

Parshat Va'etchanan
Shabbat Nachamu
Intimacy without Expectations: Cultivating a Sober Spirituality
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This week's parsha, *parshat Va'etchanan*, begins with one of the more devastating scenes in the Torah: that of Moshe pleading desperately before God.

I entreated the Lord at that time saying...(Deuteronomy 3:23) וַאֲתַחֲנַן אֵל ה' בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר: (דברים ג:לג)

In this book of Devarim, a book of recollections, Moshe speaks poignantly about his efforts to beseech God to change God's will. Having been punished to never enter the Land of Israel, Moshe begs God nonetheless,

Please let me cross over and see the good land that is on אֶעֱבְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר
the other side of the Jordan" (Deut.3:25). הַיַּרְדֵּן (דברים ג:לה)

Hoping against hope, bumping up against an already prescribed prohibition, he asks just one more time for an alternate fate. He pleads to have his one life-long wish fulfilled. Indeed, the *midrash* (in Devarim Rabbah 11:6), building off of the gematria of the word "*va'etchanan*," suggests that Moshe asked not once — but 515 times! Over and over again, he begged. But, alas, God would not budge.

But the Lord was angry with me because of you, and He did not וַיִּתְעַבֵּר ה' בִּי לְמַעַןְכֶּם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלַי וַיֹּאמֶר
listen to me, and the Lord said to me, "It is enough for you; ה' אֵלַי רַב־לֶךְ אֶל־תּוֹסֵף דַּבֵּר אֵלַי עוֹד בַּדְּבָר
speak to Me no more regarding this matter. (Deuteronomy 3:26) הַזֶּה: (דברים ג:כו)

Moshe was doomed never to step foot in the land of his dreams.

The language of this dramatic episode is particularly noteworthy. Rashi (on Deut. 3:23) points out that the root of "*va'etchanan*" is חן , meaning grace. Moshe knew that he was not worthy, and so he asked for a "מתנת חנים," an undeserved gift. He wished to be bestowed with a kindness that he was not owed. The *midrash* spells this out poignantly:

So did the Holy One Blessed be He say to Moshe: "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, [and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy]." (Exodus 33:19). He [the Lord] said: "For one who is worthy, "I will show mercy"— with my attribute of mercy, I will do for him. And for one who is not worthy, "I will be gracious"— with a gift of grace (*matnat chinam*) I will do for him. When Moses sought to enter the land of Israel, the Lord said to him, "It is enough for you" (Deut. 3:26). Moses said to the Lord: "Master of the universe, did you not tell me, 'And for one who is not worthy, "I will be gracious"— with a gift of grace (*matnat chinam*) I will do for him'? Now, I am asking nothing of you except this undeserved grace." (Devarim Rabbah 2:1)

כך אמר הקב"ה למשה (שמות לג) וחנותי את אשר אחון אמר לו מי שיש לו בידי ורחמתי במדת רחמים אני עושה עמו, ומי שאין לו בידי וחנותי במתנת חנם אני עושה עמו, ובשעה שהיה משה מבקש ליכנס לארץ ישראל אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא רב לך אמר לפניו רבונן של עולם לא כך אמרת לי כל מי שאין לו בידי וחנותי במתנת חנם אני עושה עמו, עכשיו איני אומר שמתבקש לי אצלך מאומה אלא חנם עשה עמי. (דברים רבה ב:א)

And yet he was denied.

Surprisingly, Chazal see in this prayer — *this rejected prayer of the undeserving* — a model for *tefillah* more generally. The *midrash* (Devarim Rabbah 2:1) cites it as one modality of ten for how we might approach God. The Gemara (Berakhot 30b) cites it as a halakhic precedent for the proper frame of mind for prayer. The verb finds its way into our daily *tachanun* and frames the petitionary section of the *amida* in the Siddur:

You *graciously* endow human beings with wisdom.

אתה חונן לאדם דעת ומלמד לאנוש בינה.

Moshe's doomed-from-the-start plea for God's grace, his desperate hope against hope that his fate might be turned around, is curiously hailed as an a priori ideal. Why? Why would an unanswered prayer become a model for prayer? What might that tell us about what prayer is, in general? And what might it tell us about petition, in particular?

I would suggest that the message here is purposefully paradoxical. Our rabbis are asking us to develop a nuanced stance toward prayer, to cultivate the ability to plead *whether or not* our requests will be granted. Prayers of *tachanun* aim to open the spiritual possibility for petition that does not rely on its fulfillment. They teach us that prayer is not really about getting the things we ask for. That is not discernibly how God works—at least not all of the time or within our desired timeframes. Perhaps prayer, instead, is about learning to create intimacy without expectations, finding a way to have a relationship with God that is full of trust and full of hope, and yet is devoid of tit-for-tat manipulations or a sense of entitlement. Perhaps prayer is about letting go of the all-too-human wish to control God through this or that action, this or that formulation, and instead is about opening up to a world of *chen*, of grace. When we frame our *bakashot* (petitions) with the request: "חננו מאתך דעה בינה והשכל" ("Grace us with the knowledge, understanding, and discernment that come from You"), perhaps it is to ground us in this sort of difficult wisdom as we engage in a process of petition that tempts us in another direction. For the task is not an easy one. A deep relationship with God without magical thinking is, alas, a rather sober spirituality. And yet it can be so very real and so very honest.

Moshe's "*tachanun*" models just that. He engages in *tefillah* regarding entering the land of Israel, knowing fully well that he has been denied the request. He demonstrates a willingness to hope against hope and to ask for things over and over again — even 515 times!—so enmeshed is he with God. He holds onto a thread of optimism, and yet is grounded in reality. God has other plans for him. He will see the land, but not enter it.

Why bother to ask then? Why did Moshe engage in petitionary prayer? Why do we?

I submit that petitionary prayer is not about the petition so much as it is about the cultivation of oneself as a petitioner. One way that we can build intimacy with God is by foregrounding our own sense of need, our own vulnerability and incompleteness. Asking for that which we lack accents the ways in which we are not full, not whole, in other words, not God. This awareness is spiritually primary. This humility helps us recognize that we can only avail ourselves to a "*matnat chinam*," a gift of grace. God may or may not grant it, but we will be transformed in the process of asking.

Having come through *Tisha B'Av*, this Shabbat is *Shabbat Nachamu*, where we read Isaiah's famous words, "נחמו עמי," "Comfort, comfort, my people." (Isaiah 40:1). In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, and in the wake of our mourning and fasting for it, we announce these words of consolation. There seems to be a close connection between the *chen* of *Va'etchanan* and the *nechama* of Isaiah. In a world that lacks a Temple, that epicenter of direct, immediate connection to God, we must yearn instead for a new and different relationship with God—an intimacy born of a mature, more sober spirituality, one that is without expectations or entitlements, yet still full of hope. That, arguably, will provide the real comfort that we seek. As we read *parshat Va'etchanan* and ponder the words of Isaiah, let us aim to open ourselves to *chen* and thus to real *nechama*.



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