefits to individuals who express gratitude.^{vi} The latest study confirms what we likely already knew; people like receiving thank you notes. A story about this study in the New York Times said that "the notes in question were not your typical 'thanks for the Amazon gift card.' Rather, the...participants in [the study] were asked to write a short 'gratitude letter' to a person who had affected them in some way."

The study found that most recipients cared less about what was written than that the note was sent in the first place. People felt more connected to the warmth that someone took a moment of their day to send a note of gratitude. As the Grammy-award singer/songwriter Jewel said in her song *Hands*, “in the end, only kindness matters.”^{vii} The study reinforces the value of being present with a moment of the heart, *regah ha’lev*.

I will share you one example of kindness that I will carry with me forever. Earlier this year I placed an order for a sandwich in a cafeteria. The young woman who took my order was also my sandwich-maker. It was lunchtime, the line was out the door. The process of ordering, making, and handing out sandwiches was a cross between an assembly line and a sweat shop. The woman asked me for my name so she could write it down on the sandwich so someone else could hand it to me when it was ready. She did not ask me my name to introduce herself to me, she asked me my name to complete a business transaction. I took this transaction one step further. She knew my name, but since she was not wearing a name tag I didn’t know her name. Just like me, the woman also looked tired and cranky. Even though I was tired, hungry, having a bad day, and far from home, I created a moment of the heart.

I asked the woman – whose name I have since forgotten -- for her name and when she told me, I said that I was pleased to meet her. She stopped her assembly line work for a noticeable moment, looked right in to my eyes and smiled from ear to ear. She did not say anything, but she did not need to. Her eyes and her smile said, *AhSeer Todah*. I bet that this was the first time someone asked her for her name in this sweatshop and it was clear that she appreciated a small, random act of kindness. And you know what happened after that? I had been having a pretty bad day to that point and it didn’t go much better in the afternoon either. Yet, the day brightened for me so much following my small, quiet interaction with this young woman; it carried me on air for the rest of the day. We met on the freeway of love. She made my day just as much as I made hers.

In this age of being distant/present, in this time of anger and hatred, in this moment of rudeness and insincerity, we should try more *lifnim mishuras hadin*, going above and beyond the law. We should meet each other *panim el panim*, face to face. In Deuteronomy 34:10 it says that Israel has never known a prophet like Moses, who God knew face to face. If men and women can meet each other face to face, maybe we can inspire a little prophet in each of us.

Doing right and doing good can be expressed in at least four other ways that we have heard before: First, *tzedek, tzedek terdof* (Justice, Justice shall you pursue);^{viii} second, “that which is hateful unto you do not do to your neighbor”;^{ix} third, “love your fellow as yourself”;^x and the fourth is one of my favorite passages in the Tanakh and might sum up the much of this week’s Torah portion. In Micah 6:8, God said I have told you “what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.”

Today is Shabbat *Nachamu*, the Sabbath of comforting. The name comes from the Book of Isaiah that speaks of comforting the Jewish people during our times of suffering.^{xi} It is the first of seven *haftarot* of consolation leading up to the Rosh Hashanah. I can think of no better way of finding comfort than by doing right and by doing good. Gandhi said, “the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

I will close, as I always do, by boldly offering to you a blessing and accepting the grace that you might bless me in return. Today and every day, especially as we prepare to return to ourselves and to others in the fast-approaching Days of Awe, that we take small, quiet moments of the heart to go above and beyond that which is required of us; to practice random acts of kindness; to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom Aleichem.

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- ⁱ Saks, Lord Rabbi Jonathan, *The Right and the Good* (Va'etchanan 5775), http://rabbisacks.org/the-right-and-the-good-vaetchanan-5775/#_ftn1.
- ⁱⁱ Schneerson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, Chumash Devarim, The Book of Deuteronomy, <https://www.chabad.org/media/pdf/750/mMpD7503789.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Freeway of Love*, © 1983 Copyright WB Music Corp. O/B/O Gratitude Sky Music, Inc. and See No Evil Music O/B/O When Words Collide Music, Jeffrey Cohen and Narada Michael Walden, composer; Aretha Franklin, artist, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeway_of_Love.
- ^{iv} Nicole Karlis, *Why Doing Good Is Good for the Do-Gooder*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/mind/why-doing-good-is-good-for-the-do-gooder.html>.
- ^v How to say “grateful” in Hebrew, Ulpan, <https://ulpan.com/how-to-say-grateful-in-hebrew/>.
- ^{vi} Murphy, Heather, *You Should Actually Send That Thank You Note You’ve Been Meaning to Write: New research showed the recipients of an emailed expression of gratitude felt much more “ecstatic” than writers expected*, N.Y. Times, July 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/science/thank-you-notes.html>
- ^{vii} *Hands*, © 1998, EMI Music, Jewel Kilcher and Leonard Patrick Raymon, composers, Jewel, performer.
- ^{viii} Deut. 16:20.
- ^{ix} Hillel - Talmud Shabbat 31A
- ^x Lev. 19:18.
- ^{xi} Isaiah 40:1-26.