

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Va'etchanan

In the Torah portion of Va'etchanan, we read for the second time the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can roughly be divided into two parts. The first is between God and man, and the second between man and man. Those between God and man really speak to man's desire for mastery. They tell you not to bow down to any idols because they will pollute your mind and stop you from achieving God's purpose. You will be filled with superstition and hate and false notions, which will destroy the unity of the universe, and thus not allow you to discover nature's laws and benefits. Not only is idolatry immoral, but it impedes man's conquest of the universe. It will make him a perpetual prisoner of the Stone Age.

We should not take God's name in vain, because it is not by evoking God's name alone that we achieve progress, but by helping ourselves. "God helps those who help themselves." Shabbat teaches us that we are not only man the creator, but also man the meditator, that we must pause in our endeavors to be able to approach them with a sense of freshness. Honoring your father and mother teaches us that we must stand on the shoulders of the past, if we are to make progress in the future. The commandment of honoring your father and your mother belongs to both sets of commandments.

The commandments of thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, be a false witness, or covet speak to man's nature as a lonely being. Our success will turn to mere dust if there are not those who admire us for our success, and who will benefit because of our success. A man may rob a bank and run off with millions of dollars, but he will not have the esteem of his fellow men, because he benefits no one but himself. How you do something is as important as what you do.

In this Torah portion of Va'etchanan, we also learn about the *arei miklat*, the cities of refuge. Moshe set aside three cities in Trans-Jordan, where those who kill another human being unintentionally, but who were guilty of contributory negligence, could find refuge. They were required as punishment to remain in these cities until the death of the High Priest of those times. This passage (Deut. 4:41-43) seems rather strange, first of all because of where it is located. It is found right beside Judaism's most basic teachings, right next to the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6-18) and the Sh'ma (Deut. 6:4-9). Yet we learn that this act of Moshe's was almost meaningless, because none of these cities could, in fact, become a city of refuge until after the conquest of the land of Israel. At that time, three cities inside

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the land would also be designated as cities of refuge. All six cities had to be named before any of them could become a city of refuge.

It seems to me that here we have and can learn one of Judaism's main teachings – that all of us must assume responsibility for the affairs of the community, regardless of whether or not we can implement all of our ideas. We should never feel that success must be guaranteed, before we are willing to do anything. Unfortunately, in our day, there are far too many people who want everything done for them, who don't want to accept responsibility. Their usual excuse is, "It won't help anyway; things aren't going to change." They want their success assured, even before they begin. Moshe's actions thunder against this philosophy. Even the names he chose for these three cities show the fallacy of this attitude. Betzer Bamidbar B'erezt Hamishor: there is strength in honesty; Ramot BaGilad: there are heights in giving testimony; Golan Babashan: he exposes those who are ashamed to act. Success is not always the important element of our acts. What is important is our effort. If we don't succeed, future generations might, or we ourselves in future situations. What is important is that we assume our responsibility. In the Sephardic ritual, the Torah is never read lying down. It is always encased in a special case and is read standing up. The Torah must never be dormant; it must be standing up, always ready for action. Must you be assured of success before you act?

Shabbat Shalom!

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