Parasha Va'Etchanan

וָאֶתְחַנַּן אֶל-יהוה בָּעֵת הַהִוא לֵאמֹר: אֲדֹנָי יהוה אַתָּה הַחִלּוֹתָ לְהַרְאוֹת אֶת-עַבְדְּךָ אֶת-גָּדְלְךָ וְאֶת-יָדְךָ הַחֲזָקָה אֲשֶׁר מִי-אֵל בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה כְמַעֲשֶׂיךָ וְכִגְבוּרֹתֶךָ:

Parasha Va'Etchanan is often remembered for the Shema, but beneath and around the Shema flows another profound theme: the danger of forgetting God after receiving His blessings. This theme stretches from Moshe's unanswered prayer, through the retelling of Sinai, into the warnings about prosperity in the Land, and finally into the call to covenant faithfulness. It forms a continuous narrative that speaks directly to every generation. The Hebrew word that can serve as the thread for this entire teaching is שָׁכַח (shachach)—"to forget." The story begins not with Israel, but with Moshe himself. The opening words, *Va'Etchanan*, come from the root חנן (chanan), meaning "to show favor," "to be gracious," or "to grant mercy." Moshe says, "I pleaded with Adonai." The sages observed that Moshe does not appeal to his merits. According to the Midrash, the greatest of prophets understood that even the righteous stand before God on the basis of divine mercy rather than personal achievement. Rabbi Simcha Bunim once taught that every person should carry two slips of paper. One should say, "For my sake the world was created." The other should say, "I am but dust and ashes." Moshe embodies both truths. He is the greatest prophet in Israel's history, yet he stands before God as a beggar asking for grace. The word *va'etchanan* itself is significant. Jewish commentators note that it implies an appeal for an undeserved gift. Moshe is not demanding. He is supplicating. Yet God refuses his request. This refusal creates one of the most poignant moments in Torah. Moshe, who confronted Pharaoh, split the sea, ascended Sinai, and interceded repeatedly for Israel, will not enter the Land. The rabbis wrestled deeply with this. Why would God deny such a request?

One tradition says that had Moshe entered the Land and built the Temple, neither could ever have been destroyed. Yet because Israel would later sin, divine judgment would have fallen directly upon the people rather than upon the Temple. Therefore, Moshe was prevented from entering so that mercy could remain available for future generations. Whether one accepts that interpretation literally or not, it illustrates an important Jewish principle: God's "no" may hide a greater mercy than His "yes." Christian commentators often see the same principle. Moshe, representing Torah, can bring Israel to the border but cannot bring them into the inheritance. Many Christian theologians see this as a picture that instruction points the way, but ultimate redemption requires divine deliverance. Moshe then turns his eyes toward the Land he cannot enter. The sages tell a story of a king who planted a vineyard but was never permitted to eat its fruit. Yet he rejoiced because his children would enjoy it. Moshe becomes that king. He sees what others will possess. There is remarkable humility here.

The Hebrew word for humility is ענוה (anavah). Humility in Jewish thought does not mean self-hatred. Moshe knows exactly who he is. Rather, humility means accepting one's place in God's story. Moshe accepts that Israel's future is more important than his personal desire. Immediately after this, Moshe begins warning Israel. "Now, O Israel, listen." The Hebrew word is שמע (shama). Though we are not focusing on the Shema itself, the concept of hearing dominates the entire parasha. In Hebrew thought, hearing means obedience. The rabbis observed that Greek thinking often separates knowledge from action. Hebrew thinking does not. If a person hears but does not obey, he has not truly heard. The root *shama* appears repeatedly throughout Scripture because covenant life depends upon responsive listening. Moshe knows something dangerous about human nature. People cry out to God in the wilderness. People often forget God in abundance. The next key word is שמר (shamar). It means "guard," "watch," "preserve," or "keep." Moshe repeatedly tells Israel to guard the commandments. The image is that of a watchman protecting a city wall. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explained that *shamar* is more than obedience. It is cherishing something precious. A man guards treasure. A shepherd guards' sheep. Israel must guard God's words. Why? Because memory leaks. Human beings forget. Moshe knows that the greatest threat to Israel will not be Egyptian slavery. It will be spiritual amnesia.

The Hebrew word for remembering is זכר (zachar). The opposite is *shachach*, forgetting. Throughout Jewish history, remembrance has become a sacred discipline. Shabbat itself is remembrance. The festivals are remembrance. Tefillin are remembrance. Mezuzot are remembrance. Passover is remembrance. The entire Jewish calendar functions as a divine defense against forgetfulness. The Baal Shem Tov taught that exile begins when people forget who they are and whose they are. That idea perfectly reflects Moshe's concern. He knows Israel will enter cities they did not build. They will drink from wells they did not dig. They will harvest vineyards they did not plant. The danger is not blessing. The danger is forgetting the source of blessing. A famous rabbinic story tells of a wealthy merchant who asked his rabbi why prosperity often weakens faith. The rabbi pointed to a window and asked what he saw. "People." Then he pointed to a mirror. "What do you see?" "Myself." The rabbi replied, "Both are made of glass. Add silver and you see only yourself." Moshe is warning against the silvered mirror. Prosperity can turn windows into mirrors. The narrative then returns to Sinai. Moshe retells the giving of Torah. Notice that he emphasizes not merely the commandments but the encounter. Israel heard a voice from the fire. The Hebrew word for voice is קול (kol). The rabbis often spoke of the *bat kol*, the daughter of the voice, an echo of divine communication. At Sinai, Israel did not merely receive rules. They encountered God. This distinction matters. Rules without relationship become burdens. Relationship gives meaning to commandments. Jewish thought consistently teaches that Torah is not merely legislation. It is covenant.

The Hebrew word is ברית (brit). A covenant is deeper than a contract. A contract protects interests. A covenant binds lives. Marriage is a covenant. God's relationship with Israel is described as a covenant. Moshe wants Israel to remember that Sinai was a wedding before it was a law court. The rabbis often portrayed Sinai as a marriage ceremony between God and Israel. The mountain became a chuppah. The Torah became a ketubah. The commandments became expressions of covenant love. This imagery profoundly influenced later Jewish thought. Christian readers recognize similar imagery in the Brit Chadasha, where covenant relationship is likewise described in marital terms. The emphasis remains the same. God seeks faithful relationship rather than mere external conformity. Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote that the greatest heresy is becoming accustomed to the holy. Israel's danger was not rejecting God outright. It was becoming comfortable enough to forget Him. This leads Moshe into one of the most astonishing declarations in Torah. He asks whether any nation has ever heard God's voice and survived. The emphasis falls on divine nearness. The Hebrew word is קרוב (karov), near. "What great nation has a god so near?" The covenant is unique because God is not distant. Jewish tradition continually celebrates God's nearness. The Hasidic masters often taught that God is closer than one's own breath. Christian theology likewise emphasizes divine nearness through Messiah and the Spirit. Both traditions recognize God desiring a relationship with His people.

The narrative then moves toward future exile. Moshe foresees Israel's failures. This prophecy reveals another important Hebrew word: שוב (shuv). It means "return." Repentance in Judaism is תשובה (teshuvah). Literally, it means returning. One does not merely feel sorry. One comes home. The sages compared repentance to a prince who wandered far from his father. When he could travel no farther, he sent a message: "Father, I cannot return." The king replied, *"Come as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way."* That story beautifully reflects Moshe's promise. Even after exile, if Israel seeks God, He will be found. Notice the covenant pattern. Failure is not the end. Return remains possible. Mercy remains available. The God who denied Moshe's request is also the God whose compassion never fails. God's compassion is not cold tolerance. It is covenant love. The rabbis emphasized that divine mercy precedes repentance and makes repentance possible. Christian theology similarly emphasizes grace that calls sinners back to God. Both traditions agree that restoration begins with God's initiative. As the parasha continues, Moshe recounts the Ten Words. The Hebrew expression is עשרת הדברים (Aseret HaDevarim), the Ten Words. Notice that they are called words before they are called commandments. Creation itself began through divine speech. Covenant life is likewise established through divine speech. The God who created through words transforms through words. Words shape worlds. The final movement of the parasha brings us to covenant loyalty. The Hebrew word is אהב (ahav), love. Moshe emphasizes that God chose Israel not because they were numerous or

powerful. The choice arose from divine love and covenant faithfulness. This truth is foundational. Election is not earned. It is given. The sages often marveled at this mystery. Why does God choose Israel? The answer ultimately returns to God's own character. Likewise, Christian theology emphasizes that salvation originates in divine grace rather than human achievement. Moshe therefore calls Israel to faithful response. Not because they must earn God's favor. Because they have already received it. This is covenant logic. Obedience is not the price of relationship. It is the fruit of relationship. The parasha therefore begins with grace and ends with love. Between those two truths lies the struggle against forgetfulness. The real enemy throughout Va'Etchanan is not Egypt, idolatry, exile, or even judgment. The real enemy is forgetting God's mercy. Forgetting Sinai. Forgetting covenant. Forgetting the source of blessing. Forgetting the God who drew near. Our lesson is that spiritual life depends upon holy remembrance. And Moshe, standing on the mountain, unable to enter the Land, leaves his final pastoral message: Remember the God who remembered you. Guard the covenant. Return when you wander. Trust the mercy that exceeds your failures. And never allow blessing to make you forget the Blesser. That is the enduring story of Va'Etchanan… Remembering…

Growing up, I remember watching the Beverly Hillbillies - but the DVD's you get today don't have the theme song on them - "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" - remember that? It's due to copyright laws; but that was one of the best parts of the show: "Come and listen to a story about a man named Jed, a poor mountaineer, hardly kept his family fed, and then one day he was shooting at some food, and up from the ground came a bubbling crude…" Or, if you're from a younger generation, the Barney Song: "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family…" It's a song that's hard to get out of your head. Repetition really drills things into our minds. We really remember things well, sometimes even the most insignificant things. In the greater scheme of things, the Ballad of Jed Clampett and the Barney song are of little importance. Yet many of us could sing them word for word. But can just as many of us quote Psalm 1, Revelation 4, The sermon on the mount, Deuteronomy 6? The religious of the 21st century has really fallen away from an understanding and appreciation and memorization and love of the word of God. And we have placed our love and value on that which is trivial. We say we love God, and we say we want to honor him. But we fail miserably when it comes to loving and remembering and following God's word. We want God to speak to each one of us today - not just to show us a thing or two we need to change - but to really draw us into a much deeper love and appreciation of Him and His word. Since Sefer Shemot (Exodus), we have seen Moshe lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and through the wilderness for 40 years. He is now 120 years old. Moshe was a great man. Remember God told Moshe that he was to lead the Israelites to the promised land, but that Moshe himself was not going to enter.

Moshe has brought them right up to the edge of the promised land, and they're ready to cross the Jordan River and claim their inheritance. But Moshe knows his time of leading the people is done. And what we find recorded in the book of Deuteronomy is Moshe'ss last message to the people. So here are the parting remarks of one of the greatest men ever. If you could preach your own funeral sermon, what would you say? Many people would talk of all their accomplishments and how they impacted others through their lives. Some would talk about their regrets and the things they still wanted to do. But Moshe uses his last address to God's people to remind them to obey the word of the Lord. This is what he felt was the most important lesson the Israelites could learn. Today, we also realize that it is an important lesson that we can learn as well.

After 40 years, Moshe gives his last address to the people. And Deuteronomy starts with a reminder of why the Israelites are where they are. It takes 11 days to go from Mt. חורב (Horev) to Kadesh Barnea, the land right outside of the promised land. What should have been a two-week trip ends up taking 40 years, because the people failed to obey God. Moshe addresses this people knowing that what they really need more than anything else is a renewed commitment to obey the word of God. That's what we all need in our lives. Don't blow 40 years of your life because you fail to learn the lessons God has for you. The name "Deuteronomy" can be interpreted to mean "second law" because here in this book Moshe restates the law of God: the 10 commandments as well as many of the other Mosaic laws. And we could look at all of the laws individually to learn from each one. Because each one teaches us a little about the character of our God: God cares for the poor, He is generous, He cares that the innocent are protected, …But today, I want us to look at the laws collectively, and get the main focus that Moshe gives in this book: that we need to REMEMBER to keep the word of God. Deuteronomy is quoted over 80 times in the Brit Chadasha. Its main purpose is to give us "teaching" or "instruction." Genesis gives us the "beginnings", Exodus teaches about "redemption", Leviticus teaches about "holiness", Numbers teaches about "testing", and Deuteronomy teaches us about "instruction" and "wisdom" in obeying God's word. Moshe reminds the Israelites that what makes them great is their LAWS. No other nation had a set of laws that so defined their character like the Jews. No other nation had a God who taught them how to live. And for Israelites, their LAWS were LIFE to them. Their law defined who they were. And over and over and over again Moshe calls upon the people to be sure to obey them. Deuteronomy 5:1 says, Moshe summoned all Israel and said: *Hear, O Israel, the decrees and the laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.* So, in our lives today, if we are really going to be serious about being a follower of Yeshua, we need to be committed to following the word of God as it applies to our daily lives. How do we make sure that WE remember to follow God's truth?

Let's wrap up by talking about a few ways to do that today.
<u>We remember to obey</u>… By devoting our whole selves in commitment to God – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This is the verse that Yeshua quoted when he was asked, "which is the greatest commandment." He summarized all law into this one phrase. Giving our complete love for God is the most important thing we can do. If you want to remember your God, you can't do it with the soap opera on TV, sitting in a chair reading your National Inquirer, and arguing with your spouse. You need to focus your attention on your God. Many of us live such full lives that we fail to take "quiet time" with the Lord. We can't read the Bible because we never get still or quiet. Much less pray to God - we don't have time to sit still. But if we call ourselves Messianics, or followers of Yeshua, we need to FOCUS on following God's word. This is why we set aside a "quiet time" daily to hear from God. Yours might be in the morning, at lunch, in the evening, before bed - David said is Psalm 55 - Evening and morning and at noon will I pray. If we are going to focus on following God, we need to spend time regularly reading God's word to hear from God; praying to share our heart with God; listening to understand from God; and meditating and memorizing to instill God's word in our hearts. Today, let me ask, "How is your quiet time?" Do you have a set time every day that you spend with God? Do you set aside time every day to meet with God. We started off saying that most of us here have memorized the Ballad of Jed Clampett. How much of God's word have we memorized? Most Believers today look at memorization as something akin to martyrdom. But memorization should be a joy. If you were single, and a good-looking guy or girl walked by that you were interested in, and you saw their name on their Bible, I can guarantee that you would remember it. If I was giving away a $20 bill for everyone who could memorize a verse, we'd all do our best. I'd lose a lot of money. But it is sad that we won't memorize scripture out of sheer love for God. Why don't we memorize? Many answers; many excuses. The simplest is that we don't choose to. Psalm 119:11 tells us I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. There is great value in hiding God's word in our hearts. This word "hidden" is a word that refers to hiding something because it is a treasure, because it is of great value. When Yeshua was tempted in the wilderness, he uses the word of God three times - each time a quote from the book of Deuteronomy - to keep from sinning. We first of all remember God by devoting ourselves to focus our attention on him. What are you thinking about? Throughout the day, what captures your attention? Do you think about yourself? Lustful thoughts? Thoughts of entertainment and pleasure? Or do you think about God and how you can better serve him. <u>We remember to obey…</u> By devoting our whole selves in commitment to God and by using the everyday, teachable moments to reflect on obedience of God. If I showed up at your workplace Monday afternoon, would your character be the same as it is here in Shul on a Shabbat?

Or is there a difference in the choice words you use around the boys; a difference in the stories you tell at lunchtime. Do you still pause to pray and thank the Lord for you food when you're sitting at work? Does the music you listen to throughout the day honor God? We obey God not by what we do on Sunday morning, but by how we live out our faith through our lives 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <u>We remember to obey</u>… When we remember by using memorials and markers. We read in Joshua 4:4-7 tells us, *"Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from Bnei-Yisrael, one man from each tribe. Joshua said to them, "Cross over before the ark of Adonai your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you, lift up a stone on his shoulder, for the number of the tribes of Bnei-Yisrael. Let this be a sign among you. When your children ask later saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you will say to them: 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of Adonai—when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones will be a reminder to Bnei-Yisrael forever."* We can remember our commitment to follow God by using memorials and markers in our lives. For some people, it is a sticker on your car, for others, it is religious jewelry. In any case, fill your lives with markers and memorials of how God has worked for you.

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moshe calls upon the people to celebrate what God has done for them. In Deuteronomy Moshe calls upon the people to celebrate the Feasts of Adonai. For the Ancient Israelites these were like our Independence Day, Memorial Day and Thanksgiving, remembering. This was the yearly reminder of the freedom that God had provided for them. The big difference for the Israelites, was that they did nothing to accomplish their freedom: it was completely from God. God calls his people to celebrate greatly, to include everyone in the celebration. God loves a party! God loves it when we gather to celebrate what he has done for us. When we take the time to celebrate rightly, it helps us to remember all our God has done for us. If we really want to remember the Lord in our lives, we need to get rid of the sinful influences. The Israelites struggled for generations because they never completely eradicated the influences of these people around them. They never drove them out. As a result, idol worship plagued the Israelites. Many ended up worshiping in prostitution at the pagan temples and sacrificing their children to the fire god Molech. They left a little sinful influence, and that influence grew. What is in your house that keeps you from following God? It would be ridiculous to try to treat a person for a communicable disease in the hospital but let them share plates and cups with other patients. The sick one would infect the others. Look how AIDS has spread through sexual contact and the sharing of needles. Sin is 100 times more deadly than AIDS. Yet we play with it every day. What is in your house, or your car, or your workplace, or your entertainment that needs to go?

It would do each one of us good to walk around and ask ourselves, "would I want Yeshua to watch that movie? read that book? indulge in this activity?" Let's eliminate sinful influences from our lives as we remember the freedoms God has given us.

Why do we remember? Remembering helps us to understand the past. It is only as we look back over the past that we understand what God was doing, and how he worked on our behalf. If you really want to love God, think about how he has worked in your life! Moshe reminds the Israelites that if they take time to look how God has worked in their life, they will understand what God was doing. Additionally, remembering helps us to be thankful. When we take time to remember what God has done for us, how can we do anything but give thanks. The children of Israel constantly grumbled and complained. They forgot how they were slaves in Egypt. They remembered the onions and garlic and fish - but they forgot how they had to toil and slave all day. We are called to be thankful - several times in the Brit Chadasha we find that command. Do you want to do God's will? 1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us what God's will is - give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Messiah Yeshua. We should constantly focus on giving thanks instead of grumbling and complaining. Never be ashamed to give thanks to God! No matter who is watching. Remembering also helps keep us humble. Moshe reminds the Israelites that they had nothing of themselves to boast about. When we pause to remember our God, and how he has worked in the past, we remember to give him the credit. So often we cry out to God in times of need and desperation, but when God brings us through, we take all the credit. Let's be humble and give God the glory for the way He has worked in our lives.

In Deuteronomy 10:12-13 Moshe gives a summary: And now, O Israel, what does Adonai your God ask of you but to fear Adonai your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe Adonai's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? The choice is ours whether we will remember all that Adonai has done for us.
Do you remember?

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")