

Parashah One Hundred Thirty-Four

Deuteronomy 10:1–11:25; 2Kings 13:22–25; 1Thessalonians 1:8–9

notes by Tim Hegg

Living as HaShem's Community

Our *parashah* today begins with Moses recounting the events which transpired as he carved out a second set of tablets and ascended Sinai to meet with HaShem and to receive from His hand the second copy of the Ten Words. The notion which some have suggested, that the second set was substantially different than the first set which Moses smashed, is clearly refuted by the opening statement: (v. 2) “I will inscribe on the Tablets the words that were on the first Tablets” (וְאֶכְתֹּב עַל-הַלְחֹת הָרִאשֹׁנִים הַלְחֹת אֵת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל-הַלְחֹת הָרִאשֹׁנִים). HaShem was gracious to Israel in that He forgave their sin and as a loving Father, instructed them with the words of life.

Moses is instructed to build an ark (אָרוֹן) in which to safeguard the tablets, and it seems clear that this ark is different than the אָרוֹן הַבְּרִית, “ark of the covenant” which was later constructed by Bezalel and overlaid with gold) Ex37 :11(. While both were made of acacia wood (the Stone Chumash translation “cedar” is possible, but the Hebrew in both instances is עֵצֵי שִׁטִּים), it seems obvious that the ark of which our *parashah* speaks was made by Moses and done so well in advance of the building of the ark of the covenant, which happened after Moses returned and when the Tabernacle and all of its furnishings were made. The Sages differ as to their interpretations of the two arks, but the majority took the position that the ark which Moses made was temporary and was destroyed or hidden away when the ark of the covenant was finally built) cf. t.Sota7 .18; y.Shekalim6 .149 ,c ;Rashi on Num10 :1(. Furthermore, some of the ancient commentators held that both the broken pieces of the first stones as well as the second set of stones were placed in the temporary ark. Whatever the case, we may simply understand that from God’s perspective, the words He gives us are precious and are therefore to be guarded.

Now the physical guarding of the words by placing them in the ark is a lesson to instruct us that we must likewise guard the words of God by keeping them in our hearts (minds) and living in accordance with them. Thus, the following pericope (11:1ff) begins with this admonition: “You shall love Hashem, your God, and you shall safeguard His charge (מִשְׁמֶרְתּוֹ) and His decrees (חֻקֹּתָיו), His ordinances (מִשְׁפָּטָיו), and His commandments (מִצְוֹתָיו). “Safeguarding” (שָׁמַר) means keeping them from destruction or deterioration in order that they (God’s words) may be studied, learned, understood, and lived out. The Psalmist speaks of hiding “God’s word in my heart that I might not sin against You” (Ps 119:11).

Note clearly that the text says that guarding the Ten Words (God’s Torah) as He instructs will be “beneficial” for us (v. 13, לְטוֹב לָךְ). Note also that in this case, the word “you” is singular, emphasizing that while the Torah of HaShem must be lived out in the context of community, the individual receives blessing because obedience always begins at the individual level.

10:15 contains a number of interesting emphases. First, note that the verb “love” (אָהַב) here is used in its covenant sense. “Only your forefathers did HaShem desire to love them...,” that is, only with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did God enter into covenant relationship, and He chose their descendants after them to be His covenant nation. But the addition of the emphatic pronoun כֶּם (here with the preposition אֲנִי links the emphatic “even you” to the former “upon your fathers”), alerts the reader to the understanding that covenant membership is dependent first and foremost upon God’s choice, not merely on physical lineage. Indeed, the inclusion of this emphatic pronoun

makes it clear that the offspring (literally “seed”, זרע) to which Moses refers is the nation of Israel as she prepares to enter the land (“as it is today,” בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה). The matter of His choosing is seen in that Ishmael and Esau, though the physical offspring of Abraham and Jacob, were not part of God’s chosen people. Yet even within the national election of Israel, there is required the personal response of faith. Thus, the very next verse (10:16) speaks of the “heart” and the need to have it “circumcised”—showing that covenant membership is a heart issue, not merely a physical one. Covenant membership is characterized by a circumcised heart and signified by circumcised flesh. The heart that is circumcised produces an attitude which is opposite of a “stiff neck,” the metaphor of a stubborn spirit, and unwillingness to submit joyfully to God’s leadership and His commands. It is the natural tendency of mankind to make himself the sovereign and to submit to no one. Rebellion, the sin of Satan and that into which Adam and Chavah fell, is at the root of the sinful bent mankind inherited from our first parents.

Secondly, 10:15 uses remarkable language referring to God’s love for Israel. We might translate more literally, “Only upon your fathers did Adonai join together to love them.” The verb חָשַׁק, *chashaq* means “to join together,” as well as “to desire.” Notice that a noun derived from this verb, חִשְׁוּק (*chishuq*) describes the “spoke” in a wheel, that which binds the rim to the hub (cf. 1Ki 7:33). The love that HaShem put upon Israel is a binding love, a love that forever connects Israel to her God. Yet the illustration of a spoke in a wheel serves to describe two aspects of this love, for in v. 20 we read:

You shall fear Adonai your God; you shall serve Him and cling (דָּבַק) to Him, and you shall swear by His name.

Even as the spoke in a wheel is attached both at the hub and at the rim, so the love of God is both His faithfulness to us, and our willingness to “cling” to Him. The divine-human cooperative is thus fully in place within the covenant relationship.

Thirdly, the response that is called for, once the love of God is realized, is given in v. 16, “So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.” What is the meaning of this metaphor? The sign of circumcision, given initially to Abraham, was germane to the issue at hand. Abraham and Sarah had relied upon the flesh—their own strength, to bring the promised son, and the result was Ishmael. Yet God intended to bring the promised son, Isaac, through His own miraculous powers. The cutting of the foreskin, then, was to teach Abraham and all of his descendants, that relying upon the flesh could never bring about God’s purposes. In the same way, the circumcision of the heart means to live by faith, not by one’s own abilities or strength. Circumcising the heart means to strengthen our resolve to trust God for what He has promised, and not to seek “shortcuts” in accomplishing the mission He has assigned to us.

The *parashah* goes on (11:1ff) to remind the generation in the wilderness that they were the ones who had first-hand knowledge of the events at Sinai, and that they had a prime responsibility, then, to pass the truth along to the next generation. The Stone Chumash translation, though accurate and literal, seems a bit confusing with the inclusion of a double negative: “You should know today that it is not your children ... who did not see....” One must remember that while in English a double negative turns out to be a positive, in Hebrew a double negative adds emphasis. The understanding is “You should know today that surely your children did not see....” As those who had received the Torah directly from Moses, and had witnessed the events of Sinai, they were

in a prime position to bear witness to their children and thus to pass on the truth to the next generation, even though the next generation never experienced the Sinai event themselves. This reminds us that genuine saving faith, a faith that endures, is not ultimately dependent upon experiencing a miraculous event, but upon believing and living in accordance with the truth which God has revealed.

Our *parashah* also includes the familiar passage of the Shema (11:13ff), reiterated a second time after its initial pronouncement in 6:4ff. There are several remarkable differences, however. First, and most obvious, the pronoun “you” is mostly plural in this text, while it is entirely singular in 6:4ff. Since, in modern English, the pronoun “you” can be either singular or plural, we are at a disadvantage as we read our English translations, because they cannot well reflect the subtle yet important distinctions which the Hebrew makes by utilizing singular “you” in one place, and plural “you” in another. In our *parashah*, the change is remarkable for it lays a strong emphasis upon the need for community in the pursuit of obeying God. Here is the passage with each plural “you” put in bold type and singular “you” underlined:

bold = plural, underlined = singular

13 And it shall come about, if **you** listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding **you** today, to love the LORD **your** God and to serve Him with all **your** heart and all **your** soul, 14 that He will give the rain for **your** land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil. 15 And He will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and you shall be satisfied. 16 “Beware, lest **your** hearts be deceived and **you** turn away and **you** serve other gods and **you** worship them. 17 Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against **you**, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and **you** will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving **you**. 18 **You** shall therefore impress these words of mine on **your** heart and on **your** soul; and **you** shall bind them as a sign on **your** hand, and they shall be as frontals on **your** forehead. 19 And **you** shall teach them to **your** sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up. 20 And **you** shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21 so that **your** days and the days of **your** sons may be multiplied on the land which the LORD swore to **your** fathers to give them, as long as the heavens remain above the earth.

What are we to understand from the switching back and forth between the singular and plural?

- 1) observance of Torah can, in one respect, only be accomplished within a Torah-submissive community.
- 2) There is a community responsibility to the individual, including the inclusion of the individual in worship (laying *tephillin*, for example), the teaching of children, and the observance of the commandments.
- 3) Individual ownership is a Torah principle. Notice that the pronoun changes to singular whenever it speaks of that which belongs to an individual (e.g., field, house).
- 4) Privacy of the family is a Torah principle (the pronoun changes to singular when it speaks of “lying down” and “rising up.”)

We find, then, a very important, indeed, sobering reality here: our obedience to God, while it

begins at the individual level, cannot be fully developed outside of community. While many of us may have grown up hearing and believing that community was a nice “extra” if one could find it, but not an “essential”—we have now come to understand that the community is essential for our full development as a worshipper of HaShem. This is not to say that in certain times of emergency or extenuated circumstance an individual is unable to genuinely worship and obey HaShem apart from a larger community. Nor am I saying that it is impossible to render true and heart-felt worship and service to God as individuals and individual families. But what our text today makes clear is that God’s design for the individual, and for the individual family unit, is that each exist within the context of the larger community, and that it is in this community context that the larger and fuller picture of HaShem and His will may be understood and lived out.

The *haftarah* portion was doubtlessly chosen by the Sages because of its clear statement regarding God’s unfailing love and compassion toward His chosen people, even when we have acted unfaithfully towards Him. “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2Tim 2:13). But note carefully the basis for His display of compassion:

But Adonai was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day He has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from His presence. (v. 23) [NIV]

The NASB (“and would not destroy them or cast them from His presence until now”) as well as the KJV (“and would not destroy them, neither cast He them from His presence as yet”) render the final עַד-עַתָּה, (literally) “until now” woodenly and by doing so miss the import of the Hebrew. The prophet’s point is that even up to his own day, God had remained faithful to His covenant promises in spite of Israel’s disobedience. Thus, the point is that God’s compassion and His willingness to show Israel His grace is based upon His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ultimately, His grace flows from His own immutable character, meaning He cannot but remain faithful to His covenant promises. “For I, Adonai, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6).

Moreover, perhaps the grace and compassion of God is especially manifest in His willingness to bring in foreigners from the nations to join Israel in her covenant blessings and relationship with Him. Thus, in our Torah *parashah* we read:

He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien (גֵּר, *ger*) by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien (גֵּר), for you were aliens (גֵּרִים) in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:18–19)

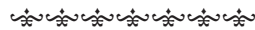
When Israel receives the compassion and mercy of the Almighty, she cannot claim to do so on the basis of her own superior character when compared to the nations, for in reality, God redeemed Israel when they were “aliens” in the land of Egypt. The biased translation of the *Stone Tanach* therefore entirely misses the point when it translates Deut 10:18 as:

He carries out the judgment of orphan and widow, and loves the proselyte to give him bread and garment. You shall love the proselyte for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Rather than seeing that Israel and the foreigner are classed together by the same use of the word *ger*, this translation strives to teach that the “proselyte” obtains God’s favor precisely because he is a proselyte. But this entirely misses the point: God loves the *ger* in the same way that He loves Israel, because in reality, Israel, in and of herself, has no different status than the foreigner. In both cases, it is God’s gracious and sovereign choosing that brings a person (whether Jew or Gentile) into the blessings of the covenant.

The Apostolic portion was chosen with this very emphasis in mind. Paul is reminding the Thesalonians of the gift of God’s grace that was bestowed upon them, a gift that evidenced itself in their having turned away from idolatry to cling by faith to the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No one, left to himself, turns from dead idols to serve the living God. Even as God sovereignly broke into the life of Abram, calling him to leave his home and family, along with the idolatry of that society, so He calls each and every one of His elect, and in that calling, enables them to repent and turn to Him with genuine, saving faith.

All of us then, whether Jew or Gentile, are left up to the mercies of God, made sure for us by the work of Yeshua our Messiah. And through His mercy and grace, He enables us to love and obey Him, and thus to receive the blessings He has promised.



Could we with ink the ocean fill,
Were every blade of grass a quill,
Were the world of parchment made,
And every one a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean, drain it dry.
Nor would the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

(“Hadamut” written by Meir ben Isaac Nehorai, 1050 CE,
Cantor in Worms, Germany. Originally written in Aramaic)



The Mercies of God! What a theme for my song.
Oh, I never could number them all.
They’re more than the stars in the heavenly dome,
Or the sands of the wave beaten shore.

His goodness and mercy will follow me still,
Even on to the end of the way;
I have His sure promise and that cannot fail,
That His mercy endureth for aye.

(Stanzas of a Hymn by T. O. Chisholm)