

Introduction to Parsha #45: Va'etchanan¹

READINGS: *Torah Va'etchanan:* Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11
Haftarah: Isaiah 40:1-26
B'rit Chadasha: Mark 12:28-34



Behold it with your eyes!
[Deuteronomy 3:26(c)]

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is *Gevurot*, the Prayer of His Powers

Va'etchanan el-Adonai ba'et hahi – *And then I appealed unto the grace [Hebrew chanan] of the Holy One.... Deuteronomy 3:23a.*

Moshe is doing the unthinkable for a public figure – he is making his private devotional life – his personal psalmistry mechanics - public. He is showing us how a mature covenant partner of the Creator of the Universe processes negative experiences and emotions. He wants us to know that *shalom* cannot be found in dumping our stress, worries, offenses, and negative emotions on our fellow man. He wants us to know that seeking either affirmation, pity, alliance, or counsel from other human beings is not the way to deal with drama, trauma, disappointment, or disgust – especially while our wounds are still fresh, our nerves and emotions are still raw, and our flesh is still operating in overreaction/self-protectionism mode. He wants us to know that there is a Friend to whom we can take our grievances and with whom we can discuss our feelings – but that Friend does not have a mortal body. He has not always known this; but at 120, after the hard lessons of the Wilderness, he knows it now. He knows the way to overcome and transcend offenses and negative emotions, instead of wallow in them and make them worse, is to take them directly to, and talk about them with, the Holy One. Moshe wants us to learn the covenant disciplines of tefillah, tehillah, and teshuvah. He models what it looks like to take our troubles and worries straight to the source of true wisdom, and to humbly seek from Him a sufficient-for-the-day allotment of, *chen/chanan* – i.e. ‘grace’.

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The God-Man Relationship has Always Been – and Will Always Be – About Grace

Holy Writ first introduced to the beautiful mystery of *chanan* – *i.e.* ‘grace’ - in the Noahic narrative. In the concluding verse of Torah’s opening parsha, *B’reshit*, the inspired Writer informed us that *Noach ‘found/discovered grace’ [chen] in the eyes of the Holy One*. **Genesis 6:8**. All the events of Noach’s life flowed from and pulsated with grace. It was, in fact, through His interactions with Noach that the Holy One introduced His *chen/chanan* to the Ecosystem of earth. Once the grace window opened, the future of both mankind and Creation became obvious: there would always be a portal of grace that leads men to *redemption*; a route of grace that leads Creation to *restoration*; a road of grace that leads broken relationships to *reconciliation*; a gate of that leads prodigals to *atonement*; and a set of grace-dripping footprints in the sand testifying of *His indescribable goodness*. There always has been – always is – and always will be a pathway lit by love, cleared by mercy, and paved in lovingkindness, that steers sinful men in the direction of *yasha* – *i.e.* *help/deliverance/rescue/salvation* - and *shalom*. Avraham began to explore the dimensions of this wonderful mystery of the Divine Plan in Genesis 18:3 ff. Speaking to three mysterious visitors, one of which represented the embodiment of the Holy One, he said *‘If/since I have found chen in your sight, do not pass your servant by’*. You remember how that turned out, don’t you? After that visitation, Avraham began to model *chen* to the world. Soon men like Lot, Laban, Ya’akov, and even Shechem were talking about *chen* like it was the most normal thing in the world. See **Genesis 19:19; Genesis 30:7; Genesis 32:5, 33:8,10 and 15, and Genesis 34:11**.

A few generations later, Yosef found *chen* in the Holy One’s eyes as well [**Genesis 39:21**]. Indeed, Yosef’s life story became the essential blueprint for *chen* in both God-to-man and man-to-man relations.

The beautiful thread of grace/*chen* continued on into the Exodus story. See **Exodus 12:36 and 33:12-17**. Moshe is therefore no stranger to this mystery by the time of *Va’etchanan* – the parsha of defining *the parameters of grace*. This parsha is all about [a] *Who the Holy One our God is*, [b] *how He relates to men*, and [c] *how He is to be loved*; and, therefore, [d] *who we His Kingdom emissaries are to be/become*, [e] *how we are to relate to our King and to the world*, and [f] *how we are to love Him, prove our love for Him, and co-labor with Him in His Grand Plan for the Redemption of Mankind and the Restoration of Creation to its intended Edenic state*.

Whew – those are weighty subjects, right? ***Lo tirah*** – *i.e.* *do not be frightened*, though! Our King will inspire and empower us to become everything He envisions. He will

even give us a Helper, to dwell with us, and to do the heavy lifting for us with regard to everything He instructs us to do. The *great reveal* begins with Moshe saying: *Va'etchanan el-Adonai ... i.e. and unto the grace of the Holy One I appealed ... Deuteronomy 3:23a*. It ends four chapters and 115 verses later with Moshe saying: *Vayadata – i.e. And know, understand and adjust your lifestyle to the reality, therefore, that the Holy One your God, He is God, the faithful Elohim, Who keeps covenant and mercy [Hebrew chesed] unto those who love him and cherish, treasure, and zealously guard and preserve [Hebrew, sh'mar] His Mitzvot for a thousand generations, and that unto those who bear enmity toward Him He shows shalom to their face, to disorient them Therefore cherish, treasure, and zealously guard and preserve² the mitzvot, the chukim, and the mishpatim with which I enjoin you today, to cause them to come alive and impact your world in tangible, visible, functional ways [Hebrew, asah]. Deuteronomy 7:9-11.*

What mysteries lie in between these bookends? Well, that is where seekers of Wisdom from Heaven find it. That is where the Master takes the hand of Moshe, directs it ever so gently to the canvas ... and *paints His Masterpiece!*

The Curtain Rises: Act I at the Masterpiece Theater

As the curtain rises on Moshe's Masterpiece parsha we find the prophet-turned-sage with a scroll open before him. Which scroll? The one listing the departure points of B'nei Yisrael's great four decade long *Coming-Out-of-the-Wilderness-Leaning-on-the-arm-of-her-Beloved Journey*. Moshe introduced this scroll to the world in the concluding parsha of *Sefer Bamidbar* [see **Numbers 33:1-2**]. Now the prophet is taking it a step further – not merely listing the points of departure as he did before, but actually delivering a drash about what happened at what he deems the most critical places.

The fire of the Holy One that burned at Mount Sinai is *burning away* in the old greybeard's breast, you see. Moshe knows that he only has 36 days to complete his mission on earth, and deliver his *magnum opus* to the world. He is not about to go gently into that good night. His heart is overflowing with a noble theme. His tongue is the pen of a ready writer. He may be an old wineskin, but he is filled to the brim with new wine – and the pressure in the vessel has to be released! The Holy One has Moshe's spirit primed to pour out cascading waves of *prophetic insight* and *Divine empowerment*.

What is coming forth from Moshe's lips and stylus now is not *human wisdom*. Nor

² The Hebrew verb used in the original text, which includes all the actions described, is *sh'mar* – shin, mem, resh, Strong's Hebrew word #8104. The first usage is found in Genesis 2:15 – to describe the second prong of Adam's initial assignment in the Garden of Eden. In transliterated Hebrew, that verse reads: *Vayikach Adonai Elohim et-ha-adam vayanichehu v'gan-Eden l'ovdah ul'shomrah.*

is it *the perspective of human experience*. What he is speaking now are not ordinary human words – they are *Devarim*. They are beams of light. They are bursts of atmosphere-shifting energy. They are pulses of life. They are waves of sound. Moshe’s devarim have an empowering ‘buzz’ about them - like that of bees as they go about the grand enterprise of gathering pollen from flowers, carrying it to the hive, and converting it to honey. The words Moshe is speaking carry *the sweetness of the honeycomb* to all who buzz in rhythm with them – but they deliver the sharp bite of the stinger to all who ignore, resist, or try to change or misuse them. The Holy One appeared to Moshe long ago, you see, and promised: ***I will be with your mouth, and will teach you what you are to say.*** Exodus 4:12. That was a stunning promise. Heretofore, it has only happened intermittently – in bursts and spurts. Heretofore in between the glorious discourses of Divine Speech the Holy One has released through his prophet we have continued to watch the ‘old’ Moshe drift back to his natural, flesh-man center of gravity many, many times. One day – or for one season - he has poured forth rivers of revelation straight from the Throne Room of Heaven; but the next day - or the next season - he has reversed course and gone back to spewing destructive torrents of very human, very dark, and sometimes downright sinister, negativity. Finally, however, the fullness of the great promise the Holy One made to him in Exodus 4:12 has come. There will be no more angry outbursts. There will be no more fits of outrage. There will be no more hate of fellow man. There will be no more vigilante justice. There will be no more murmur or complaint. There will be no more negativity. There will be no more acting out. He will never again break anything – especially a precious set of tablets that had actually been inscribed with the very ‘Finger of God’ - in a fit of self-righteous indignation. No order to take up swords and kill will ever come from his lips again. He will issue no ill-fated challenge to anyone to take censor in hand, kindle a fire, and test the Holy One. Never again will he shout ‘you rebels’ at anyone, or flamboyantly smite a Rock to which he was instructed merely to speak. Never again! Thank Heaven - never again! As Moshe reaches the end of his life on earth, he is, at long last, finally ready to let the Holy One truly be ‘*with [his] mouth*’. As a result, now every word Moshe speaks *carries the weight of the glory of the Holy One*. Now every syllable that issues from his mouth carries the Creator’s life force. Now every sentence he speaks contains His Divine Mentor’s *creative vision and energy*. Now every statement he utters is an impartation, an empowerment, and activation from on High. Now every utterance of his lips is *a pearl of divine wisdom*. Oh, Beloved - he who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Getting A Fresh Divine Perspective on the Events of the Recent Past

In the course of our studies last week we were reminded by Moshe that *a lot has happened since we left Egypt*. He brought to our remembrance some of the *tremendous highs* we have experienced since we embraced the Holy One’s Lech

Lecha calling for our generation. He has spoken to us of mountaintop experiences. But he has not by any means overlooked the *miserable lows* we have experienced in between the mountaintops. Moshe has reminded us that it was as the result of one of the low points – *i.e. chet ha-meraglim* [the sin of the spies] at *Kadesh Barnea* – that an entire generation of Redeemed Souls now lies buried in the desert sands of Sinai and Shur.

As Moshe looks around him at the faces of those who are drinking in his *magnum opus*, he realizes that the Holy One has raised up and carefully nurtured a completely new generation – a generation that looks to him as a father figure. And he sees that he is seeing the fulfillment of what the Holy One had meant back in Exodus 14:12 when He told Moshe: ***I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.*** Back then, Moshe had actually thought that the Holy One was saying he was going to *abandon His ancient Covenant with Avraham and start over completely with Moshe and his biological offspring.* How foolish he had been. I am sure he chuckled, and shook his head, at how full of himself and his own opinions his *emunah* had been at that time.

Now Moshe realizes that preparing those who sit at his feet to take responsible possession of the Land is going to be the crowning achievement of his life. More than the dramatic confrontations with Pharaoh, the miracle at the Sea, or even the awesome 11 months at Sinai, this will turn out to be the season in which Moshe speaks most purely the Words that have been given to him by the Holy One. For thirty-six days every man, woman, and child in the camp of the Redeemed will sit at peace – if not in awe. They will sit before their prophet-turned-rabbi at *rapt attention.* There will be no murmuring. There will be no complaining. There will be no jealousy, or jostling for position. There will be no rebellion. There will be no liaisons of Hebrew princes with pagan priestesses. There will be no plague. There will be no war. All that anyone will care about is Moshe's *Devarim.*

Moshe will rise to the occasion. He will surrender to – and faithfully perform - his assigned role. He will sing a beautiful anthem of Divine Love and Vision to the Bride. And, as the last notes of the Great Love Song echo through both the atmosphere of earth – not to mention the inner chambers of three million human hearts - Moshe will climb one last mountain and let the Holy One lay him to rest.

A Crash Course in Prophetic History – As Viewed Through the Eyes of the Shepherd-on-Watch

As part of our preparation for assuming a responsible stewardship role vis-a-vis the promised land, Moshe has been giving teaching us a *crash course in Prophetic History.* He has not just been listing historical facts – he has been *establishing our*

connection with the prophetic destiny carried by our forefathers. Through telling us spellbinding stories of our history since we left Sinai, Moshe has been helping us to understand not merely *how we got to the place where we now find ourselves* ... but also *how glorious a future lies ahead of us* in light of what the Holy One has in store for us.

As *Va'etchanan* begins, Moshe's crash course in redemptive history appears to be winding down. He has been giving us a prophet's perspective on the dramatic events following on the heels of the Exodus from Egypt that the people who lived them in real time could not appreciate. He has used words to awaken us to an understanding of *who we are called to be*, of *what our purpose on this earth is*, of *how critically dependent we are upon the Holy One our God to fulfill that purpose* - and of *the choices our fathers and mothers made after being set free from bondage that caused their lives to miss the mark and fall short of the great destiny they could have – should have - enjoyed.* In his next download Moshe will start to focus our attention on *our grand Bridal destiny* instead of on the events that make up our nation's prophetic past. But that will have to wait. There is one more brief, but emotionally super-charged, retrospective that Moshe feels we need to process through before moving into the forward-looking phases of his farewell. Moshe is going to *drop his guard*, and get *very, very personal* with us. He is going to reveal with great emotion how the events of the wilderness wandering *have affected him - and his relationship with the Holy One - personally.*

Why this detour of self-indulgence? Like any responsible prophet or scribe, Moshe has seldom been wont to get 'up close and personal' with the reader. He, like most sages and teachers, is usually very diligent to keep the focus of attention on 'us'. His primary message is always about our calling, on the ways our lives have gone off course from that calling, destiny and purpose, and, most importantly, what we need to do about it. Why does this aging prophet whom Torah elsewhere describes as *the most humble man on the face of the earth* suddenly interrupt his prophetic discourse to talk about ... himself? Hmmmmn. The fellow is old, no doubt - but he is *far from senile*. He is not one to stray off point. He *never, ever* says things just to hear himself talk. Is it possible that this sudden, unexpected focus upon himself constitutes a *parable of sorts* – and consists not of a *parenthesis* but a *summary* of the heart of the message he has been assigned to communicate? What exactly could Moshe be saying - to those with eyes to see and ears to hear – when he talks about the greatest *personal* disappointment of his life?

Moshe's Poignant Parable of Passionate Prayer

The sages have given every parsha of Torah a name. The name chosen for the parsha of Torah we study every year the Sabbath following *Tisha B'Av* is

Va'etchanan. Literally that name means “*And to mercy/grace I appealed*”. The line is taken from the opening line of Deuteronomy 23, where Moshe says:

Va'etchanan el-Adonai ba'et hahi l'emor

And at that time to the mercy/grace I appealed of the Holy One, saying ...

[Deuteronomy 3:23]

Moments of personal vulnerability like this are uncharacteristic of Moshe. He seldom directs the attention of the reader on himself. But he has done it before. He started down this road in parsha *Devarim* when he said: *Gam-bi hit'anaf Adonai biglalchem* – i.e. *And the Holy One issued me a warning because of you*³. Deuteronomy 1:37. This sudden revelation of Moshe's personal pain should give us pause. Why is the prophet of the Most High suddenly pulling back the veil on his personal sin, baring his soul in regard to his greatest disappointment, and sharing with us – and all people who will ever read this book of Torah - his *most intimate moment of failure and deprivation*? What is he trying to teach us by this departure from the normal prophetic ‘aloofness’? He is teaching us about something very, very important to all who seek to walk in relationship with the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak and of Ya'akov. Through this parable he teaches all with ears to hear the mystery of the Divine Call to Lay Down Our Personal Dreams and Visions for those of our Divine Bridegroom. And in the process the prophet has some amazing things to teach us about a mysterious part of Covenant life which our English Bibles often translate as “grace”

Mah Chanan? [i.e. *What is “Grace”*]?

What, pray tell, is a discussion of the ‘grace’ of God doing in the Book of Deuteronomy? Why on earth would Moshe, of all people, appeal to ‘grace’? What did this 120-year-old prophet know about ‘grace’ – Hebrew, *chanan* - that Christian theologians don't and, if they keep persisting in considering it a ‘justification doctrine’ of theology - probably never will? Of what does the ‘grace’ of the Creator of the Universe really consist? From what Biblical Root, and for what Covenant Fruit, does the Holy One extend ‘grace’ to humankind? Why does He not just demand ‘obedience – or else! Why has He NEVER demanded that of humans? What is *chanan*'s purpose? What is its desired effect? What motivates a Holy, All-Knowing, All-Powerful, All-Wise God to extend *chanan* to fallen,

³ That is, of course, a strange way to remember what happened. Memory and self-interest are strange bedfellows indeed. Was the Holy One REALLY ‘angry’ with Moshe? And whatever relational challenge Moshe experienced, was it really *because of the people*? Or was whatever discipline/correction the Holy One imposed on Moshe the result of his own choices? Was it not because, at Meribah, Moshe himself drifted way off course from *his* calling? Was it not because Moshe, at a time he was called to be a humble servant to the people, flew into a rant, screamed curses at the very people he was called to serve, took personal credit for the miracle of supernatural water, and topped it all off by striking the rock with his staff in a rage instead of demonstrating how caring, responsive, and ready to bless the people the Holy One was by merely speaking to the rock as instructed?

stubborn, sometimes perverse human beings [a] in general, or [b] in a given situation? What enables us to recognize *chen* when it is given? What response is He seeking to elicit from us when He offers it? Let's approach those questions Hebraically and Covenantally, shall we?

The Biblical Root of 'Grace'

Many Christian theologians mistakenly teach that 'grace' began with the fleshly appearance and teaching of Yeshua of Natzret in the First Century CE. Nothing could be more demonstrably false – and show more Biblical ignorance. Kayin knew 'grace'. Noach knew 'grace'. Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'akov, Yosef, Y'hudah, Moshe, and David – among millions of other 'Old Testament' saints – all knew 'grace'. Any one of them – or hundreds of millions of others who lived before *Yeshua* of Natzret appeared in a sukkah outside *Beit-Lechem* around 4 BCE would be quick to tell you that the idea that before Yeshua there was no 'grace' – only 'law' – is *sheer* and *utter nonsense* – not to mention a tremendous insult to the God they passionately loved and zealously served.

If we want to understand 'grace' as a Biblical term, therefore, we absolutely must shed the false, arrogant imagery of modern Christian theologians about that subject. We must debunk the lie that here is some kind of chronological and/or functional dichotomy between Torah, on the one hand, and 'grace', on the other.

The Covenant Connection

What our English Bibles call 'grace', you see, is actually an ancient Hebraic concept resting in Covenant known as '*chanan*'. *Chanan* is an *essential covenant term* as ancient as the Holy One Himself. It is what allowed, indeed compelled, the Holy One not to stop creating on *Yom Echad* of Creation Week when the world was *tohu v'voihu* - *i.e. without form and void* – and covered in *deep darkness*. *Chanan*, you see, means to *choose to see two sides to every coin*. *Chanan* is not a *short-term sentiment*, it is, instead, a *long-term – even cross-generational – perspective*. *Chanan* starts with choosing to *delight in someone or something's latent beauty and dormant potential* rather than focusing on *present state, attitude, or level of performance*. To exercise covenantal *chen/chanan*, therefore, a Covenant Partner *chooses to moderate one's actions, and temper one's reactions, according to the latent potential of his Partner in Covenant – not current bad behavior*. If not for the abundant presence of this kind of 'grace', after the Fall mankind as a species would not have been given Creation to tend, till, and make fruitful; mankind would have been wiped out, as its behavior deserved - and Creation would have been given over to angels! If not for the abundant presence of 'grace', Kayin would never have been protected and allowed to live, marry, and raise a family; he would have been killed by the Holy One – or some angel dispatched for the purpose - in like manner as he killed Hevel. If not for this kind

of ‘grace’, in abundance, Noach and his family –and thus all of mankind, as well all living creatures – would have been destroyed in the Great Flood. If not for this kind of ‘grace’, those who built the Tower of Babel would have been consumed by fire and brimstone; not merely confused in language and sent into the far reaches of Creation. If not for this kind of ‘grace’, Lot and his daughters would not have been rescued from Sodom. If not for this kind of ‘grace’, Hagar would have had to watch her son Yish’mael die of hunger and thirst in the desert. I could go on and on and on and on with examples, of course – and hopefully, so could you. But I hope you are getting the picture: Torah and grace are, and always have been, two inseparable sides of the same covenant coin.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Torah and ‘grace’ are all part of the eternal Covenant. They have always coexisted, side by side – like two sides of the same coin. Due to the limitations of your natural vision, you may only see one of the sides at a time; but they are both always there, side-by-side; and the idea that only one side is functional just because your eyes do not see it in operation is absolutely ludicrous.

The phrase *et-chanan*, which Moshe uses to begin the parsha we study this week, means to make a *request to a covenant partner which is technically extraneous to the covenant but which would be in furtherance of the Covenantal purposes and would strengthen the Covenantal relationship*. Moshe could make a request of this nature only because his relationship with the Holy One was firmly grounded in covenant.

The availability of *chen/chanan* – i.e. ‘grace’ - is an absolutely essential element of Covenant living. If even for a second there is a possibility that there will be no ‘grace’, you see, entering into covenant is sheer folly – for both the Stronger Partner/Suzerein and the Weaker Partner/Vassal. What would be the point? Were it possible to make a covenant without incorporating the concept of grace every little mistake, every minor misstep, and for that matter every unfortunate misunderstanding would result in covenant curses coming into operation and the parties being consumed. This would allow the form of the Covenant to defeat its substance and allow the actual wording of the covenant to defeat the purposes of the Covenant. Covenants are about living, breathing relationships – not hard, rigid rules. They are about commitment to long-term purposes, not obsession with short-term pleasures, frustrations, or feelings.

A covenant without grace at its heart is absolutely doomed to failure. Without grace there is no room for error, no room for growth or maturity, and no need for a relationship. Without grace there is no hope of reconciliation from the slightest

distraction, much less restoration from any level of indiscretion. Ah, but when grace is the reason for and woven into the very fabric and heart of a covenant, that covenant can be indestructible. If, as, when, and to the extent grace is figured in, the parties to a covenant do not have to walk on eggshells – or tremble in fear on ‘bad days’. They know there is hope for better days. All they have to do is work out a mutually agreeable protocol for reconciliation and restoration.

Cutting Covenant is not about two equals forging a strategic alliance; it is about two very unequal and dissimilar parties forging a relationship. One of the parties to a Covenant is known, from the outset, to be the ‘weaker partner’. The stronger partner could wipe the weaker one off the face of the earth. But he – or HE – doesn’t. With a covenant that includes grace a man like Avram [Abram] can lie to a Pharaoh about his real relationship with his wife and wind up honored and blessed beyond imagination. With a covenant based on grace a man like Ya’akov [Jacob] can manipulate his brother, deceive his father, sire children by four separate women living in the same household, and still wind up the father of the nation chosen by the Holy One to release the plan of redemption in the world. In the context of a covenant based upon grace a man like Y’hudah [Judah] can participate in a holocaust, have his little brother stripped, beaten, thrown into a pit and sold into slavery, pay to sleep with a veiled woman he thinks is a prostitute and wind up being the progenitor of the tribe from which Messiah – not to mention the kingly line of all Israel – would be brought forth.

Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound

The Hebrew word *chanan*, which Moshe utilized to kick off the 45th parsha of Torah, is made up of the Hebrew consonants *chet*, *nun*, and *nun sofit*⁴. The Hebraic mural is that of a covenant gateway or *chuppah* [*chet*] out of which the son or heir [*nun*] comes forth to begin to emulate the Messiah [*nun sofit*]. The first usage of this word in Torah is found in Genesis 33:5 in connection with the much-dreaded reunion between Ya’akov and Esav. Torah tells us: “*Esav ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept. He [Esav] lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children [with Ya’akov]; and said, "Who are these with you?"*” He [Ya’akov] said, ***The children whom God, in grace [chanan], has given your servant.*** These children, of course, were destined to become the Holy One’s *goy kadosh* [holy nation] and *mamlakah kohanim* [kingdom of priests], to lead the nations to the knowledge of and covenant with the Holy One. The children that Ya’akov was talking about were sired by him through four different women, after he had to run away from home in absolute disgrace after a series of ugly deceptions. The children had most definitely been given to him by operation of the Holy One’s grace/*chanan*.

⁴ *Chanan* is *chet, nun, nun sofit*. Strong’s Hebrew word #2603, it is pronounced *khaw-nawn*’.

When Yochanan [John] tells us that *grace and truth came through Messiah Yeshua* [John 1:17], and when Shaul of Tarsus tells us that it is *by grace you are 'saved' ...*" [Ephesians 2:8], and when the writer of Hebrews tells us to *come with confidence before the throne of grace* [Hebrews 4:16], these Hebrew thinkers and writers were not thinking of some term from Greek philosophy or post-modern Christian theology. They were drawing upon millennia of cultural experience with *a relational tool that Torah had etched deep into their psyche from the womb*. It is to these men's Hebraic understanding of Covenant and grace - not some emotionally-charged post-modern Western idea of 'unmerited favor' – that we need to return. All Greco-English connotations need to be cast off - like a cheap shoe that does not, and will never, fit.

A Whole Lot More than "Unmerited Favor"

When Yeshua spoke of what we know in English as "grace", and when His talmidim wrote the Hebrew word that later writers translated into English as "grace", they did not intend for us to intellectually define it as "*unmerited favor*". To them *chen* and *chanan* were covenant terms, absolutely inexplicable outside the context of a covenantal relationship. In the context of the God/Man Covenant, in all its manifestations and expansions, *chen/chanan* meant/referred to *the entirety of the way Avraham, and Yitzchak, and Yisrael, and Yosef - and, yes, Moshe - related to the Holy One*. In context, *chen/chanan*, basically describe the sum total of 'special treatment' reserved by the stronger covenant partner for the weaker covenant partner(s). *Chen/chanan* mean that the Holy One was the One Whose will was done, and Avraham, Yitzchak, *et al* were the ones who bent their knee and their back in response – and yet, even when the patriarchs performed their assignments poorly – or even failed to perform them at all – they were *at most disciplined*, never forsaken. *Chen/chanan* mean that man is only a *vessel* of the Holy One's love and power and goodness, never an *initiator* or even a *director* of it. *Chen/chanan* mean that every good and perfect gift came to the patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, and citizens of Heaven's tribe from *above*, solely at the will of the Holy One – and that those gifts could not and can never be either manipulated by any man's words, actions, or lifestyle or permanently forfeited by any man's, or any group of men's, Covenant transgressions.

One Goes Into the Realm of Holy Things and Places Not On the Basis of Merit – But on the Basis of Chen/Chanan

This week's parsha begins with Moshe teaching the younger generation of the Redeemed Community – and us – about this Hebraic concept of *chen/chanan*. The Redeemed Community is about to enter the land. Moshe does not want us to think we are doing so because we *merit* or *deserve* it. He does not want us to think we

have somehow *earned* it. He wants us to know that the Holy One, and the Holy One alone decides, in His sovereignty, just *who* enters the promised land, and *how*, and *when*.

Moshe does not want anyone thinking they can *name and claim* anything in the Kingdom. He wants everyone to see that if “naming and claiming” did not work for the presumptuous ones of Numbers 14:40-45, it would/will not work for them - or us - either. Moshe does not want the people he was assigned to train up to possess the promises of the Holy One [or us, for that matter] commissioning feasibility studies or drawing up assault/appropriation manuals. The key, Moshe wants the generation standing before him on the plains of Moav [and us, for that matter] to know, is that it is in *doing the Holy One’s will, not their [or our] own, that frees us to move in our purpose and destiny*. Success, in kingdom terms, is to be found in doing what the Holy One tells them/us, rather than what they/we want to do. But sometimes we fall short of that goal. Sometimes we get distracted, offended, discouraged. Sometimes we lose focus. Sometimes we succumb to anger, to sensuality, to the frailty of our humanness. Even Moshe, he wanted us to know, had to learn a few hard lessons about that in his time. So before turning our attention to the glorious future that lies before us Moshe decides to make sure we learn the ***chanan*** concept. He decides to teach us this *essential principle of covenant relationship* by opening up his own personal palace of pain.

Tips From a Pro

Moshe knew what it was like to *act out* very badly – and inflict a lot of collateral damage in the process. He was well known to have a dicey attitude – and a checkered past to go with it. He had a well-documented history of trying to do things *his way*, according to his own ‘fruit-of-the-tree-of-knowledge-infected pseudo-intellect and out-of-control fleshly emotions, instead of waiting on, and *sh’ma*-ing the directives of, the Holy One. At 40 years of age this resulted in him committing, then trying to cover up, a heinous act of vigilante murder that got him exiled from his country of birth. Even after meeting the Holy One, and receiving his life’s call, in a fit of anger he took the most precious physical objects humankind had ever received – the tablets of Torah inscribed by the very ‘finger’ of the Creator – and smashed them to pieces. He then ordered his brothers, the Levites, to strap their swords on their sides and go forth throughout the camp of the Redeemed killing every man his brother and every man his neighbor. On and on it went. There were so many moments of distraction for Moshe. He succumbed to so many fits of childish rage. He so often deviated from the Divine Instruction he was given. He so frequently played footloose and fancy free with the Divine Will. Once, for all to see, he had to be called out for *directly – and very publicly - disobeying a clear directive of the Holy One* in anger and in pride. He *ranted and*

raved and struck with his rod a rock he was told to speak to. He claimed for himself and Aharon the power to bring forth water, when that power belonged only to the Holy One. He *took unto himself the glory that belonged to the Holy One*. And every single man, woman, and child in the camp of the Redeemed saw – and heard - him do it. They heard the appointed and celebrated spokesman of the King of Heaven declare lies and spew venomous accusation. He horribly misrepresented the heart of the King to His people. He brought reproach upon the name of the King.

In the aftermath of that incident of rebellion the Holy One had told Moshe that such an act, by someone with so much influence, had to have consequences. The Covenant purposes required that gross misrepresentation of the Holy One's character by His most trusted servants be deterred. The purposes of the Covenant required that He neither allow, nor enable nor encourage, much less ignore, spiritual abuse of the sheep of His pasture, the flock under His Care. The task of physically leading those people into the Promised Land had to be handled by one who would reflect the Holy One's heart and emotions and speak the Holy One's words, not his own. Go read Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 7:15-23 if you do not yet understand this aspect of the Holy One's character.

When Moshe sees the Holy Land just a few watery steps away, however, he absolutely salivates at the thought of entering into its holy precincts and seeing its stunning beauty. So he decides to visit with the Holy One and appeal to the covenant protocol of grace. He does not even ask to have the Holy One reverse the decree of Merivah so that he could lead the people into the land and oversee its purification. He knows that is out of the question. But he does ask for two things he clearly does not deserve, and which are clearly beyond any covenant promise the Holy One had ever made to him: 1. to 'cross over' the Jordan River, at least once, and 2. to 'see' the good land beyond.

The Holy One has a long-term plan to honor and bring delight to his friend Moshe in ways that will blow Moshe's mind – and our own. But Moshe has not tapped into that yet. Moshe's shortsighted requests will be handled with grace – but exactly how and to what extent they will be granted will take some time to process. The Holy One will respond '*Rav lach*'. Moshe will not get what he asked for immediately, or in the manner he in his shortsighted human understanding envisioned. But he will get what will further the purposes of the Covenant in a much greater way – and be more than he or we could ever have asked, or hoped, or thought.

Approaching the Throne of Grace

The attitude, posture, and methodology of Moshe's approach to the throne of grace are all very, very informative. Moshe might of course have approached the Holy One about this subject in any number of ways. He might have approached with *whining*, focusing on his wants, his desires, and his human sense of 'fairness'. Or he could have tried to approach the Holy One with *legal arguments*, demanding that the Holy One fulfill for him, in his life, promises made to others [Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, for instance], for other Divine purposes. He might even have quoted Exodus 3:17⁵ to the Holy One, and insisted that the Holy One 'fulfill His Word'. He might, I suppose, even have approached the Holy One with a list of his "accomplishments for the kingdom", and said "look what all I've done for you - you owe me this - I've earned it!"

Most of us have tried each of these approaches at varying times, with varying degrees of "success". Whatever "formula" we try, it only 'works', it seems, when the Holy One wants it to work. But the ultimate man of "faith" in the Bible – Moshe - did not *name it* and *claim it*. The ultimate spiritual warrior in the Bible – the man who stood toe-to-toe with and stared down Pharaoh of Egypt - did not shout down the devil or kick in the gates "*in the Name of the Holy One*". What did Moshe do? He remembered *who he was*, and *who God was*. He bowed his knee, he bent his back, and he humbled his heart – and he did something most of us in this day and age have forgotten how to do – he *asked*⁶. Moshe's manner of approaching the Holy One on this matter is very informative. It teaches us a beautiful lesson in how we should approach the Holy One in prayer.

Let's look at what Moshe did not do. First of all, Moshe did not quote the Holy One's promise and claim his inheritance based thereon. In that regard, Moshe was not much of a "faith" man as that term is presently bantered around. Secondly, Moshe did not selfishly demand his "rights" as a *child* of God, nor claim any special privilege as a *man* of God. Moshe did not challenge the Holy One's sovereignty, wisdom, or righteousness by telling Him what He should do.

What, on the other hand, did Moshe do? What was his *protocol of prayer*? He

⁵ Exodus 3:17 constitutes the statement made by the Holy One at the burning bush, when He called Moshe, about the "promised land". Roughly translated, it is: *I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Kena'ani, the Emori, the Perizzi, the Hivi, and the Yebusi – a land flowing with milk and honey.*

⁶ Of course Yeshua used the same approach when approaching the Throne of Heaven. Look at His most famous prayers, in *Gat Shemani* [Gethsemane]: [1] "**Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You Will**". Matthew 26:39. [2] "**My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may Your will be done.**" Matthew 26:42, 44. Consider also the overall tenor and respectfulness of Yeshua's so-called "High Priestly Prayer" – John 17:1-26.

approached the Creator in *reverence* and in *humility*. He became a supplicant. He *pleaded*. Moshe had learned the fear of the Holy One. Is it not time we did the same?

A Va'etchanan Travelogue

The beautiful *sh'ma* and *v'ahavta* passages [Deuteronomy 6:4 and 6:5-9] clearly constitute the center-of-gravity of Hebraic life. Among the first words a Jewish child learns, these are the words of Torah that Messiah taught constituted the 'greatest commandment'⁷. Indeed, coming to Him as a little child, as Messiah taught us it is essential to do, involves coming to Him in the spirit of the *sh'ma* and the *v'ahavta*. Such a weighty passage can sometimes tend to overshadow its context. But that need not be the case with parsha *Va'etchanan*. As wonderful and significant as the *sh'ma/v'ahavta* passage is, it actually constitutes only a part of the treasure we find in this parsha. I therefore call *Va'etchanan* the great parsha of prophetic impartation, empowerment and activation. In the opening aliyah Moshe recounts for us a fascinating story of one of the last God-encounters of his life. In the course of this late-in-life interaction with the One with Whom he so often spoke '*face to face, as a man speaks to his friend*', Moshe tells us that he pleaded passionately for the Holy One to modify and soften the well-deserved judgment he received after he disobeyed the Divine directive at Merivah. Many years had passed since he committed that infraction, and in the interim Moshe has been faithful in all that he has been called upon to do. Now as the end of Moshe's life approaches the prophet bends the knee and begs the Holy One to moderate His decree of judgment and allow him at least to cross over the Jordan one time and feast his eyes upon its beautiful vistas – particularly '*those pleasant mountains, and Lebanon*'. This, it appears, is the only thing in Moshe's 'bucket list'⁸.

1. His Dream is Always Bigger, and His Way is Always Better!

At first glance it appears to the casual reader that the Holy One refused Moshe's request - and perhaps even chastised him for making it. However we will discover that things are not always as they appear. We will see that the Divine Bridegroom is going to *make more than enough provision* for Moshe. He is actually going to give him something far more valuable and meaningful than that which he asked for. What he is going to do for Moshe is give him 'grace'.

2. A Reminder of the Grace In Which We All Stand

Moshe then continues his narrative of 'how we got where we are as a nation' by reminding the people of the relatively recent incident of *Baal Peor* – the first major

⁷ Matthew 22:37-38.

⁸ In 21st Century Western culture the term 'bucket list' refers to a list of the things a person would like to do before he or she dies. It is drawn from the use of the phrase 'Kicking the Bucket' as a Western idiom describing the last spastic action of expiring human life.

sin of the generation of the conquest. In that incident as you will recall many of the chosen people died as a result of succumbing to the exotic beauty and seductive allure of the daughters of Moav Midyan. They left their wives, families, and destinies as ambassadors of the Great King and descended into debauchery, adultery, and idol worship. And yet the Holy One had mercy, and somehow managed to bring forth beauty from our ashes and the oil of joy from our mourning.

3. The Commissioning of the Next Generation

Moshe will then begin in earnest the task of commissioning and prophetically empowering the generation which will follow Y'hoshua and Kalev into the land the Holy One promised to the descendants of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Ya'akov forever. First of all Moshe will remind the multitudes gathered before him that they are *a nation unlike any the world has ever known* – a nation that was birthed from the womb of another nation through great miracles and wonders. Then the aging prophet will recount how this nation, unlike any other, actually *heard* the Holy One's voice out of heaven at Mount Sinai and actually *received the Holy One's instructions for living directly from Heaven*.

In light of these things Moshe exhorts the people to *always remember this world-changing connection with the Almighty, to teach the ways of the Holy One as revealed at Sinai to our children and our children's children, to watch over to perform the instructions for living we have been given, and not to ever again stray after other gods of other nations*.

4. Prophecy of a Great Falling Away – and an Eventual Great Return

Moshe will then prophesy that there will eventually come a time when the descendants of those gathered before him will fail to heed the teaching, and as a consequence will find themselves scattered among the nations. Moshe will however assure everyone that *the covenant will endure even dispersion and long exile*. For he will prophesy of an even later generation of B'nei Yisrael far down the hallowed halls of time which will awaken from spiritual slumber, will *seek the Holy One with all their hearts and souls*, and will in that day *find and return to the Holy One* in a wonderful way.

5. Establishing Cities of Refuge – East of the Jordan River

Moshe will then continue the flow of impartation, empowerment and activation in a slightly different manner. He will pause between speeches to designate three *cities of refuge* on the Eastern side of the Jordan River that are to be used by the tribes that settled outside the confines of Eretz Yisrael proper. You might want to check out the directions to *Betzer* on the plateau, *Ramot in Gil'ad*, and *Golan* in Bashan. The names of these cities of refuge were surely recorded in the Torah for

more than historical reasons.

6. *The Centrality of the Sinaitic Revelation Re-Affirmed*

Returning to his prophetic empowerment and commissioning Moshe will then restate in the hearing of the people the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* [i.e. the *Ten prophetic declarations*] that the Holy One spoke over His Beloved under the Chuppah of Sinai. Moshe will then give some "behind the scenes" details of what went on at that mountain. He will remind his hearers - and us the readers - how the Holy One *spoke the words out of the midst of fire and thick darkness and with a great voice*. He will then describe how these same words were subsequently written by the Holy One on stone tablets.

7. *The Passionate Prophetic Call to Adopt a Sh'ma-Lifestyle*

Moshe will then teach us the well-known "*Sh'ma Yisrael!*" declaration that the Holy One's people have learned to repeat every morning and evening and which is the first spiritual principle we teach to our children. This powerful declaration of covenant loyalty begins with the directive to forsake all other 'gods' and pursue interaction with the Holy One alone. It then proceeds to call us to develop and forever walk in a *sh'ma lifestyle*. What is a *sh'ma* lifestyle you ask? It is a *bridal orientation* to life in the context of which we base all thoughts, values, priorities, words, behavior patterns and relationships on the Words the Holy One has spoken. It is a lifestyle of *forsaking all other voices and choosing to reject all other possible sources of instruction, revelation, and/or focus*. It is a lifestyle through which we learn to *heed only what our Divine Bridegroom speaks, to do only what we see our Divine Bridegroom doing, to speak only that which we hear Him say, and to be satisfied with whatever material things He sees fit to bestow upon us*. It is a lifestyle not based upon a set of *beliefs*, a system of *halakah*, a code of *moral laws*, or a *creed*, but on the *INTIMATE RESPONSIVENESS of a Bride to the subtle urgings and whispered promptings Her Bridegroom*. This is our *calling* and our *mission*. This is our *inestimable honor and privilege*. This is our *exquisite delight*.

8. *Moshe Shares A Glimpse of the Holy Land that Awaits Us*

Moshe will then relate the promise of the Holy One to give us the precious land of milk and honey in which Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov once sojourned. He will caution us not to ever forget that it was not our own strength, the arm of man, or any other god who brought us out of Egypt, redeemed us from slavery, and gave us that land to possess. Our redemption was brought about by the strength, dedication, wisdom, and Covenant Faithfulness of our Divine Bridegroom in Heaven, and Him alone!

Moshe will then again don the prophet's hat and tells us that the Holy One is going to go before us and uproot for us the seven *Kena'ani* nations who were presently

squatting in the land of the patriarchs and desecrating its precious precincts with unspeakable abominations. Our part of the Holy One's project of displacement and restoration in that land will be simply to acknowledge that the nations we are displacing are under Divine judgment, to not be offended in this or substitute our sense of fairness for His, and to therefore cooperate with Him as He drives out the nations He has judged.

10. The Eternally Specially Treasured Status of B'nei Yisrael Re-affirmed Once More

Moshe will then remind us that as an act of faithfulness to His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Ya'akov, the Holy One has chosen us, out of all the nations of the world, to be his specially treasured people.

The prophet will then bring the parsha to a close by promising to us that the Holy One will indeed be faithful to keep His covenant with those that [a] love Him and [b] treasure and diligently watch over to perform His instructions for living.

A Quick Look At Haftarah Va'etchanan – 1st Haftarah of Consolation

Isaiah 40:1 -26

This week's Shabbat has been dubbed by the sages of Israel as *Shabbat Nacham* (the Shabbat of Comfort). In that connection, the haftarah chosen by the sages for this week conveys the first of a series of seven "messages of comfort" which we study each year in the aftermath of the ninth day of Av [when the First and Second Temples fell, among many other disasters].

This opening haftarah of consolation is taken from chapter 40 of the prophecies of *HaNavi Yeshayahu* [Isaiah]. The words with which our haftarah begins are both poetic and transforming:

Nachamu nachamu ami yomar Elohechem

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Yeshua taught it this way: ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*** Have you learned what it means to *mourn*, Beloved? I am not talking about mourning over a *personal disappointment* or a *private loss* or bereavement. I am not even talking about mourning over a national catastrophe like the destruction wrought by the enemies of the covenant people over the years on the ninth and tenth days of the month of Av. I am talking about mourning WITH THE HOLY ONE, HIS PROPHETS, AND HIS MESSIAH over the things that break the heart of God Himself. It is in that kind of mourning Beloved that the blessedness of which Yeshua spoke – as well as the comfort declared by Yeshayahu - is found. For the people of the Holy One, mourning is not an abyss that swallows the soul; it is a wellspring that fuels the spirit to soar to greater

heights than would otherwise be possible.

A Note on this Week's Reading from the Apostolic Scriptures

Mark 12: 28-34

Our readings from the apostolic scriptures this week will be taken from the 12th chapter of the discipleship account of Mark. In this passage we are privileged to read the very words of the Messiah – revealing Himself through the paradigm of the promised Torah-teacher *par excellence*. The basics of the story are this – a scribe approaches the Messiah and asks the question that is on all the heart of all good Jews - "*Which of all the Divine directives [of Torah] is the greatest?*"⁹ This is Yeshua's opportunity. He can now announce, if He so desires, that from this point forward the 'commandments'/divine directives of Torah should be considered 'old covenant stuff' – and that relationship with God from henceforth will involve only *grace* and *forgiveness* and *believing all the right stuff*.

Many post-modern Christian theologians would if you asked them such a question smile condescendingly. They would look down their noses in disgust and say, 'What an absurd question – the answer, of course, is *'none of them!'* They would explain to the scribe that through someone named Jesus that silly Torah they keep talking about has been *done away with* and all its directives '*nailed to the Cross*'. They would explain that if we accept so much as even *one commandment* as still valid and wise and spiritually worth either studying or observing we assume a horrible, burdensome yoke, crucify the "Jesus' character afresh, and are doomed to eternity in Hell. They would explain that commandments are dangerous – and that any talk of them is the banter of heretics and 'foolish Galatians'.

Ah, but it was not Christian theologians to whom the scribe posed the question, was it. The one being asked the question was not a seminary professor, but a Torah observant Jew named Yeshua from the village of Natzret. The one being asked to comment about the Torah was not a Christian at all – but was none other than the *real Messiah* - the Torah teacher *par excellence about whom the writers of the TaNaKh prophesied*. So how will Yeshua respond to the question the Scribe posed? Will He declare that He has come to start a new religion? Will He lecture the scribe on 'grace' and 'forgiveness' and freedom from the 'curse of the law'? Will He declare that from thenceforth he should forget 'commandments' of Torah, and just be 'led by the Spirit'? All Creation falls silent, awaiting Yeshua's answer. Men and angels incline their ear to hear Yeshua's response.

⁹ The Orthodox Jewish Brit Chadasha renders the question asked by the Scribe as follows: *Which mitzvah is rishonah of all the mitzvot?* *Rishonah* is the "head", or "beginning point". If this rendering is correct the issue is not whether one instruction of the Holy One is better or more important than another [as the English word "greatest" implies] but which instruction is *the beginning point* for an observant lifestyle.

Yeshua's discourse with the scribe in response to the asking of the question of the scribe, if it was ever truly heeded, understood, and taught for what it is, would send absolute shockwaves cascading across both Judaism and Christianity. Are you ready to have your spiritual worldview challenged?

*May you learn this week to trust the Holy One with all your dreams,
and accept His Will in all areas of your life,
and thereby truly experience what the covenant concept
our English Bibles call 'grace' really means.*

The Rabbi's son

Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week

Gevurot - The Prayer of His Powers

Atah gibor l'olam Adonai

You are incomparably mighty, My Holy One!

m'chai'ai maysim atah

You bring the dead back to life

rav l'hoshea

Captain of our Salvation/Deliverance/Help

M'chalkel chayim b'chesed

Who sustains the living with covenant love

m'chai'ai maysim b'rachamim rabim

Who resurrects the dead with overflowing compassion

somech nof'lim v'rofei cholim u'matir asurim

Who lifts up the fallen, and heals the sick, and sets captives free

u'm'kayam emunoto li-sheneh afar

and is faithful even when we fall asleep in the dust

Mi chamocho ba-al g'vurot

Who is like You, Master of Miracles?

Melech maymis u'm'chai'ah

O King, Who causes death, then restores life

u'm'tz'miach Yeshuah

and Who causes salvation to burst forth like a sprout

v'ne-aman atah l'ha-chai'ot maysim

and Who can be trusted to resurrect the dead

Baruch Atah Adonai m'chai'yah ha-maysim

Blessed are You, O Holy One; in You the Dead have life