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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT VA-ETCHANAN - shiur #2
Understanding the speech in chapter four

Pretend that you were there! It's a great frame of mind to put yourself in when reading Parshat Ve'etchanan, as it will definitely help you 'put all of its pieces together'.

In the following shiur, that's exactly what we'll do; i.e. by considering when, why, and where Moshe is giving his speech - and pretending as though we were there - we will follow its flow of topic in an attempt to better appreciate its content.

INTRODUCTION

Last week's shiur discussed how the first 26 chapters of Sefer Devarim divide into two speeches:

The introductory speech (chapters 1-4);

The speech of mitzvot (chapters 5-26);

In that 'main speech' (5-26), Moshe Rabeinu teaches the special set of laws (originally given at Har Sinai) that Bnei Yisrael must keep as they establish their nation in the Promised Land; while the 'introductory speech' served as both an explanation why forty years had passed since those laws were first given, as well as a 'pep-talk' to encourage the nation not to allow this new opportunity to fail.

In that shiur, we followed the first three chapters of the introductory speech - and now we continue that discussion, to explain the wide range of topics that Moshe Rabeinu discusses in chapter 4.

LAWS ABOUT LAWS

Let's begin, by noting how the opening line of chapter four relates directly to the main speech:

"And now, O Israel, listen to the '**chukim u'mishpatim**' which I teach you, to do them; that you shall live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers has given you." (4:1)

[Recall how the main speech begins with almost the identical phrase - Listen all Israel to the '**chukim u'mishpatim**' that I'm telling you today..." (see 5:1). Should you like further proof, compare 4:1 with 5:28-6:3, see also our intro shiur to Sefer Devarim!]

In other words, the opening line in chapter four does **not** introduce the laws that will follow in chapter four, rather it refers to the lengthy set of laws that will follow in chapters 5 thru 26. Instead, chapter four itself will include a set of guidelines, warnings, and insights that Moshe will now instruct Bnei Yisrael - to encourage them to keep those laws that he intends to teach them in his main speech.

Sounds a little complicated? It's really not. Just follow the flow of topics in chapter four, and pretend that you were standing there in Arvot Moav, listening to Moshe Rabeinu at this critical time in Jewish history; as he is about to teach as long set of laws before his death, and the nation is about to enter the land (where they must keep these laws).

For our first example, let's take a look at the next pasuk in chapter four:

"You shall not add unto the word which I command you, nor shall you diminish from it, to keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I [am about to] command you." (4:2)

Even though this is the famous law of "bal tosf" [not to add to (or take away from) any of God's mitzvot] - it is not just one law among a list of many others. Rather it is a general principle that will relate to **all the laws** that will follow in the

main speech. In essence, Moshe is telling the people, I'm about to teach you a lengthy set of laws; but before we begin - a reminder that no individual has the right to add or take away from them. This general warning is followed by yet another:

"Your eyes have seen what Hashem did in Baal-peor; for all the men that followed the Baal Peor, Hashem has destroyed from your midst - But you who did cleave unto God are alive - every one of you this day. (4:3-4)

In a rather indirect manner, Moshe reminds the nation that it doesn't pay to disobey God, for only a short time ago, those who did were smitten, while those who followed God survived - and hence are still alive to hear this speech!

[This also explains why Moshe had just mentioned (right before he began this section of the speech) that Bnei Yisrael were encamped in Arvot Moav "in the valley opposite Beit Peor" (see 3:29).]

With this in mind, we continue our analysis of chapter four, noting how the next section as well relates to the mitzvot that will follow in the main speech.

OR LA'GOYIM - THE REASON FOR THESE MITZVOT

From a thematic perspective, the next set of psukim are some of the most important in Chumash, for they explain how all mankind will benefit should Bnei Yisrael keep these mitzvot (in their land) in the proper manner:

Behold, I am teaching you '**chukim u'mishpatim**' - that God has commanded me - to keep them in the land that you know prepare to possess. Observe them and keep them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the nations, that, when they hear all these laws, they will conclude: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. - For what great nation is there, that has God so close unto them, as Hashem is to us whenever we call upon Him? And what great nation is this, that has '**chukim u'mishpatim**' that are so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day!' (4:5-8)

This section provides us with conclusive proof that chapter four serves as an introduction to the main speech. Before actually teaching these laws [i.e. the '**chukim u'mishpatim**' of the main speech], Moshe Rabeinu first explains why it is so important for Bnei Yisrael to keep them. They are not only for your own good (see "I'maan tichyu" at end of 4:1), but they are also for the good of all mankind. This explanation also ties in beautifully with our explanation (in our shiurim on Sefer Breishit) for why God had originally chosen Avraham Avinu - to bring a blessing for all mankind (see Breishit 12:1-3 and 18:18-19). By diligently keeping the laws of Sefer Devarim, Bnei Yisrael will become a 'model nation', showing a behavior that other nations can learn from. [See also Yeshayahu 2:1-5 and 42:5-6.]

REMEMBERING MOUNT SINAI

At this point in the speech (i.e. beginning with 4:9), there appears to be a sudden change of topic:

"Only be careful... lest you forget the things that your eyes saw... the day that you stood before Hashem at Chorev, when God instructed me: 'Assemble the people, and I will make them hear My words that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children.' Then you came near and stood under the mountain; the mountain burned with fire... (see 4:9-11)

For some reason, Moshe now reminds Bnei Yisrael of what happened at Har Sinai, warning them not to forget what they saw. But why should this special warning be included in these introductory remarks that preface the main speech?

To answer this question, we must consider how the main speech begins. Recall (from chapter five) how Moshe begins that speech by explaining that the '**chukim u'mishpatim**' (that he is about to teach) were part of covenant with God (see 5:1-3), and

even though God had spoken its first 'ten commandments' directly to Bnei Yisrael (see 5:4), the remainder of these laws were given via Moshe, as the people became fearful (see 5:5 & 5:20-28!).

With this in mind, let's read on in Moshe's speech in chapter four, as he explains exactly why he has mentioned what happened at Har Sinai, and we'll find a very similar detail:

"And God spoke unto you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the voice of words, but you saw no form; only a voice. And He declared unto you His **covenant**, which He commanded you to perform, the **ten statements**; and He wrote them upon two tables of stone. And then God commanded me at that time **to teach you the chukim u'mishpatim**, so that you would keep them in the land that you go over to possess" (see 4:12-14)

In other words, these details of what transpired at Har Sinai, which Moshe talks about in chapter four, relate directly to the main speech. Now, a different question arises. If he discusses all these details in chapter five, why does he include them as well in chapter four?

One could suggest an answer based on the psukim that follow, by considering the unique situation that Moshe Rabeinu now finds himself.

To do so, we must first study the next set of psukim, noting the sudden transition of topic to idol worship:

"Take heed - for you saw no manner of form on the day that the God spoke unto you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire -- lest you deal corruptly, and make a **graven image**, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast... (see 5:15-17)

This sudden transition seems rather strange. First of all, what does idol worship have to do with what Bnei Yisrael saw (or didn't see) at Har Sinai? Secondly, if this speech in chapter four is of introductory nature, why include a specific mitzvah such as idol worship - a law that will appear numerous times in the main speech itself (see 6:14, 7:4-5, 8:19, 12:1-3; 29-30 etc.).

To complicate matters, take a look for a minute at the strange list of examples of 'forms' that Moshe warns them not make:

the likeness of **male or female**,
the likeness of any **beast that is on the earth**,
the likeness of any winged **fowl that fly in the heaven**,
the likeness of any thing that **creeps on the ground**,
the likeness of any **fish that is in the water** under the earth;
... lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and be drawn to worship:
the **sun**
the **moon**
the **stars**,
even all the **host of heaven**... (see 4:15-20)

First of all, why is Moshe 'giving them ideas' for what they are **not** supposed to do? Secondly, it's quite obvious that this 'list' is taken directly from the story of Creation in chapter one of Sefer Breishit [note the opposite order, from day 6, 5, & 4!]

Furthermore, what does any of this have to do with what Bnei Yisrael didn't see at Har Sinai?

In the midst of all this, we find yet another sudden change of topic, where Moshe mentions once again the fact that he's not going with them into the Promised Land:

"But God was angered with me for your sakes, and swore that I should not go over the Jordan, and that I should not go in unto that good land, which Hashem has given you; for I must die in this land, I must not go over the Jordan; but you are to go over, and possess that good land." (4:21-22)

Then, immediately after interjecting this comment, Moshe returns once again to the topic of idol worship, including one final warning:

"Take heed, lest you forget the covenant of God, which He made with you, and make a graven image, even the likeness of any thing which Hashem has forbidden you. For Hashem is a devouring fire, a zealous God." (see 4:23-24)

At first glance, the flow of topic in this entire section - from 4:9 thru 4:24 - seems to be very disjoint, and totally unrelated to the main speech that it is supposed to be introducing.

To understand what's going on, we must consider once again the current predicament that Bnei Yisrael now face.

IT'S HAPPENED BEFORE

Recall that this will be that last time that Moshe will teach these laws to Bnei Yisrael. As he explains in this speech over and over again, he won't be crossing the Jordan River with them into the land - but this very fact creates a new danger.

It is specifically because he has been the intermediary to teach God's laws [since the Ten Commandments were given], that Moshe is so worried of what will be once he passes on. Undoubtedly, upon his death, the people would want to do something special to remember him, to commemorate his memory and legacy.

[Is that not what every nation does for its past leaders?]

In fact, that is exactly what happened forty years earlier, when Moshe had left for some forty days and the people were almost sure that he was gone forever (see Shmot 32:1). Despite the positive aspect of a request to create some 'replacement' for Moshe, the negative result was the sin of the 'golden calf'!

[Ssee Shmot 32:1-7 / note parallel "lech red ki SHICHET amcha" with "pen TASHCHITOON v'asitem pesel..."). See also our shiur on Parshat Ki-tisa, as well as the interpretations of Ramban and Sefer ha'Kuzari re: Aaron's positive intentions, even though it led to that sin.]

Once he ascends Har Nevo to die, the people will soon realize that this time, he's not coming back. What will Bnei Yisrael do upon Moshe's death? Is it not logical to assume that someone would take an initiative to commemorate his memory?

AVODA ZARA L'SHEM SHAMAYIM

Moshe Rabeinu has good reason to worry that the people may want to make some image to remember their great leader, but he also knows that the people are well aware that Second Commandment forbids that they make any 'graven image'. Therefore, he is worried that the people make look for a 'loophole' by assuming that even though a graven image of another god is forbidden, nonetheless, an image taken from the story of Creation would not fall under that category, and hence may be permitted.

Possibly, they could choose from a wide range of images from stories in Chumash that would serve as an eternal reminder that Moshe had given them Torah that contains those stories.

[After all, in the Mishkan, the "keruvim" are used as a symbol of God's presence. Are not the "keruvim" as well a symbol from the story of Creation in the Torah, as the protected the path to Gan Eden! (see Breishit 3:24)

With this 'fear' in mind, let's return to our study of chapter four, to explain the flow of topic between each section.

As Moshe will be emphasizing in his main speech that he will be teaching God's laws, even though they were originally given by God at Har Sinai (see 5:1-28) - his primary goal in the section from 4:9-24 is to make sure that the people won't make an image of any sort to 'commemorate' him as God's messenger.

Therefore, he begins with a quick review of what happened at Har Sinai (4:9-14), warning 'not to forget' that they saw no image of God, only his voice [and hence - they should make no image to commemorate that event]. Nonetheless, after those events, Moshe was commanded to continue to teach them God's laws (4:14) - but unlike God Himself, Moshe they saw (and heard). Hence in 4:15-20, Moshe warns the nation not to make any image to remember Matan Torah - even using imagery from the Creation story in the Bible!

This explains why Moshe then reminds the people once again that he won't be going with them (4:21-22) - followed by one final warning not to make any graven image [even with good intentions] - for even that is considered a transgression of the second Commandment (see 4:23-24).

AN ETERNAL COVENANT

In the final section of his speech (4:25-40), Moshe warns that should Bnei Yisrael follow other gods, He will exile them for their land:

"When you shall have children, and children's children, and be living for along time in the land, and shall deal corruptly, and make a graven image, even the form of any thing....
I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you shall soon utterly perish from off the land....
And God will scatter you among the peoples...
And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands..."
(see 4:25-28)

Why should Moshe mention this possibility of Exile even before they even enter the Land? Certainly, this doesn't seem to be information that will encourage the people to conquer the land!

If we consider once again the forthcoming topic of the main speech, we can suggest an answer.

Recall that the laws of the main speech are part of a covenant between God and His people (see 5:1-3). Even though Moshe makes it quite clear that Bnei Yisrael cannot break their side of the covenant; one may conclude that should Bnei Yisrael sin to such a degree that God would exile them - that Exile could be 'misunderstood' by the people that God has left them for ever.

Hence, Moshe Rabeinu must explain in 4:29-31 that no matter how severe their punishment may be, Bnei Yisrael will remain forever God's nation, and ultimately He will return them to the Promised Land (after they have done proper repentance):

"Then you will seek Hashem and find Him, if you search after Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. In your distress, when all these things will come, in the end of days, you will return to Hashem and hearken unto His voice... (see 4:29-31)

As God's purpose in choosing a special nation is eternal, His covenant with them remains eternal as well.

LEARN FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE

Finally, in 4:32-39, Moshe summarizes all the great wonders that the nation has witnessed since the Exodus, to encourage them to solidify their belief in God - and properly face the challenges that await them:

"For ask now of the days past... since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?

* Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?

* Has God ever taken a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by an outstretched arm...

* This was shown to you that you should know that Hashem, He is God; there is none else beside Him.

* Out of heaven He made you hear His voice...

* And because He loved your fathers... he brought you out of Egypt with His presence, with great power... to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day;

Therefore, know this day, and lay it to your heart, that Hashem, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else." (see 4:32-39)

As this speech introduces the lengthy speech of laws that will follow in chapter five, Moshe Rabeinu concludes this preface with fitting reminder:

"And you shall keep [God's] laws and commandments which I command you this day, that it will be good for you and your children, and so that you may prolong your days upon the land, which Hashem has given you, for ever." (see 4:40)

THE INTERLUDE

After completing this introductory speech, as an 'interlude' before the main speech begins, Moshe takes this opportunity to designate the three cities of refuge in Transjordan (see 4:41-43

and Rashi's commentary). Then the Torah introduces the main speech with the famous pasuk of "v'zot ha'Torah asher sam Moshe lifnei Bnei Yisrael..." (4:44), which leads us directly into the main speech in chapter five.

The deeper meaning of that phrase "v'zot ha'Torah", used numerous times at key points in Sefer Devarim, will be discussed iy"h in future shiur, till then;

shabbat shalom,
menachem