



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Vaetchanan (וַאֲתַחֲנִן, "and I pleaded")**
- **Chapters: Deut. 3:23-7:11**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוּק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Preface:

The Sabbath immediately *following* Tishah B’Av is called Shabbat Nachamu, “the Sabbath of Comfort,” because we take time to remember Israel’s promised future. The assigned Haftarah (Isa. 40:1-26) therefore begins: *Nachamu, nachamu ammi yomar Adonai*: “Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.” Despite Israel’s tribulations, God’s love for her continues forever...

Synopsis

In last week’s Torah portion (Devarim), the Israelites were encamped near the land of Moab, just east of the Jordan, waiting to enter the Promised Land. Moses then began his “farewell address” by summarizing their 40 year history of wandering in the desert, including their 38 year exile at Kadesh Barnea, and their more recent conquest of the Amorite kings Sihon and Og.

In this week’s portion, Moses first recalled how he had pled with God to allow him to enter the land, despite God’s earlier decree that he was forbidden to do so after the incident at Meribah. Despite his request, however, God refused to change His mind, though he permitted Moses to ascend a mountain to catch a glimpse of the land of Canaan. Nonetheless, Moses would die in the desert and was instructed to commission Joshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) to lead the people into the land.

Because he was denied access to the land due to his disobedience, Moses went on to earnestly warn the people regarding their observance of the laws of God. In particular, he warned the people not to add or take away any word that the LORD had commanded, and he further reminded them of the grave sin at Baal Peor, when 24,000 men died from their rebelliousness. Moses then explained that God had especially chosen Israel to be a light to the nations of the world, and their obedience to the Torah would set them apart as a great and wise nation.

Moses then admonished the people to be careful and “keep their soul diligently,” lest they forget their unique identity as God’s covenant people. He then reviewed the Exodus from Egypt and the great revelation of the Torah at Sinai, where the people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire. He reminded them that they saw no form when the LORD spoke to them, and therefore warned them against making any carved image or likeness of God.



Moses continued by saying that if the Israelites engaged in idolatry, they would assuredly be exiled from the land, and he went on to prophesy that future generations would indeed suffer a worldwide exile for their disobedience. However, after a period of tribulation “in the latter days,” the people would again seek the LORD and be regathered to the land. But even in the face of exile, God promised never to entirely abandon the Jewish people: “For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.”

In the midst of this speech, the Torah records that Moses designated three cities of refuge in the territory east of the Jordan River. These cities were safe havens from an “avenger of blood” in cases of involuntary manslaughter. They were also Levitical cities used to promote Torah learning among the tribes of Israel.

The narrative then resumes with a prelude, “This is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel. These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the rules, which Moses spoke to the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt...” Moses then called the people together and repeated the Ten Commandments, stating that the people originally assembled at Mt. Sinai were so terrified by the wonders they witnessed that they pleaded with Moses to speak to them in place of God. After this, Moses stated the central commandment of the Torah – the Shema – affirming the oneness of the LORD and our duty to love and serve Him with all our hearts. The people were warned to carefully transmit to the next generation the commandments of God – to teach them “diligently” to their children – and to place the commandments as “signs” on their hand and heads (tefillin), and to inscribe them upon the doorposts of their dwellings (mezuzah).

Moses then commanded the people to “devote to destruction” all traces of Canaanite culture as they took possession of the land. They were warned not to make any covenants with the seven Canaanite nations and to abhor all forms of their idol worship. Moses reminded them that they were a holy people for whom God showed special love by redeeming them from bondage, and it is therefore their duty to honor Him by observing His commandments. They are to avoid assimilation and to always remember that they are God’s ‘treasured people.’

The portion ends with a reminder of why God chose the Jewish people. “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the least of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.”



Parashah Questions

1. What does the word *va'etchanan* mean (Deut. 3:23)? ¹
2. What was the substance of Moses' plea (Deut. 3:24-25)? ²
3. Why did God refuse Moses' plea (Deut. 3:26)? ³
4. According to Jewish tradition, how many times did Moses appeal to God? ⁴
5. Even though Moses' plea was denied, God made what concession (Deut. 3:27)? ⁵
6. What role was given to Joshua bin Nun (Deut. 3:28)? ⁶
7. What is the "valley opposite Beth Peor" (Deut. 3:29)? ⁷
8. What is the difference between a "statute" (chok) and a "rule" (mishpat) mentioned in Deut. 4:1? ⁸
9. What does the word "shema" (שְׁמַע) mean (Deut. 4:1)? ⁹
10. Why were the people to obey Moses' teaching (Deut. 4:1)? ¹⁰
11. Why did Moses forbid changing even one word from his writings (Deut. 4:2)? ¹¹
12. What was the incident of Baal-Peor (Num. 25; Deut. 4:3)? ¹²



¹ The word *va'etchanan* means "and I pleaded" which comes from the verb *chanan* which means to beseech or implore, from the root noun *chen*, meaning "grace." It means "I sought favor" in terms of appealing to God's grace. In traditional Jewish liturgy, *tachanun* are prayers begging for God's grace and mercy.

² Moses said the LORD God (יְהוָה) had only just begun to show him his greatness and mighty hand, and therefore he asked to enter the land to see God's promises fulfilled -- despite his earlier sin at Meribah (Num. 20:2-20).

³ He seemed to blame the people for his trouble (see 1:37; 3:26), though the account in Num. 20:2-20 seems to suggest that Moses acted presumptuously and in frustration.

⁴ The gematria of *va'etchanan* (וַאֲנִי־חָנִּין) is 515 - the same as the word for *prayer* (i.e., *tefillah*, תְּפִלָּה) - which suggests that Moses offered no less than 515 supplications to be allowed into the land.

⁵ Moses was allowed to see the land from the top of Mount Pisgah ("cleft"), thought to be another name for Nebo. It is also called Mount "Abarim" (עֲבָרִים), the range of crossing - the word "Hebrew" (עִבְרִי) shares the same root (עִבַר).

⁶ He was to be appointed as the one who would lead Israel to inherit the land.

⁷ Beth Peor (בֵּית פְּעוֹר) might have been the place near Pisgah where Balaam attempted to curse Israel (Num 23:28). The Moabites also worshiped Baal there by the name "Baal Peor" (Num 25:1-5).

⁸ A statute (chok) is an "inscribed" divine decree or fiat, whereas a rule is a judgment determined by reason (mishpat).

⁹ Shema means to "hear" in the sense of obeying. It is most famously used in the great commandment (Deut. 6:4-6). That they might live and take possession of the land that the LORD gave to them.

¹¹ Moses wanted to ensure the integrity of the "Book of the Law," that is, the final compilation of his teaching before his death. Since Moses received the mitzvot from God, keeping Moses' words is the same as keeping God's words.

¹² A case of idolatry, sponsored by Balaam, in which Midianite women seduced the Israelites to worship an ancient Semitic god of the "openings" ("Baal Peor") associated with excrement and exposure. Cp. "Beelzebub."



13. What reason(s) were given to keep the laws that Moses taught (Deut. 4:5-8)? ¹³
14. What does Moses mean when he says “keep yourselves diligently” (Deut. 4:9)? ¹⁴
15. What *especially* does Moses want the people to remember (Deut. 4:9-12)? ¹⁵
16. What did the Voice out of the midst of the fire say to the people? (Deut. 4:13)? ¹⁶
17. What else did the Voice say to Moses? (Deut. 4:14)? ¹⁷
18. Since the people saw no “form” (תְּמוּנָה) of the LORD at Sinai, what are they particularly forbidden to do (Deut. 4:15-18)? ¹⁸
19. Were the people allowed to engage in astrology, or the worship of the sun, the moon, or the stars (Deut. 4:19)? ¹⁹
20. What image does Moses use to describe Israel’s servitude in Egypt (Deut. 4:20)? ²⁰
21. Why did God take the people out of Egypt (Deut. 4:20)? ²¹
22. Why was God angry at Moses, and what was his punishment (Deut. 4:21-22)? ²²
23. Why does Moses call the LORD *esh okhlah* - a “Consuming Fire” and *El kannah* - a “Jealous God” (Deut. 4:23-24)? ²³
24. What punishment will come to Israel if they forsake the LORD (Deut. 4:25-29)? ²⁴

¹³ Observance of these would lead to wisdom (chokmah) and understanding (binah) in the sight of all peoples, which in turn will glorify the LORD God of Israel and provide a testimony of His wisdom.

¹⁴ He means to consciously *remember* what God has done for them. This focuses on education (chinuch), and especially with educating children in the truth: “Make these things known to your children and grandchildren.”

¹⁵ Moses wanted parents to make sure their children remembered the Sinai experience. This was to be a vivid memory, with images of the people at the foot of the mountain burning with fire “to the heart of heaven,” and the sound of the Voice of the LORD speaking from the midst of the fire.

¹⁶ The Ten Utterances (עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרִים) which He later wrote on two tablets of stone (שְׁנֵי לְחֹת אֲבָנִים). This is also referred to as “His Covenant.”

¹⁷ God gave Moses additional statutes and rules to be observed in the land of Israel.

¹⁸ They are forbidden to make any carved image (pesel / idol) in the form of any figure, human or animal, or to engage in astrology or “star gazing.”

¹⁹ No, though there is a strange statement that God had “allotted them to all nations under heaven.”

²⁰ He calls it an “iron furnace,” a smelting pot of great affliction.

²¹ To become for Him a people of His own inheritance (לְהִיְיֹוֹת לוֹ לְעַם נַחֲלָה). This is the basis for the Jewish people being a “chosen people,” a “treasured people,” and so on. Compare 1 Peter 2:9. Note that the word for “inheritance” (nachalah) is also used to describe the land that the LORD gave to Israel.

²² Because of the sin at Meribah-Kadesh - when Moses struck the rock in frustration (Num. 20:10-13, Deut. 3:23-28) - Moses was forbidden to cross the Jordan to enter the promised land but instead was destined to die in the desert.

²³ These metaphors suggest that God is both indescribable and passionately concerned with our love for Him (see Heb. 12:28-29). The Fire that consumes will consume all things that are not approved by our Heavenly Father.

²⁴ They would be decimated and exiled from the land, scattered among the nations.



25. What promise did God give the people for the “latter days” (Deut. 4:29)?²⁵
26. What reason did God give for the preservation of the Jewish people (Deut. 4:31)?²⁶
27. What rhetorical question did God want the people to ask (Deut. 4:32-34)?²⁷
28. Why did God deliver the Jewish people from Egypt (Deut. 4:35)?²⁸
29. Why did God “discipline” the people (Deut. 4:36)?²⁹
30. Why are the Jews called the “chosen people” (Deut. 4:37-38)?³⁰
31. What are we to know in our hearts (Deut. 4:39-40)?³¹
32. How many cities of refuge were set apart east of the Jordan (Deut. 4:41-43)?³²
33. What does the word “Torah” mean (Deut. 4:44-45)?³³
34. Is the Sinai covenant the same as the Abrahamic covenant (Deut. 5:1-5)?³⁴
35. Can you list – in order – the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6-21)?³⁵
36. Did God directly speak *other* words to the people at Sinai (Deut. 5:22)?³⁶
37. When the people heard the Voice of God, what did they do (Deut. 5:23-27)?³⁷

²⁵ Even during the tribulation of the latter days (אַחֲרַיִת הַיָּמִים), if the people would seek the LORD they would find Him, if they sought *b'kol levavkha uvkhol nafshekha* – “with all their heart and all their soul.”

²⁶ He cannot nullify the covenant he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Note this refers to the Abrahamic covenant, not the Sinai covenant. Israel’s preservation is guaranteed by God’s promises to the patriarchs.

²⁷ What other nation had been rescued from bondage by great signs and wonders in order to hear the Voice of God?

²⁸ That they might know that the LORD is God; there is no other power besides him (אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ). God did this because He loved the fathers of Israel and uniquely chose their offspring (Deut. 4:27).

²⁹ “Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you” (Deut. 4:36). The verb “discipline” here is *yasar*, from which we get the word *mussar* (מוֹסָר), meaning correction, ethical instruction, and so on.... It is a word used to describe the instruction a good father would give his son regarding moral cause and effect and spiritual truth.

³⁰ Based on the verse: “he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them (יָבַחֵר בְּזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו) and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power.”

³¹ That the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other, and therefore we must obey his commandments.

³² Three cities, which were safe havens for those accused of manslaughter.

³³ The word Torah (תּוֹרָה) means “instruction” (a teacher is called a *moreh/morah*). This is a general word that encompasses “testimonies” (*edot*), “statutes” (*chukkim*), and “rules” (*mishpatim*). The phrase שָׁם מִשָּׁה לְפָנַי בְּנִי וְשָׂרָא לְפָנַי is used in the Torah service at synagogue every week.

³⁴ No. The Sinai covenant was made “not with our fathers” but with us – namely, the remnant of the Exodus generation.

³⁵ 1) I am the LORD your God; 2) no other gods/idols; 3) no name in vain; 4) keep Sabbath; 5) honor parents; 6) no murder; 7) no adultery; 8) no stealing; 9) no false oaths; 10) no coveting.

³⁶ No. “The LORD spoke to all your assembly ...with a loud voice; and he added no more.

³⁷ They grew fearful and asked Moses to be their “mediator” before God.



38. Was God angry that the people wanted Moses to be their mediator (Deut. 5:28)? ³⁸
39. What other revelation did Moses receive at Sinai (Deut. 5:31)? ³⁹
40. What is the central commandment of all the Torah (Deut. 6:1-9)? ⁴⁰
41. What is the Shema? ⁴¹
42. What does the idea of “echdut” – oneness – mean to you? ⁴²
43. How important is education of children to the LORD (Deut. 6:7)? ⁴³
44. What are “totafot” (Deut. 6:8)? ⁴⁴
45. What is a mezuzah (Deut. 6:9)? ⁴⁵
46. When your child asks about what all the commandments, statutes, and rules mean, what are you to say (Deut. 6:20-24)? ⁴⁶
47. Can you list the seven Canaanite nations that were to be “devoted to complete destruction” (Deut. 7:1-3)? ⁴⁷
48. Why were the Israelites forbidden to marry members of these nations (Deut. 7:4)? ⁴⁸
49. What were the Israelites to do with artifacts from these cultures (Deut. 7:5)? ⁴⁹

³⁸ No, he said their request was righteous and he praised their heart’s intent (see Deut. 5:29).

³⁹ Moses was to receive “all the commandment and statutes and rules” (כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים), that is, an explanation of the meaning of the Ten Commandments as well as additional laws for Israel.

⁴⁰ To fear the LORD; to keep His laws all the days of your life; to hear and to do the commandments, and most especially, to love the LORD with all your heart, soul, and “muchness.” See also Deut. 11:18-20.

⁴¹ The Shema is a “three-in-one” prayer. The Name of God appears three names in the six primary words, and that the Shema and its blessings is composed of three separate portions (i.e., the Ve’ahavta, Vehayah, and Vayomer).

⁴² Because God is One - *echad* (not *yachid*) - the very great commandment is to become one with Him in love: HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE - and (therefore) you SHALL LOVE the LORD *b’khol levavkha* - with all your heart, *uvkhol nafshekha* - with all your soul, *uv’khol me’odekha* - with all your “muchness,” so that you are part of His unity in love. See John 17:11, 22-23.

⁴³ It is vital and part of the central commandment of Torah: “You shall teach them *diligently* to your children....” The Hebrew here (וְשִׁנְנָתֶם לְבְנֵיךָ) implies inculcation, repeating over and over again. See also Deut. 11:18-20.

⁴⁴ “Four compartments,” thought to refer to the four boxes in the head Tefillin (Talmud). Totafot is usually translated as “frontlets,” “bands,” or “phylacteries” in English.

⁴⁵ A mezuzah is a kosher scroll (inscribed with Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21) that is rolled up and inserted into a decorative case. The case is then affixed to a doorway in fulfillment of the commandment given in Deut. 6:9, 11:20, “And you shall write them upon the *doorposts* (mezuzot) of your house and upon your gates.”

⁴⁶ Avadim hayinu: “We were slaves...” Verses 6:21-24 are part of the traditional Passover Haggadah.

⁴⁷ The Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and the Jebusites – all nations steeped in the occult and led by the powers of darkness to spuriously occupy the land in a vain attempt to thwart God’s plans.

⁴⁸ They would turn away the people from following the LORD by encouraging them to tolerate idolatry.

⁴⁹ They were commanded to utterly destroy all traces of their idolatry and culture.



50. Why did God choose the Jewish people and set His love upon them (Deut. 7:6-8)?⁵⁰
51. What is in store for those who hate the LORD (Deut. 7:9-11)?⁵¹

Discussion Topics

1. Part of the Shema includes the commandment to teach your children the laws of the Torah, which implies that it is a religious obligation for everyone to understand Jewish culture and heritage. Discuss how you further your education in the Torah...
2. Moses repeatedly warns against idolatry and states that at the theophany at Sinai, the people saw no form or likeness of God (Deut. 4:12-15). He stresses the people heard a voice and that the revelation was therefore verbal rather than visual. However, in the Book of Exodus it is written that the people would see the LORD come down on the third day (Exod. 19:11), and later the elders of Israel were said to have directly seen the God of Israel (Exod. 24:10-11). Discuss why visual idolatry is prohibited though metaphorical language is permitted (e.g., God is a Rock, etc.).
3. When Yeshua was asked what was the greatest commandment, he quoted the *ve'ahavta* portion of the Shema and the duty to love others (see Matt. 22:36-40). The commandment to love is central, but how can it be *commanded*? Discuss the relationship between loving God and obeying His commandments.
4. Why do you think the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) is mentioned *before* the commandment to love God (Deut. 6:5)? It has been said, when you love a king, you will love his children (see 1 John 5:1). Discuss how loving others can express your love for God.
5. Bonhoeffer once said, "Only those who believe obey; and only those who obey believe." Do you agree? Certainly there are cases where someone obeys but does not truly believe (think of a self-righteous religionist, for example), but is it possible to sin and yet still believe? Discuss the relationship between faith and "works."
6. In this portion we are repeatedly warned us to obey the "statutes and rules" revealed to Moses. In light of the deliverance we have in Yeshua, are Christians required to heed these words? If so, to what extent, and if not, then why not? Read Hebrews 7:12 and discuss the new covenant in light of the Sinai covenant.

⁵⁰ God chose them to be "am segulah" – a treasured people from among the nations. The call of holiness was meant to make them be a "light to the nations" and an example of the glory of God. God chose them because he loves them and is keeping the oath He made to Israel's fathers. Likewise, God chose you because He loves you (1 Pet. 2:9-10). If you sense His presence or hear His call, you are His and He wants you to be in relationship with Him. Your hunger for love is His call for your heart.

⁵¹ He will "repay to the face" those who hate Him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him, "He will repay him to his face."



For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Eikev** (Deut. 7:12-11:25)
- Read the Haftarah (Isaiah 49:14-51:3)
- Read the NT (Heb. 11:8-13; Rom. 8:31-39)

