

TIMELESS TORAH

VAETCHANAN: THE FOUNDATIONS OF JEWISH FAITH

Hearing the Sound of Sinai

We live in an age of constant change. Technology transforms the way we communicate, ideas evolve at remarkable speed and yesterday's certainties are quickly replaced by new ones. Against that backdrop, the Torah presents a striking alternative. Its values are not subject to the fashions of the moment but speak with the same clarity and relevance in every generation.

In this context, Parshat Vaetchanan, the second parashah in Moshe Rabbeinu's final address to the Jewish people, lays out a roadmap for developing faith. As the nation prepares to enter Eretz Yisrael, Moshe reminds them that the Land is far more than a national homeland. It is the place where a society shaped by the Torah can flourish.

What is particularly striking is that Moshe frames this message in relation to the wider world: 'Safeguard and perform them, for this will be your *chochmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding) in the eyes of the nations' (4:6). Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888) explains that *chochmah* refers to absorbing eternal truths, while *binah* is the ability to apply those truths wisely in daily life.

For Rav Hirsch, this verse highlights a fundamental distinction between Judaism and other civilisations. Human cultures produce remarkable achievements in science, politics and philosophy, but these are constantly refined, challenged and replaced. The Torah's wisdom is different. It is rooted in eternal principles that do not change with the spirit of the age. That constancy, Moshe tells the people, is itself a source of admiration. When a nation remains faithful to timeless values, others cannot help but recognise its moral strength.

A similar idea emerges from the Sfat Emet (d. 1905), commenting on the verse, *Atah har'ei-ta lada'at* – 'You have been shown in order to

know that the Lord is God; there is none besides Him' (4:35). The Jewish people witnessed Hashem's power throughout the Exodus from Egypt, but *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah) gave them something deeper: certainty born of direct encounter. While we cannot personally witness every truth, we are expected to build upon what we have experienced. Faith grows by reflecting on those moments when Hashem's presence has become real to us and allowing them to shape the way we see the world.

Perhaps that is one reason Jewish history has always played such a powerful role in strengthening faith. Looking at what our people have endured, survived and built, particularly over the past century, reminds us that the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people is not simply an ancient belief but a living reality.

A Vision Beyond Completion

Towards the end of the chapter, the Torah briefly records that Moshe designated three *arei miklat* (cities of refuge) on the eastern side of the Jordan (4:41-49). At first glance, the passage seems strangely out of place. These cities would not become operational until the remaining cities had been established in Eretz Yisrael, something that would only happen years later. Moshe's action therefore had no immediate practical effect.

The passage concludes with the very familiar declaration, '*VeZot haTorah asher sam Moshe* - This is the Torah that Moshe placed before the Children of Israel' (4:44). Why should the symbolic designation of three incomplete cities of refuge introduce the Torah in its entirety – words that we proclaim to this day every single time we lift up the Torah?

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Although he knew he would never complete this commandment himself, he embraced the opportunity to fulfil whatever part of it lay within his reach. That, suggests Rav Moshe, was precisely the lesson Moshe wished to leave with the nation. Torah is not acquired only through great achievements or perfect observance. It begins with the willingness to seize every opportunity to fulfil Hashem's will, even when the task remains unfinished.

In a culture that often measures success by visible results, this is a vital lesson. Judaism places equal value on sincere effort. As the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (2:16) teaches, we are not always privileged to complete the work we begin, but that should never prevent us from taking the first step. A mitzvah undertaken with enthusiasm is never incomplete in Hashem's eyes.

With Open Ears

Following the repetition of the *Aseret HaDibrot* (Ten Commandments), the parshah continues with the opening paragraph of the Shema, recited every morning and evening. There we are

instructed: 'These words... shall be upon your heart' (6:6). The Kotzker Rebbe (d. 1859) asks a simple but penetrating question. Why does the Torah tell us to place these words upon our hearts rather than *within* them?

The key to answering this may lie in the Torah's description of Hashem's Voice as *lo yasaf* - literally, 'it did not cease'. The Maharal of Prague (d. 1609) understands this to mean that the voice of Sinai never ended. The Revelation was not confined to one extraordinary moment in history. The voice of Torah continues to resonate through every generation. What changed at Sinai was not Hashem's Voice but our ability to hear it.

The Kotzker develops this idea further. There are times when we feel spiritually inspired and the Torah speaks directly to our hearts. There are also periods when that sense of connection is harder to find. At such moments we may be unable to place the words *within* our hearts. The Torah therefore asks us to place them upon our hearts instead.

In other words, we do not wait until inspiration arrives before committing ourselves to the Torah. We continue learning, praying and performing mitzvot, trusting that even when our hearts seem closed, the words are waiting just outside. Then, when the heart finally opens, they are already there, ready to enter.

That image offers a comforting perspective on spiritual life. Faith is not measured only by moments of inspiration. More often, it is sustained by quiet perseverance, by continuing to listen even when the voice of Sinai seems faint. The Torah assures us that the voice has never fallen silent. Our task is simply to keep our ears open long enough to hear it once again.

The weekly Timeless Torah Parsha Shiur resumes in person after the summer break on 26th August