

August 9, 2014

D'RASH - VA-ET-HCHANAN (I Plead)

This week's *parashah*, *vah-eh-tchah-nahn*, begins with Moshe relating to the Israelites how he was pleading with HaShem, asking to be allowed to enter the Promised Land. He then tells the people to obey God's laws so that they might live securely in the land and so their wisdom and discernment might be evident to the other nations. Look how good HaShem has been to His chosen people. He got them out of Egypt, provided food and water for them in the desert, defeated their enemies along the way, and took them to a land flowing with milk and honey. On the other hand, Moshe outlines the punishment for not obeying these laws. Moshe warns them that they will go into exile if they falter, but reminds them that HaShem is compassionate.

Now, as in the past, people are divided into two general camps. Some say we must fear HaShem while others stress the need to love Him. The natural consequence of too much emphasis on fearing God is to expect the human/divine relationship to go in one direction: God commands and we obey. You might say that we obey or else! But in this *parashah*, Moshe tells the assembled tribes of Israel that they must love the Lord with all of their heart, soul, and might. It is important to fear God, but it is also important to love Him. One cannot compare a person who acts out of love to one who acts out of the fear of punishment. It has been observed that fear can motivate behavior for only so long. As the source of fear loses its strength, service stops. When a person sees that his service no longer exempts him from the hazards and disappointments of life his inducement for serving God also stops. Serving God out of a sense of fear is not the standard set by the prophets and sages. At best, fear is only a useful educational tool until a person's knowledge of God increases and they can serve motivated by love.

What was true in the time of Moshe is even more applicable to our time. Today's insistence on the worth of the individual and the ability of mankind to progress, has moved us beyond the utility of fear. We want to draw near to our God because He became one of us, taught us, suffered for us, and died for us. If we want to draw close to God, we will do so out of our love for Him. He said that He would come back for those who belong to Him. Do we love because He first loved us, or do we fear being punished by being left behind?

Hebrew            Deuteronomy 6:4-5

English            Deuteronomy 6:1-5

Haftarah            Isaiah 40:9-11

B'rit Chadashah    Mark 12:28-34