

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
The Portion of
Va'eschanan

July 29, 2009

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

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Yad Avraham Institute
New York
July 29, 2009

B"H

Va'eschanan

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*
Dean

1. The Tzaddik's Understanding of his Obligation to G'd

The Torah tells us that G'd decreed that Moshe would not enter into the Land of Canaan, rather he would pass away on the trans-Jordan side. The Portion of Va'eschanan begins, **"I implored (va'eschanan) - Hashem at that time..."** Moshe supplicated G'd to allow him to enter into the Land of Israel despite the prior decree that he would not be allowed to do so; however, G'd did not heed his request.

The Torah tells us that Moshe reprimanded the Jewish people for the sin of the spies. After the sin they bemoaned their predicament and cried. Despite their expression of remorse, G'd did not accept their repentance. Sforno explains that the reason G'd did not heed their cries was because they had caused a desecration of His Name by believing the slanderous reports of the spies, rather than having faith in G'd. The weeping of the Jewish people was a result of being informed by G'd that they would all perish in the desert. Thus, their crying was not out of love for G'd but rather they were repenting because of their own situation. Had their repentance been based upon the desecration of G'd's Name that they had brought about, rather than upon themselves, G'd would have forgiven them.

Although Moshe supplicated G'd for forgiveness to allow him to enter into the Land, his prayers were not heeded. Why was this so? Sforno explains that the Moshe's supplications were not accepted because he did not pray immediately upon being told of the decree. Rather he waited until this very moment. As a result of the success of his past supplications on behalf of the Jewish people, Moshe believed that it was not necessary to beseech G'd immediately. He could do that at another time. However, he was mistaken. Since he did not pray immediately, G'd was not receptive to his plea.

When Moshe supplicated G'd he used the expression of "imploring (*va'eschanan*)."¹ Rashi cites Sifri, "'Va'eschanan (I implore)' is a term of supplication that implies that the basis for the request is rooted in G'd's graciousness. In essence, the supplicant is asking that G'd should respond despite his lack of being deserving. When a tzaddik prays to G'd, although he has sufficient merit upon which he could base his request, nevertheless, because he sees himself as unworthy, his request from G'd is to grant him a gift (*matnas chinum*)."

We say in the Amidah (Silent Prayer) that is recited on Shabbos morning, "Moshe rejoiced in the gift of his portion..." What was his portion? Moshe received a portion in Torah that will never be equaled by any person. He also was given a unique level of responsibility for the spiritual future of the Jewish people that was commensurate with his portion. Moshe rejoiced being privileged and honored for being able to serve G'd, the Omnipotent One and Master of existence. He was only able to appreciate this responsibility as the ultimate privilege because he was G'd's faithful servant. As it states, "You (G'd) called him a faithful servant." Because Moshe was the most humble person to ever walk the face of the earth, he was able to see G'd on a level that was unequalled by any other human being. He therefore rejoiced, despite his level of obligation.

He did not for one moment feel that he was deserving of reward for his unparalleled service of G'd, but rather, the honor of being able to serve His Maker itself was the reward. This is the reason Moshe did not feel that he was deserving of anything. It is only the tzaddik, who sees G'd as his benefactor and the ultimate master, who can experience serving G'd as a privilege. It is only the Jew who lives for himself, that cannot understand and appreciate who G'd is. He sees his obligation as a semi-burden and thus does not internalize it as a privilege. The blessing which one recites before the study of Torah states, "You have chosen us from all the nations to give us Your Torah."

The Jew must understand that he was chosen to be given something that has a dimension of value which is one of a kind. As King Solomon writes in Proverbs, "G'd said to the Jewish people, 'I have given you a special/good commodity, do not abandon it.'" If one truly understands this, one is able to comprehend what is stated in the Mishna in Ethics of Our Fathers, "If you had learned an enormous amount of Torah, do not pride yourself in it because it is for that that you were created."

We find that the First and Second Temple are alluded to by the Torah as "the collateral" of the Jewish people. Meaning, that G'd destroyed the First and Second Temple rather than destroying the Jewish people. He had taken both Temples as collateral, rather than bringing total destruction upon His people. Moshe, not being allowed to enter into the Land guaranteed the survival of the Jewish people. This is because had he crossed into the Land and built the Temple, it could have never been destroyed. Anything with which Moshe had been associated assumed a dimension of eternity and permanence because of his own level of holiness. Although we are pained and we mourn and grieve the destruction of the Temple, we must appreciate G'd's Kindness for taking it from us rather than His expending his Wrath upon His beloved people. In actuality, we are not mourning the destruction of the edifice, but rather the distance between G'd and ourselves that is caused by our sins.

2. *Egypt, the Iron Crucible*

The Torah states, "(Moshe recounted to the Jewish people) Hashem has taken you and had withdrawn you from the iron crucible, from Egypt, to be a nation of heritage for Him, as this very day." The Torah refers to Egypt as "the iron crucible" in order to convey that just as a smelter extracts the impurities from iron, so too did the bondage of Egypt remove the spiritual impurities from the Jewish people. Although the bondage in Egypt was severe, it had a purging effect on the Jewish people.

The Torah states regarding the splitting of the Sea, "Moshe stretched out his hand over the Sea... The Children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the Sea; the water was a wall (*choma*) for them, on their right and on their left." Chazal tell us that the word "*choma*-(wall)" which refers to the wall of water surrounding the Jewish people in the Sea, is written with the letter "vav" deleted. Thus, the word can be read as "*cheima*," which means "wrath." The Midrash explains that as the Jewish people walked between the walls of water through the Sea, the angels began prosecuting them before G'd. They had said, "Why are you sparing the

Jewish people and destroying the Egyptians? These are idolaters and these are idolaters." Since the Jewish people had fallen to the level of paganism to no less a degree than the Egyptians, why are the Egyptians more culpable than the Jewish people? The Jewish people should have perished as the Egyptians had in the Sea. Despite the fact that the original seventy members of Yaakov's family who had come to Egypt were the equivalent of living angels, their descendants had become completely acculturated into the pagan society of Egypt. The Jewish people only retained three aspect of their identity: their names, attire, and the Hebrew language (The holy tongue). In all other respects, the Egyptian experience had transformed a nation of devout people into idolaters.

Chazal tell us that although the Jewish people had witnessed the Ten Plagues and the Splitting of the Sea, which were revealed miracles, and G'd had spoken to them "face to face" at Sinai when they received the Torah at Sinai, they failed with the sin of the Golden Calf because there was a trace of impurity from their idolatrous past in Egypt. When they found themselves in a precarious state, believing that Moshe had passed away and were left stranded alone in the desert, they gravitated to their past, which was idolatry. If this is so, it would seem that Egypt was the antithesis of the "iron crucible" that had removed impurities of the Jewish people. To the contrary, Egypt was the setting that caused them to absorb the most extreme level of spiritual impurity that could not be extracted. In what context was Egypt the equivalent of the "iron crucible?"

The Torah tells us that at the Covenant Between the Parts, after G'd had promised Avraham, our Patriarch, that the Jewish people would inherit the Land of Canaan, Avraham asked G'd, "How will I know that my children will inherit it?" This was considered an inappropriate question for Avraham, since G'd's Promise was not contingent on any issue. Rather, it was an unconditional gift. Therefore, there was no basis for Avraham's question. He should have had trust in G'd. Because he had asked this inappropriate question a spiritual impurity had entered into his own spiritual make up and thus needed to be purged. The Jewish people, being his descendants, possessed this impurity. They needed to be purged through the difficult bondage in Egypt. As the verse states, "You shall know that your offspring will be strangers in a land that is not their own. There, they will be enslaved and afflicted for 400 years."

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that although the Jewish people did succumb to idolatry in Egypt, they experienced overwhelming suffering through back-

breaking enslavement. The suffering that they had experienced through the bondage was part of an atonement process which resulted in a spiritual purification. The setting and situation of the Jewish people in Egypt caused them to become vulnerable to their masters' pagan beliefs. Although they had become idolaters, their essence remained unaffected. Assuming a pagan belief was based on each individual's own choice. Factually, the spiritual impediment that was caused because of Avraham's sin was removed. They thus had the capacity and potential to rise to unlimited spiritual heights.

The Torah states, **“Moshe and Aaron went and gathered all the elders of the Children of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that Hashem had spoken to Moshe...and the people believed.”** After Moshe had presented his credentials as G'd's agent to be the Redeemer of Israel, which was through the performance of specific miracles, the Jewish people believed in G'd. Despite the fact that until that moment, they were fully immersed in their idolatrous beliefs, when they witnessed the Hand of G'd through Moshe performing the various miracles, they had the ability to recognize the truth. Consequently, they chose to bring about a work stoppage, believing that their redemption was imminent. The spiritual obstruction that they had inherited as a result of Avraham's failing, had been purged. If in fact the bondage and suffering did not impact upon them by removing the spiritual obstruction, they would have been as impervious to the miracles as the Egyptians were. They would have thus remained unaffected.

Every morning we recite among the many blessings, “Blessed are You, Hashem our G'd...Who releases the imprisoned (bound).” Although one may not be confined to an actual prison, each individual has his own spiritual impediments and blockages, which are the equivalent of a prison. One is not able to advance and succeed because of this level of interference. We therefore acknowledge G'd as the One who provides the Divine Assistance to extricate one from this spiritual confinement and allow us to see and internalize His truth that exists. It was the “iron crucible” that removed the impediments that were created by the failing of Avraham, from the Jewish people to allow them to be redeemed from Egypt and ascend to Sinai to receive G'd's Torah.

3. Looking Back to Go Forward

The Mishna in Tractate Taanis tells us that five tragedies occurred on the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av). The decree that the generation of the spies needed to perish in

the desert over a forty-year period, the destruction of the First and Second Temple, and the destruction of the community of Beitar (Bar Kochva led a rebellion against the Romans and consequently the entire community of Beitar was destroyed. Rambam writes that this tragedy was the equivalent of the destruction of the Temple.). The fifth tragedy that occurred on Tisha B'Av was the city of Jerusalem was plowed under. After the Jewish people were driven from the Land, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem so that there should be no remnant of the Jewish past. How are Chazal able to equate the fifth tragedy with the first four mentioned in the Mishna? Seemingly, the plowing under of Jerusalem, which was only the destruction of the material and physical, is not in the same realm of tragedy as the first four, which was the destruction and exile of the people themselves. However because Chazal did list it together with the others, evidently there is an aspect of the plowing under of the city that is as tragic as the others that are mentioned.

The Romans understood that if they destroyed the past, the history of the Jewish people, they would effectively destroy their future. If there was no remnant of the holy city of Jerusalem, which was the location of the Temple and all of its influences, then the Jewish people would have no frame of reference regarding their spiritual identity. If one is aware of his past, he can have a future if he chooses to pursue it. By plowing under the city, the Romans believed that the Jew would cease to have relevance to his spiritual origins. Without a connection to the past, the Jewish people would become extinct. Thus, the plowing of the city was as tragic if not more so than the others enumerated in the Mishna.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that Reb Yochanon went to visit Rebbe Elazar, a colleague who was ill. When Reb Yochanon entered the room, he saw that it was in completely darkness. Reb Yochanon exposed his arm, that had been covered and caused the room to become illuminated. He radiated holiness, beauty, and a light that was one of a kind. He noticed that Rebbe Elazar was crying. He asked him, "Why are you crying? Is it because you feel that you did not study a sufficient amount of Torah? We had learned that as long as one had studied with the proper intent, for the sake of G'd, it is not relevant how much one actually learned. As it is stated in the Gemara in Tractate Menachos, 'One who does more or one who does less, as long as he intends for the sake of heaven (spiritual standing)'. Are you crying that you did not merit the two tables (the table of Torah and the Table of wealth)? Not everyone merits these two tables..." Rebbe Elazar answered, 'I am crying because of that beauty (referring to the beauty of Reb Yochanon) that will

decompose in the earth." Upon hearing this, Reb Yochanon began to cry also. Reb Yochanon said to Reb Elazar, "This is something worthwhile to cry for."

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Metzia tells us that Reb Yochanon had said about himself that his beauty and radiance was a remnant of those who lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Temple. Although Reb Yochanon had lived hundreds of years after the destruction of the Second Temple, he nevertheless retained that level of holiness. If one wanted to have an inkling of the dimension of holiness that had existed during the Second Temple period, he needed only to gaze upon Reb Yochanon. If one would want to aspire to greatness in spirituality, Reb Yochanon was that special model. However, when Reb Yochanon would pass away that representation of holiness would no longer exist. Thus it would be an end of a spiritual era. This is the reason Reb Yochanon and Rebbe Elazar cried over that beauty that will decompose in the earth.

Similarly, when the Romans plowed under the city of Jerusalem they attempted to obliterate the spiritual past of the Jewish people, and thus sealing their fate forever.

4. Abuse of Rights

The Mishna in Tractate Taanis tells us that five tragedies occurred on the ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av). The first tragedy that took place on Tisha B'Av was that G'd had decreed that the generation of the spies needed to perish in the desert over a forty-year period. The spies had returned with slanderous and evil reports about the Land that G'd had promised the Jewish people. Rather than having faith and trust in Him they said, "...**It is a land that devours its inhabitants!**" The Jewish people believed the reports of the spies and became distraught. The Torah states, "**The entire assembly raised up and issued its voice; the people wept that night.**" The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that in response to their weeping G'd said, "Because you cried for naught (without basis), this day (Tisha B'Av) shall be a day of crying for all generations." Consequently, the First and Second Temple, the destruction of the community of Beitar, and the city of Jerusalem was plowed under on the Ninth of Av. All of these tragedies came about because the Jewish people chose to believe he spies and cry about their predicament, rather than having faith in G'd.

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah tells us that the First Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people had violated the three cardinal sins - murder, idolatry, and forbidden sexual relations. The Second Temple was

destroyed because of baseless hatred between Jews (sinaas chinam). If the First and Second Temple were destroyed for the reasons mentioned in the Gemara, unrelated to what had preceded this period of time, why does the Gemara say that their destruction came about because of the baseless crying of the Jewish people on Tisha B'Av?

At the time of the sin of the spies, the level of clarity that the Jewish people possessed was unique. They had witnessed the revealed miracles of Egypt. They had experienced the splitting of the Sea. They stood at Sinai and G'd had communicated to them face to face as they heard the Ten Commandments. They survived in the desert with the Manna, the living wellspring, and the Clouds of Glory. Despite, their understanding of G'd and His dedication to them, they did not have sufficient trust in Him. They believed the reports of the spies rather than trusting G'd's Word. After the Jewish people wept, G'd said, "How long will this people provoke Me, and how long will they not have faith in Me, despite all of the signs that I performed in their midst?"

When the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt they were idolaters. Through the revealed miracles that G'd performed on their behalf, He endowed them with a unique level of clarity of which they were not worthy at that time. Their perception of truth was a gift from G'd. Despite this exceptional gift, they chose to see their situation incorrectly. They bemoaned their fate and cried upon hearing the reports of the spies, which was incongruous with what they had witnessed previously. Since at that time they had the ability, because of the clarity with which they were endowed, to make the proper choice and they did not, G'd withdrew the His gift of clarity from them. The Jewish people sinned during the First Temple period through violating the three cardinal sins because of a lack of clarity. Their behavior was considered irrational. Despite the fact that G'd's Presence dwelt in their midst in the Temple, they nevertheless succumbed to the three cardinal sins. G'd's punishment for failing with the spies was measure for measure. Just as they had chosen to ignore truth despite their clarity, G'd chose to withdraw their clarity because it was ignored.

Rambam writes in the Laws of Repentance that when G'd hardened the heart of Pharaoh He withdrew his power of free choice. If one is only culpable for doing evil because he had the choice to refrain from it, then why was Pharaoh culpable for withholding the Jewish people and not heeding the Word of G'd to free them? Rambam explains that initially Pharaoh did have the ability to choose between right and wrong but because he chose to defy G'd, despite the fact that he had openly witnessed the

hand of G'd through the first five plagues, G'd revoked his power of choice. Pharaoh had sufficient clarity as a result of the first five plagues to submit to the Will of G'd; however, he chose to ignore Him. Therefore, G'd withdrew His privilege of choice from Pharaoh so that he could no longer make a choice. This is the meaning of "**I (G'd) have hardened his heart.**" Although Pharaoh's continued perpetration of evil was not within his control, he is held fully culpable for his behavior because it was his choice not to have choice.

G'd provides one with exceptional opportunities in life. However, if one chooses to ignore them or undervalue their significance, G'd will withdraw those opportunity. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us that if one accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, G'd removes from him the yoke of material and government. However, if one does not accept upon himself the yoke of Torah, G'd will place upon him the yoke of material and government. As it states, "whoever fulfills the Torah in a state of poverty, will be endowed with ability to fulfill it in a state of wealth. Whoever violates the Torah in a state of wealth, will be ultimately violate it in a state of poverty." If one utilizes the gifts that G'd grants him, He will provide more of the same. However, if one abuses or ignores these gifts, then G'd will withdraw them.

5. *The Root of Baseless Hatred*

The Prophet Isaiah states, "If your sins are crimson (like a crimson thread) then they will be restored to the whiteness of snow. If they are like a (red) worm, then they will be restored to the whiteness of (washed) wool." The whiteness of snow is the most pristine; however, the whiteness of washed wool is to a lesser degree. The Jerusalem Talmud in Tractate Shabbos states that the words of the Prophet are referring to the First and Second Temple period. The sins that are compared to a crimson thread refer to the First Temple, while the sins that are compared to the (red) worm, refer to the Second Temple period.

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah explains that the First Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people had violated the three cardinal sins – forbidden sexual relations, murder, and idolatry. After they had repented, the Jewish people returned from exile to rebuild the Second Temple. This was the equivalent of the crimson thread being restored to the whiteness of snow. They were fully atoned after 70 years of exile in Babylon. The Gemara in Tractate Yomah continues that the Second Temple was destroyed because of *sinaas chinam* (baseless

hatred among Jews). Even after they had repented, their sins that were initially compared to the redness of a worm, were only restored to the whiteness of washed wool. Meaning, they were not fully rehabilitated.

Reb Meir Simcha of D'vinsk explains that a crimson thread is essentially white and it is only colored with crimson dye. It is only a superficial covering concealing the true character of the thread. If one were to wash the dye from the thread, it would be restored to its pristine whiteness (similar to snow). The sins of the First Temple, although they were considered serious/grave, were not indicative of the essence of the Jewish people. Rather, it was a result of their predicament. On the other hand, a worm is red because that is its essence – blood flows within its system. The sin of baseless hatred, even after one repents, can only be restored to the whiteness of washed wool – similar to the worm, whose essence is red, cannot be converted to something other than what it is. *Sinaas chinam* became part of the essence of the Jew's function and experience, rather than being something that one does. Therefore, for one to fully repent, it must be purged from his essence, which is something much more difficult than removing the dye, which is only of superficial nature.

The Gemara tells us that Reb Yochanan was asked, "Which generation was greater – that of the First Temple period or that of the Second? It would seem that violating the three cardinal sins would be considered more severe than baseless hatred, thus causing them to have greater culpability." Reb Yochanan responded, "Look at the Citadel (Temple). After the Jews of the First Temple period repented, the Bais HaMikdash was restored after 70 years. However, after the destruction of the Second Temple, although the Jewish people had repented, it has not yet been restored. Evidently the sin of baseless hatred has not been fully expunged from the Jewish essence."

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that a gentile approached Hillel to be converted to Judaism. However, he had set a precondition for the conversion. It was only if Hillel would be able to teach him one principle that encompassed the Torah in its entirety would he convert. Hillel responded by saying, "Whatever you despise for yourself, do not do to unto your fellow." This is the all-encompassing principle of the Torah and the rest is commentary/detail, which must be studied. We can understand how this principle applies to the segment of the Torah that addresses the mitzvos that are between man and his fellow; however, how does it address the mitzvos that are between man and G'd? What significance does loving

one's fellow have to dietary laws or the observance of the Shabbos?

It can be explained on a simple level that since G'd is similar to a father and the Jewish people are His children, when the Jew sins it pains G'd. Therefore, a Jew should not sin even in the area of between man and G'd because as he does not want to be pained, G'd should not be pained.

We can explain the words of Hillel on a more profound level. The Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred. Baseless hatred emanates from one feeling that his fellow did not afford him his proper due. Baseless hatred is also caused by envy. If one feels that he deserves the degree of success of his fellow, then he will become envious of him and ultimately despise him.

There is a negative commandment "You shall not take revenge and you shall not harbor ill feeling in your heart..." Although one may have been denied something that he had wanted from his fellow, or even had been victimized by him, one may not take revenge or bear ill feeling toward that person. Chinuch explains that the reason for this is, if G'd did not want that individual to fall prey to victimization, it would not have happened. It is similar to a woodchopper using an ax to chop wood. Just as the ax could not chop the wood without the power of the individual behind the ax, so too the victimizer could not infringe on another person's existence, to any degree, unless it was the Will of G'd. This is the basis for the prohibition of not taking revenge or harboring ill feeling. To be able to adhere to these negative commandments one must have a deeply rooted belief that nothing takes place in existence unless it is Willed by G'd.

The Gemara in Tractate Nidah tells us that before a child is conceived an angel takes the droplet of semen before G'd, who pronounces upon it its destiny: "Strong or weak, wise or foolish, wealthy or poor..." This pronouncement is made before the conception of every human being. However the pronouncement of "tzaddik (righteous) or rasha (evil)" is not made because "All is predestined by heaven with the exception of the fear of G'd (heaven)." If one truly believes this fact, there is no basis for envy.

Envy is rooted in a lack of belief in G'd's involvement in one's predicament. If one truly believes that whatever is meant to be his, is rightfully his (because G'd deemed it to be so), then he will not be envious of his fellow. In addition, he will understand that whatever

degree of success or glory was achieved by his fellow was only possible because G'd Willed it to be so. Each person's predicament is unique to himself. One only exists to achieve perfection in his life through multiple choices. Each individual's setting is designed to accommodate his specific spectrum of choices relating to the perfection of his soul. The degree of perfection that is needed by the wealthy person is a different degree of perfection that is needed by one who is wanting. If a person truly believed this reality there would be no envy- thus, no basis for hatred because everything is preordained by G'd.

The sin of baseless hatred (sinaas chinam) is considered so grave because it is a result of the denial of G'd being the basis for all that exists. Thus, it pervades every aspect of his mitzvah involvement. If one has baseless hatred for his fellow, it is a reflection of his lack of belief in this fundamental principle. This in turn reflects on his perspective of performing mitzvos. The objective of mitzvos, regardless of their classification, is to perfect one's spirituality- thus fulfilling his objective in existence.

It is interesting to note that because the Divine Presence dwelled in the First Temple, there was a level of clarity that was available to the Jewish people. This clarity gave them the perspective to understand that one's predicament is preordained. Consequently, their failing was not in the area of baseless hatred. Although it is true that they became distracted and convoluted and therefore transgressed the three cardinal sins, it was not a reflection of their belief. As a result of their severe spiritual regression during the First Temple period, they did not merit to have the Divine Presence in the Second Temple. Consequently, they lacked the clarity that was necessary to appreciate G'd's involvement in each individual's life. Thus, they failed in the area of baseless hatred. The only way G'd will restore His Presence in the world is when the Jewish people recognize that one's predicament is not random, but rather is a result of Divine Providence- only then will baseless hatred no longer exist.