

Sermon by Rabbi Hirsch

Va'etchanan 20 "Finding Favor"

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. First, I'd like to express congratulations to Rachel Mark and Samy Belfer, upon the bris this week of their baby boy, who was named Tziyon Yaakov. Mazal tov!

Our parsha opens with Moshe praying to God, *va'etchanan*, asking that he be allowed to enter the land of Israel despite God's decree to the contrary. What's unusual is the choice of words. The word *va'etchanan* connotes that Moshe appealed to God's mercy. But the more common term for prayer is *tefillah*, so why doesn't it say *va'etpalel*, instead of *va'etchanan*?

I think we can find the answer in the timing of this week's parsha, which always coincides with Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat which follows Tisha B'Av. The root of the word *v'etchanan* is *chein*, which means charm. The root of the word *nachamu* is *nach*, which means rest. The funny thing is that those 2 words -- *chein* and *nach* -- are composed of the same letters, in reverse order. And this brings to mind the juxtaposition of both words at the end of Parshat Bereisheet, which tells how Noach found favor in the eyes of God, ***v'Noach Matza Chein B'einei Hashem.***

Why did Noach find favor? While other religions dismiss God's selection of people such as Avraham and Noach as arbitrary decisions, that notion is impossible to reconcile with our belief that life, and our choices, have meaning. The implication would be that our actions mean nothing to God. But God's special treatment of Noach was far from random, and I think Noach's name is the key to understanding why he found favor. Rashi explains that Noach created the plow, which brought great consolation to the world. Because the ground was cursed, everyone else had shied away from the challenge of creating a viable farming tool. Noach was the only one willing to grapple with adversity instead of assuming the worst and refusing to try. I think **that** is why he found favor. God doesn't want us to retreat in the face of an uphill battle; he wants us to **persevere**.

And that kind of determination is what we see in Va'etchanan. Moshe tried his best to convince God to reconsider, despite the poor odds. The Sefer Dudaei Reuvein and other commentators explain that the reason God told Moshe to stop praying is that he was becoming persuasive (so to speak) and if Moshe kept on, God might have actually changed His mind!

There is a powerful message here, particularly for our shul and all the other congregations that are facing enormous challenges during the pandemic. Recently, we've been discussing how to reopen Mekor for Shabbat with social distancing, and even some form of kiddush, as well as how to plan for the High Holidays. It's certainly very easy to dwell on the obstacles. But if we heed the message of Va'etchanan, we'll remember that God does not want us to become mired in defeatist negativity. Instead, we must show creative perseverance, (which most certainly includes prayer), and that is the only way forward to the spiritual success God wants for us all. Shabbat shalom.