

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VAET'HANAN

Haftarah: Yeshayahu 40:1-26

AUGUST 20, 2016 16 AB 5776

DEDICATIONS: Happy Birthday Jay

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Editors Notes

Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes (Devarim 6:8)

We have a friend who lives in the Old City of Jerusalem and we've written about him before. You may have met him or had dinner by his home and if you have not, you should. You can find him before dawn setting up the chairs at the Kotel and during a part of the day volunteering at the Tefilin stand at the Kotel. His name Reb Gutman Locks

Each day he sends out an email and often describes the challenges and successes at getting men to put on tefilin while visiting the wall.

Some stories are very inspiring: He once wrote of a small group of men from an "old-folks' home" in Connecticut who came to the Kotel last Thursday. A couple of them were in wheelchairs, and one had a push-stroller. Two of the men from the tefillin stand tried to help them with tefillin, but they all refused. Not a single one of them would put on tefillin!

When they turned to leave, I tried. I went up to one nice looking old man and said, "Come, let me help you to put on tefillin. It's a free service."

One of the guides quickly jumped in and said, "No!"

I did not do a good job of hiding my feelings for what he said. "How can you take a Jew away from doing a mitzvah!"

"He said that he didn't want to!" the guide said.

"He did not!" I said, and I turned to the old man and asked, "What's your name?"

He said, "Bill," but then he quickly changed it, "Velvel."

"Velvel, have you ever put on tefillin?" I asked.

He said that he had not. I told him how important it was, and that I would help him do it.

"Can we take a picture?" he asked.

"Sure, we can take a bunch of them, and you can show them to your grandchildren so they will know to do it, too."

I helped him slide his arm out of his jacket, and asked, "How old are you?"

He answered, "Next month, the 31 of December, I will be 98."

"You are going to live to be 120 years old," I told him.

"Do you guarantee it?" he quickly asked.

"Absolutely! (We do believe that our prayers will be answered, right?) And after 120, when you go to Heaven, there's going to be a Bas Kol, a voice from above, and one of the things that this voice is going to say is, 'I put you in the world as a Jewish man. Did you put on My tefillin while you were there?' And now you are going to be able to say, 'Yes, I did.'" He smiled. He had a very warm face.

I helped him say the Shema, and then told him to thank G-d for all the good that He has given him. He asked if he could go to the Wall to do it. I went with him and heard him say a few names, and then he said, "Thank you for all the good that you have given me, and please make me a better person."

AMAZING

My son Moses is heading for the Old City in a few weeks to attend Yeshiva before beginning his medical studies. I asked him to make sure he spends time working at the stand. Its an incredibly challenging job. One learns how to speak with people and is challenged daily in his powers of persuasion. I recall that when my son Jonah was young, I sent him out with Rabbi Zalman Wolowik of the Five Towns Chabad on the Friday Tefillin runs. He recalls it was a great experience.

This week I read an amazing story by Rabbi Yonasan Abraham, a Dayan and member of the London bet Din. He titles it, The Ferry Ride

He writes: "As I once stood in a small Beit Midrash in London, I soon found myself surrounded by a number of philanthropists, among them a man named Joe Orenstein. His father had been a Holocaust survivor who hailed originally from Opatow, an eminent Polish town. Having met much financial success, Joe was

heavily involved in helping set up the London Jewish community and various chesed organizations.

"It was one year during the month of August that he and his wife flew to New York to attend a wedding. Finding his table number and taking a seat, he was met by another gentleman sitting across from him. The man was dressed in Chassidish attire and appeared to be a distinguished individual. Striking up conversation with the man, Joe began to relate how he had recently moved from England to Israel and how a large part of his family now lived in Lakewood, New Jersey.

"It was then the other gentleman's turn to recount some of his past experiences and background. But there was one particular word which caught his attention when listening to Joe speak about his own life: England. Mentioning how years ago, he had also visited England, the man went on to tell Joe what exactly transpired on that one occasion:

"Thirty-five years ago, I took a trip to England. I was twenty-two years old at the time and didn't have anything to do with Judaism. My father wasn't Jewish and I had no connection to it either. After being in England for some while, I continued on to Amsterdam, and from there to Berlin and then Paris. From Paris, I eventually decided I would make my way over to London.

"To my luck, a rowdy group of fifteen-year-old boys sat alongside me on the train from Paris. Of course, I was somewhat older than they were and was unable to peacefully fall asleep listening to their noisy antics. But I managed to keep my cool. It was after this train ride that I needed to take one last ferry to my final destination. While I thought that I would now be able to enjoy a moment's reprieve, I was mistaken. The same group of fifteen-year-old boys followed me onto the ferry. That was the last thing I wished would happen.

"But then, all of a sudden, they became quiet. Surprised and curious as to what happened, I looked up and noticed that they were taking out black boxes from their bags. I had no idea what they were doing. All I could think about was how it was quiet and that now I would finally be given a few moments to peacefully relax.

"But then, one of the boys walked over to me and began explaining what they were doing. Asking me if I was Jewish, I told him, "I'm sorry, but I am not. My dad is not Jewish." "What about your mother?" he said. After replying in the affirmative, he reassured me that I was Jewish despite my father not being

Jewish and my complete ignorance of Judaism. "Why don't you try these on?" he told me.

"Touched by the boy's genuine sincerity in coming over to me and taking interest in someone he never met before, I agreed to do so. And so, I began wrapping the black straps around my arm. It was the first time in my life that I put on Tefillin. The boy also proceeded to teach me the verse of Shema Yisrael and explain what it means.

"After this unexpected event, I was tremendously moved. While all I had wished to do was get off the ferry and move away from that group of noisy teenagers, in hindsight, that ride in the ferry changed my life forever. After looking further into Judaism, I eventually traveled to America and went on to learn little by little and become who I am today: a religious practicing Jew."

"After hearing this story, Joe Orenstein was certainly moved. But, rather quickly, Joe realized that this story was closer to his heart than he would have thought at first.

"Can I tell you something?" said Joe to the gentleman. "Do you know whose Tefillin those were who you put on thirty-five years ago? Mine. I was that boy who went over to you and helped you wrap Tefillin for the first time. And here we meet thirty-five years later. Pleasure to meet you again..."

"Years later, the two neshamot which had connected decades earlier met again. While Joe Orenstein may have believed he was simply exposing a fellow Jew to the beauty of a mitzvah, little did he realize that he was planting a seed that would later flourish into a plentiful tree with abundant fruit. This man's life and the lives of his children saw an entirely different destiny due to that one morning on the ferry. Never should we minimize even the smallest gesture of outreach to a fellow Jew. Its impact can last forever."

Shabbat Shalom, David Bibi

Summary of the Perasha

Parasha va'etchanan includes the ten commandments. Among the 10 commandments is the commandment to keep the shabbat (perek 5, pesookim 13-15). Interestingly the pasook says the reason we rest on Shabbat is to remember that we were slaves in Mitsrayim and that Hashem took us out with a strong hand and outstretched arm. Elsewhere the Torah explains that we rest on shabbat also to remember creation and that Hashem rested on the 7th day, however, the question here

remains how is resting on Shabbat a remembrance that we were freed from Mitsrayim. The Sefer ha'hinuch explains that resting on Shabbat is a remembrance that we were freed from Mitsrayim because when we were slaves we were not in control of our own time. We did not have the opportunity to rest when we wanted to. Thus, resting on Shabbat shows that because Hashem freed us we now can rest at a time when our creator commanded us to. So this is our kavana when keeping Shabbat. We are commemorating creation and being freed from Mitsrayim. And this is what we say in kidoosh Shabbat night; zikaron le'maaseh bereshit and zecher le'yetsiat mitrayim.

Va'etchanan - Moshe tells Benei Israel how to behave once they get into Israel.

The 10 Commandments and Shema.

- 1- Moshe recounts how he prayed to Hashem but was not allowed to enter Eretz Israel. Moshe tells Benei Israel of the mitsvot they will need to keep in order to merit staying in the land.
- 2- Moshe tells Benei Israel to remember and tell future generations how Hashem spoke to us at Sinai and did miracles in Mitsrayim so that we keep the laws and not stray after other Gods.
- 3- Moshe sets up cities of refuge in Jordan (where Reuben, Gad and half Menashe were to live).
- 4- Moshe reminds Benei Israel how they all heard Hashem speak directly to them at Sinai. The ten commandments are repeated here.
- 5- Moshe recounts how Hashem then related the hukim and mishpatim to him as an intermediary upon the request Benei Israel who was unable to withstand hearing from Hashem directly.
- 6- The parasha of Shema and Ve'ahavta is said here. Moshe then warns Benei Israel not to succumb to sin as a result of the prosperity they will experience in Israel.
- 7- Moshe says that when we get to the land we should destroy the 7 nations living there and take care not to show favor to them and inter-marry with them. Moshe tells again how Hashem loves us and warns us to follow in the ways of Hashem.

FROM THE WELLSPRINGS OF THE PARASHAH

"Hear O Yisrael, Hashem our God, Hashem is one"

The Shulhan Aruch writes: "One who reads the shema and does not concentrate on the first pasuk, that of 'Shema Yisrael,' has not fulfilled his obligation." He writes further, "The custom is to read the first pasuk in a loud voice so as to arouse concentration. The custom is place one's hand over his face during the recitation of the first pasuk, in

order to avoid seeing something that may prevent him from concentrating."

On what must one concentrate? Rabbenu Yossef Hayyim zs"l ("Ben Ish Hai," - I, Va'era) explains that one should divide the pasuk into three sections of two words each in order to concentrate on their meaning. "Shema" means acceptance and comprehension. Here, "Shema Yisrael" means, accept these words and understand them and know them, so that you believe in them, that "Hashem Elokenu" - Hashem is our God, and, furthermore, "Hashem ehad" - Hashem is one. As it turns out, then, we declare here an acceptance and acknowledgment of two things. The first is the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven, through the recitation of the two words, "Hashem Elokenu" (Hashem is our God), which denotes our acceptance of His Godliness, that He is God and we are His servants. The second acceptance is the concept of the Almighty's oneness and singularity, which we declare when we say, "Hashem ehad."

"Hear O Yisrael, Hashem our God, Hashem is one"

According to what we have said, when we recite "Shema Yisrael" we mean that every Jew in Am Yisrael should accept and understand this. The Gemara, however, mentions an additional meaning, one which is brought by the Rambam. We have a tradition that when Yaakov Avinu gathered his children in Egypt before his death, he reinforced for them the notion of Hashem's singularity and the path of Godliness upon which Avraham and Yisshak had walked. Yaakov then asked his sons, "Perhaps there is someone here who is not with me in the belief in the singularity of Hashem?" They all answered, "Hear O Yisrael [referring to Yaakov], Hashem our God Hashem is one." Yaakov then said, "Blessed be the Name of the Glory of His kingdom forever" ("Baruch Shem Kevod malchuto le'olam va'ed"). The custom thus evolved to always add this praise uttered by Yaakov immediately following the pasuk of Shema Yisrael. The Shulhan Aruch explains that one must recite this silently, since it is not written in the Torah as are the pesukim of shema itself.

"Hear O Yisrael, Hashem our God, Hashem, is one"

Rashi explains that this pasuk contains a declaration of belief in the redemption, at which point all mankind will call in Hashem's Name and acknowledge the power of His kingdom. In this pasuk we say as follows: Hashem, who is now only our God since the other nations do not recognize Him, will, in the future, be the one God over the entire world, as it says, "For then I will bring upon all the nations a clear language that they all call in the Name

of Hashem" (Ssefanyah 3). It similarly says, "Hashem shall be king over the entire land; on that day, Hashem shall be one and His Name shall be one" (Zechariah 14).

The Ramban adds that Mosheh here speaks of Hashem as 'Hashem our God,' while generally in Sefer Devarim he says, "Hashem your God." The Ramban explains that it appeared as though Hashem dealt with Mosheh Rabbenu on a fundamentally different level than He did with the rest of Am Yisrael, as He revealed Himself to Mosheh with the Name of "H-V-Y-H," which represents the supernatural aspect of Hashem. Mosheh Rabbenu here tells Benei Yisrael that "Hashem Elokenu." Meaning, he includes himself with the rest of the nation, implying that Hashem's supernatural protection will always accompany the nation, just as Hashem always dealt with Mosheh on that level. Indeed, Rav Yaakov Emden zsl"l wrote that the miracle of Am Yisrael's survival through the last two millennia despite persecution and oppression surpasses all the miracles of Yessi'at Missrayim!

**Va'etchanan and Shabbat Nachamu:
A Sabbath of Consolation
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

I was very fortunate as a young boy, and in one particular way I knew it. Very few of my friends had living grandparents. Their families had recently arrived in America, and their grandparents remained behind in Eastern Europe and were consumed in the fires of the Holocaust.

I, on the other hand, had all four of my grandparents and was even privileged to have known one great-grandparent, my mother's mother's mother, Yitta Leah Kriegel, may she rest in peace.

However, I did not immediately realize then just how fortunate I was. That, I discovered much later, when I reached early adolescence. It wasn't until then that I became informed about the Holocaust. It slowly dawned upon me that I was born just months after Hitler invaded Poland.

The image that continues to haunt me today first emerged then into my mind's eye. It is the image of many cousins being buried alive, their tiny bellies punctured by storm troopers' bayonets, their bodies incinerated, reduced to ash.

It was only then that I came to understand how fortunate I was to have been born in Brooklyn, NY, and not in Kolomay, Poland.

My great-grandmother was the impetus for my life-long preoccupation with the Holocaust, its history, and its horrors. Somehow, although others claimed that they were then unaware of what was transpiring in distant Europe, she knew what was happening to her family there. Not only did she know, but she responded.

"Responded?" you ask incredulously. Of what sort of response was she capable? She was ninety years old, frail, of meager means, and spoke no English to boot.

Her response was prayer; prayer and fasting. She fasted every Monday and Thursday from dawn to dusk, and spent those days entirely in prayer, tearfully but silently reciting Psalms. If my childhood memories serve me correctly, she recited the entire Book of Psalms each day that she fasted.

I do not know, and to this day have had no way of ever knowing, when she began this pious spiritual practice, but I know for certain when she concluded it. I know this for certain, for I was with her on that summer day in 1950 when she passed away.

The image of my great-grandmother has, by now, mostly faded from my memory. But every year, as this coming Shabbat approaches, that image is revived. For one thing, it is close to the date of her passing on the 22nd of Tammuz.

But what brings it back to me even more forcefully is another image, this one from this week's Torah portion, Parashat Va'etchanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11). It is the image of Moses, days before his demise, praying urgently and repeatedly that the Almighty grant him permission to enter the Promised Land.

There are many differences between Yitta Leah's prayers and those of Moses. She was praying for the lives, and eventually for the souls, of others, six million others. He, on the other hand, was praying for himself.

Yet in so many ways, their prayers were similar. They both prayed silently, as a Jew should. They both prayed desperately and repetitively. We are told that Moses uttered 515 prayers, and Yitta Leah's prayers were certainly no fewer. Both prayed in solitude.

Sadly, the prayers of neither were answered. Except for those who were already in America, great-grandmother's extended family had but one survivor, and Moses never set foot into the Promised Land.

It is partly for this reason that this week's parasha calls to mind the theme of unanswered prayers.

But there is another reason. This Shabbat inevitably follows the somber day of Tisha B'Av, a day whose very essence is the theme of unanswered prayers: "You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, so that no prayer may pass through" (Lamentations 3:44). This verse expresses the feeling of every faithful Jew as he or she struggles to cope on Tisha B'Av with the recollection of the multitudes of unanswered prayers that characterized the long list of the catastrophes of Jewish history.

It is thus so very apt that our tradition designates this Shabbat as the Sabbath of Consolation, Shabbat Nachamu. There can be no greater consolation than the hope for "answered prayers" and the promise that they will be answered.

It was only as a little boy that I knew my great-grandmother. But even then, I knew her well enough to understand that in her current heavenly abode, she finds her prayers answered. For one thing, we believe that the Almighty's mysteries are revealed to the righteous in the Afterlife. Moreover, she has undoubtedly found consolation in the knowledge that so many of her descendants are faithful to her life's example and now tell her story to their own great-grandchildren.

And Moses too has found consolation in the knowledge that his People are returning to the land for which he yearned. Joel Cohen, in his beautiful book *Moses: A Memoir*, poignantly describes Moses' last moments and imagines him saying these words:

"For better than allowing me to walk with my people in the Promised Land, He has indulged me to see the beauty and magnificence of His continuum and how, despite all, He has loved them so..."

Both our parasha itself and its haftarah, the reading from the Book of Isaiah which accompanies it, encourage such hope and herald such promise:

"For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7)

And,

"Comfort, oh comfort My people...
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And declare to her
That her term of service is over,
That her iniquity is expiated..." (Isaiah 40:2)

FROM THE JERSEY SHORE NEWSLETTER

"You shall do what is fair and good in the eyes of Hashem." (Debarim 6:18) In a city in Israel there was a beautiful gemach that extended large loans to pay for wedding expenses. Rabbi Shimon Finkelman tells a story about this gemach. The one in charge of the fund, the gabbai, was a busy person and was "open for business" one hour a night. If a borrower was not seated with the gabbai when the hour ended, he had to return another night. There were no exceptions to this rule.

One evening there was only one person remaining on line when a second person entered the waiting room panting for breath. He had just gotten off the bus from another city and had run from the bus stop to reach his destination. He asked the person ahead of him where he lived. "In this neighborhood," the man replied. Since the hour was almost up, the second man asked the first to allow him to take his place so that he would not have to make the bus trip again to procure his loan. "It will be hard for me to return another night," he explained. "For you it's not a problem."

But the first man did not agree. "I'm sorry, but my time is valuable. I don't want to have to come back another night."

The second man went home very disappointed. The first man got his money. Unfortunately, he was pick-pocketed later that night and came home with only half his money. He later related this incident and said that he felt that his loss was a Divine punishment for having failed to show compassion and give up his turn for the second man.

One may wonder, true he did not show compassion, but then again didn't the man have a point? After all, he was there first, and as he explained, his time was valuable!

In this week's perashah it says, "You shall do what is right and good in the eyes of Hashem." The Gemara (Baba Mesia 35a) derives that in his dealings with others, a Jew is required to go beyond the letter of what strict justice would require.

The Gemara (Kiddushin 20b) says, "Yerushalayim was destroyed only because its people decided judicial cases according to the strict letter of the law. When we go beyond the letter of the law, Hashem responds in kind. He shows compassion even when our service of Him is wanting.

Shabbat Nahamu is a time to reflect on our relationships with others, to ensure that we do go beyond the letter of the law when the situation calls for it. In this way we will earn Divine compassion so that the three weeks of mourning will be transformed into days of unparalleled joy. Rabbi Reuven Semah

RABBI ELI MANSOUR
The Office Is Always Open

Moshe Rabbenu tells Beneh Yisrael in Parashat Vaethanan, "Who is a great nation that has a God close to it – the way Hashem our God is close to us whenever we call out to him!" (4:7).

The message Moshe seeks to impress upon us is a simple one: the door to God's office is always open. A Jew can turn to Hashem in prayer at any time, under any circumstances. Whether it's 3am on a cold, snowy winter night, or 3pm on a bright, balmy summer afternoon, we can speak to Hashem, and He will listen to us. "Hashem our God is close to us whenever we call out to him." His office hours are 24/7.

Of course, there are specific Halachot governing the three daily prayer services, and one is obligated to ensure that he recites these prayers at the proper times. But we must never make the mistake of thinking that the opportunity of Tefila is restricted to that timeframe. Hashem always wants to hear our prayers, around the clock. At any moment, we are welcome and encouraged to speak to Him and submit our requests. And if a person happens to miss a daily prayer, he should not despair. Hashem still wants to hear from him, no matter what. The door remains open at all times, even for those who have, unfortunately, missed an appointment.

This is not to say that our prayers are always answered precisely as we want. Parashat Vaethanan begins with Moshe's impassioned prayer for permission to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Sages teach that Moshe uttered 515 prayers, and yet, his request was denied. Nevertheless, each of those prayers was valuable. God did not stop Moshe after his first prayer, or after his first three hundred prayers, because he wanted him to continue praying. Even if a prayer is not answered precisely as the person intended, the prayer is still valuable. God stores all our prayers in a "prayer bank" in the heavens, and they are eventually pulled out and used to help us or somebody else in distress – sometimes even years, or even many generations, after the prayer was recited. God's door is always open, and it is always worthwhile to go in. He wants to hear our prayers, and every prayer is a priceless treasure, often in ways that we will never know.

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Rabbi Wein
THE OLYMPICS

The Olympic Games currently taking place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are allegedly supposed to be all about sports, fair play and world camaraderie. However, underlying all of the hoopla, spin and fanfare, is the knowledge deep within all of us, that the games are all about money – lots of money for the athletes, promoters, cities involved and the pompous officials who rule the sporting games.

This may appear to be too cynical an assessment of such a grand event, one which captivates millions of people around the globe. But the sordid history of the Olympic Games and of its organizers over the past century, pretty much vindicates this harsh assessment of their motives and goals.

Like its counterpart in soccer/football, the World Cup, the Olympics is also awash in scandal, corruption, pay-offs, illegal trafficking and other non-sportsmanlike but hugely lucrative activities. The Olympics is an enormous business generating hundreds of millions if not even billions of dollars. Because of this financial factor, there can be no doubt that human venality and corruption will also be present at many stages regarding rulings on the myriad details that go in to the actual production of the games.

The athletes receive gold, silver and bronze medals, which are really only of symbolic value. However, they certainly have the ability to convert their fame into fortune and most of them have commercial agents anxious and willing to help them do so. The days of pure amateur athletics are long past and the Olympics itself allows for competition by athletes who are professional and earn money on a grand scale.

The Olympics are not only tainted by money, something which is perhaps inescapable with the human condition being what it is, it also suffers from political and moral pressures. Hitler staged the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the team from the United States excluded Jews from actual participation in certain competitions in the fear of offending Hitler. The fact that an Afro-American, Jesse Owens, won a number of track and field medals in was doubly ironic and infuriated the Fuhrer.

Israel is always subject to problems at the Olympics. Naturally we all remember the Olympic Games held in Munich Germany a few decades ago, where Israeli athletes were murdered by Arab terrorists, aided by lax German security. This time around, the Israeli delegation was subject to verbal abuse and

demonstrations from other athletes and from some spectators in the crowds.

Israel has won a few medals and is entitled to fair treatment. As usual however, it is the only country singled out for negative events and comments. It seems that the rest of the world is perfect, peaceful, law-abiding, never repressive while Israel is the sole culprit of world society. Somehow we have become accustomed to our status so that it hardly even makes the news here in Israel, let alone anywhere else in the world. But again, if the organizers of the Olympics had a shred of decency left within them, it would certainly be incumbent upon them to take steps to prevent such ugly and discriminatory behavior from occurring.

Poor Russia. After decades of systematic illegal doping of its athletes in order to achieve sports domination, the Olympic committee finally took action by banning Soviet athletes from participation in this year's Olympics unless they undergo rigorous testing. Thus Russia will not be a major medal winner this time around.

Putin loudly bewailed the fact that Russia was singled out for punishment. He also stoutly denied that such a program of doping ever took place in the past and presently. However his claims fell on deaf ears, with many of the Russian athletes themselves admitting that his systematic doping program exists in their training. Putin is interested in restoring the Cold War superpower status of Russia. His blunt foreign policy, his aggressions in Ukraine and Syria and his support of Iran all are symptoms of this dangerous goal that he hopes to achieve.

To him the Olympics are just another tool and front of his overall campaign for Russia's place in the sun. I imagine that it is impossible to free the Olympics from political and diplomatic pressures just as it is unlikely that monetary corruption will be completely eliminated from the production of the games. But one can hope for better times and for a more honest competition. The ancient Olympic Games in Greece never ranked high in the eyes of our religious leaders. Perhaps they were well aware of the dark side that seems to always accompany this competition

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks The Power of Why

In a much watched TED talk Simon Sinek asked the question: how do great leaders inspire action?[1] What made people like Martin Luther King and Steve Jobs stand out from their contemporaries who may

have been no less gifted, no less qualified? His answer: Most people talk about what. Some people talk about how. Great leaders, though, start with why. This is what makes them transformative.[2]

Sinek's lecture was about business and political leadership. The most powerful examples, though, are directly or indirectly religious. Indeed I argued in *The Great Partnership* what makes Abrahamic monotheism different is that it believes there is an answer to the question, why. Neither the universe nor human life is meaningless, an accident, a mere happenstance. As Freud, Einstein and Wittgenstein all said, religious faith is faith in the meaningfulness of life.

Rarely is this shown in a more powerful light than in *Va'etchanan*. There is much in Judaism about what: what is permitted, what forbidden, what is sacred, what is secular. There is much, too, about how: how to learn, how to pray, how to grow in our relationship with God and with other people. There is relatively little about why.

In *Va-etchanan* Moses says some of the most inspiring words ever uttered about the why of Jewish existence. That is what made him the great transformational leader he was, and it has consequences for us, here, now.

To have a sense of how strange Moses' words were, we must recall several facts. The Israelites were still in the desert. They had not yet entered the land. They had no military advantages over the nations they would have to fight. Ten of the twelve spies had argued, almost forty years before, that the mission was impossible. In a world of empires, nations and fortified cities, the Israelites must have seemed to the untutored eye defenceless, unproven, one more horde among the many who swept across Asia and Africa in ancient times. Other than their religious practices, few contemporary observers would have seen anything about them to set them apart from the Jebusites and Perizzites, Midianites and Moabites, and the other petty powers that populated that corner of the Middle East.

Yet in this week's parsha Moses communicated an unshakeable certainty that what had happened to them would eventually change and inspire the world. Listen to his language:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other

people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by miracles, signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (Deut. 4:32-34)

Moses was convinced that Jewish history was, and would remain, unique. In an age of empires, a small, defenceless group had been liberated from the greatest empire of all by a power not their own, by God himself. That was Moses' first point: the singularity of Jewish history as a narrative of redemption.

His second was the uniqueness of revelation:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:7-8)

Other nations had gods to whom they prayed and offered sacrifices. They too attributed their military successes to their deities. But no other nation saw God as their sovereign, legislator and law-giver. Elsewhere law represented the decree of the king or, in more recent centuries, the will of the people. In Israel, uniquely, even when there was a king, he had no legislative power. Only in Israel was God seen not just as a power but as the architect of society, the orchestrator of its music of justice and mercy, liberty and dignity.

The question is why. Toward the end of the chapter Moses gives one answer: "Because He loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them." (Deut. 4:37). God loved Abraham, not least because Abraham loved God. And God loved Abraham's children because they were his children and He had promised the patriarch that He would bless and protect them.

Earlier though Moses had given a different kind of answer, not incompatible with the second, but different:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me ... Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deut. 4:5-6)

Why did Moses, or God, care whether or not other nations saw Israel's laws as wise and understanding? Judaism was and is a love story between God and a particular people, often tempestuous, sometimes serene, frequently joyous, but close, intimate, even inward-looking. What has the rest of the world to do with it?

But the rest of the world does have something to do with it. Judaism was never meant for Jews alone. In his first words to Abraham, God already said, "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you, I will curse; through you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Jews were to be a source of blessing to the world.

God is the God of all humanity. In Genesis He spoke to Adam, Eve, Cain, Noah, and made a covenant with all humankind before He made one with Abraham. In Egypt, whether in Potiphar's house, or prison, or Pharaoh's palace, Joseph continually talked about God. He wanted the Egyptians to know that nothing he did, he did himself. He was merely an agent of the God of Israel. There is nothing here to suggest that God is indifferent to the nations of the world.

Later in the days of Moses, God said that He would perform signs and wonders so that "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 7:5). He called Jeremiah to be "a prophet to the nations." He sent Jonah to the Assyrians in Nineveh. He had Amos deliver oracles to the other nations before He sent him an oracle about Israel. In perhaps the most astonishing prophecy in Tanakh He sent Isaiah the message that a time will come when God will bless Israel's enemies: "The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people, Assyria My handiwork, and Israel My inheritance'" (Is. 19:26).

God is concerned with all humanity. Therefore what we do as Jews makes a difference to humanity, not just in a mystical sense, but as exemplars of what it means to love and be loved by God. Other nations would look at Jews and sense that some larger power was at work in their history. As the late Milton Himmelfarb put it:

Each Jew knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together, we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable . . . The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers. Big things seem to happen around us and to us.[3]

We were not called on to convert the world. We were called on to inspire the world. As the prophet Zechariah put it, a time will come when "Ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:23). Our vocation is to be God's ambassadors to the world, giving testimony through the way we live that it is possible for a small people to survive and thrive under the most adverse conditions, to construct a society of law-governed liberty for which we all bear collective responsibility, and to "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly"[4] with our God. Va-etchanan is the mission statement of the Jewish people.

And others were and still are inspired by it. The conclusion I have drawn from a lifetime lived in the public square is that non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They find it hard to understand why Jews, in countries where there is genuine religious liberty, abandon their faith or define their identity in purely ethnic terms.

Speaking personally, I believe that the world in its current state of turbulence needs the Jewish message, which is that God calls on us to be true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith. Imagine a world in which everyone believed this. It would be a world transformed.

We are not just another ethnic minority. We are the people who predicated freedom on teaching our children to love, not hate. Ours is the faith that consecrated marriage and the family, and spoke of responsibilities long before it spoke of rights. Ours is the vision that sees alleviation of poverty as a religious task because, as Maimonides said, you cannot think exalted spiritual thoughts if you are starving or sick or homeless and alone.[5] We do these things not because we are conservative or liberal, Republicans or Democrats, but because we believe that is what God wants of us.

Much is written these days about the what and how of Judaism, but all too little about the why. Moses, in the last month of his life, taught the why. That is how the greatest of leaders inspired action from his day to ours.

If you want to change the world, start with why.

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZoJKF_VuA.

[2] For a more detailed account, see the book based on the talk: Simon Sinek, Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action. New York,

Portfolio, 2009.

[3] Milton Himmelfarb and Gertrude Himmelfarb. Jews and Gentiles. New York, Encounter, 2007, 141.

[4] Micah 6:8.

[5] The Guide for the Perplexed, III: 27.

**AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL
"For who is such a great people that has G-d near to him as Hashem our G-d whenever we call out to Him?"**

These two verses (4:7, 8) declare that Israel is unequalled in greatness of two kinds:

- 1) they are unequalled in their privilege of calling to Hashem whenever they are in need
- 2) and they are without equal in the world because of the righteous laws that Hashem has bestowed upon them Because of these two reasons, Israel is therefore the most important ("greatest") nation.

Two unequalled privileges are here pointed out. In the daily Shemoneh Esreh we say: "For You listen with compassion to the prayer of Your people Israel". And here we see the source of this statement. "Who is such a great people that has G-d near to him as Hashem our G-d whenever we call out to Him". We are informed of a most exceptional status, that Hashem is most close to us and therefore grants His especial attention to the prayers of Israel.

In the following verse, we are informed of another unique privilege: "this Torah that I put before you today."

Although they are mentioned as two separate privileges ("For who is such a great people", And who is such a great people"). Yet fundamentally they both stem from the fact that G-d is near to Israel. But this nearness is due to the Torah that they accepted, and which they loyally study and fulfill.

Thus the Torah study is declared as the chief service of Hashem:

"The study of the Torah equals all of them" (Peah 1:1).

The greatest nearness is to Think the same thoughts, and by learning His Torah one Thinks Hashem's thoughts.

Quoted from "Fortunate Nation" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT'L

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