

Va'etchanan 5775

Sometimes it's hard to get a bearing on why we have to do terrible things. It's hard to understand the necessity of conquering, killing, and destroying a city just for us to inhabit it. Much like Pinchas ending the plague by killing Cozbi and Zimri, Canaan needed to be wiped out for their iniquities. Their sins of sorcery and idolatry were far different than the Pagan religions of today, which exemplify kindness over harm. Their sins were of sacrificing children, of hurting others, and of sexual transgressions.

But this is not a d'var Torah of pain or even of Canaan. This is a d'var Torah of comfort and consolation, something we need after Tisha b'Av.

Last week we remembered the destruction of our Temple, and this week in the Torah we're watching Moshe look over the land his followers are about to take. He pleads with Hashem to go to the land and is continually shot down. In the end, his iniquities keep him from being eligible to enter Eretz Yisrael.

The problem is that the people love Moses. They've been following him through thick and thin; they've found communal peace through the government he set up; they've discovered levels of spirituality and connections with G-d they would not have otherwise had.

Moses was G-d's protege and deeply entwined with the development of the nation and the people Israel. Without Moshe's influence, the people would certainly devolve back into barbaric ways, so there needed to be a foundation for the government. Foundations for homes are usually poured concrete, the foundation for Israel was also to be stone. And we see these tablets of stone come into existence here.

It is with these tablets I want to build today's words around.

There are three commandments I will be talking about: the first, the third, and the tenth.

In order to establish our nation, we had to completely break away from the polytheistic religions based on their senses. The old religions centered around what they could see, touch, taste, and smell. They were religions of objects and idols, of sensations and violence, of blood and fire. We are a religion of cerebral thought, of self sacrifice, and of discipline. This is one of the many reasons our sages believed we were always meant to be weaned off of sacrifices and why our prayers now take the place of the *karbanot*.

We've taken something physical and turned it into something cerebral. Something which requires a discipline.

This is the first commandment. It is often described as a preamble or an introduction to the remainder of the laws. I feel it is not, though. It reads, in English, "I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." That is not a preamble. It is not "I, the Lord, in order to form a more perfect nation..." it is a statement establishing Hashem as the god of Israel. That statement, which tells us who G-d is, is commanding us to acknowledge who he is.

The only reason there needs to be the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods beside me," is because he has commanded us to accept him in his eminent position.

Our acceptance of him is the reason we are such a cerebral religion, who debate and expand our knowledge. In fact, Egypt is, only today, what we call the place we were taken out of. The Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*. The name, *Mitzrayim*, comes from the word *m'tzarim*, which meant "narrow straits."

The narrow straits was both geographical, a place between land and rivers, and metaphorical, a place where we were restricted.

Accepting Hashem as G-d, as our G-d, and allowing us to shed the history of idols and sacrifices brings us to new avenues of thought and knowledge. Instead of relying on something we can see, a statue, rock, or celestial bodies, we are allowed to rely on theories, ideas, and studies. Instead of relying on objects to sustain our spirituality, we are free to explore and find it ourselves.

Moses was fundamental in this. Had Moses died in Eretz Yisrael, he would have undoubtedly been interred and we would likely have revered him as we do G-d. We would likely have resorted to iconography by worshipping *him* rather than Hashem.

Clearly we needed to sever ourselves from these past habits and, since we were to take back Canaan, we needed to clear it of people who would lead us astray, especially considering the plague from promiscuity we just overcame.

But Moses wasn't allowed to enter. As I said earlier, had he entered the Land, there was too strong a chance he would have been elevated to the status of a deity, rather than the most elevated prophet. He was not a deity, of course, and his humanity was shown many times, such as when he infamously struck the rock out of anger to draw water.

The third commandment is the prohibition on oaths. It tells us not to use G-d as a vehicle for perjury. On page 1,011 of our Etz Hayim, chapter 4, verse 21, Moses tells Israel Hashem was angry with him on the people's accord. As our *chumash* points out, this is seemingly inappropriate for a leader to do. Normally, saying that you were hurt because G-d was angry at someone else would be a violation of this commandment. It was necessary, though, as it set up his own sacrifice of himself for them. He let them know that not only was he not entering the land with them, but that if G-d would deny his best prophet access because of the iniquities of the people, then the foundation of laws to follow had better be adhered to.

Moses wanted nothing more to enter and see his people flourish. One might say he coveted the land they were receiving and their status of fulfillment in that land. In fact, I believe, since he was human after all, that he definitely did.

What's interesting about the commandment not to covet is that it's one of the few commandments that are about thoughts, rather than actions. We're told keep the Sabbath holy, not to commit adultery, not steal, not bear false witness, not do false acts in G-d's name, but these are all actions. Coveting is highly internalized. It's intangible and often unavoidable. To be completely happy with one's lot is an extraordinarily difficult mindset to obtain.

So why is this in here? I would argue that taking action on those thoughts is what really needs to be avoided. Falling into a depression because you can't get what you desire is to be avoided. Wanton wanting, gluttonous or excessive thoughts of acquisition are what we must keep in check.

If you look at our *haftorah* this week, you'll see it's one of consolation. It is words from Isaiah telling us of how immense Hashem is. It tells us of all the good he creates, in stark contrast to the destruction we experienced last week. It tells us that we can be thoughtful, we can worship with our minds and hearts, rather than our senses and labors. It tells of all the good surrounding us that we are here to enjoy.

To covet is in our nature, it drives us as a species. But it must be checked and we must sometimes sacrifice what we want most for the greater good. As the *Shema* is in this *parashah*, with the binding of *tefillin* in chapter 6, verse 8, we can learn something. As Ashkenazim, we wrap our arm *tefillin* inward. While performing this extraordinarily holy act of *davening* with *tefillin*, turning our hands inward towards us only tightens our bindings, bringing us closer to *Mitzrayim*. Only by opening our hands to others are we truly comforted.

We were taken out of the land of narrowness and suffering and told to flourish and thrive. We were given a set of rules to facilitate thriving and to give us focus. The sacrifice of Moses was necessary, but we can show that same generosity by living well and opening up our hands to others.

Shabbat shalom.