

## Va'etchanan: Clinging to God Through the Mitzvot

- ואתם הדבקים בה" אלקיכם חיים כלכם היום (Deut. 4:4)

And you who clung to Adonai your God are all alive today.

- What is suggested by "cling?" The challenge of holding fast to our relationship with God. And the ease, the natural-ness of the opposite - disconnecting from God. Within the parasha, the ease of worshiping the God of Ba'al Peor, and other Gods, for that matter.
- We become disconnected from God in many ways, one of which is by misunderstanding the nature of God's activity in our lives -- and overlooking the Torah's recipe for connection, mentioned two verses earlier, the mitzvot.

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- Tisha B'Av very much embodies this cycle of disconnection, misunderstanding and overlooking.
- The theme of the day? God has abandoned us into misfortune, due to our errant ways.

- Where do we want to be? Reconnected and repatriated -- but from where do they come? They do not come when we're at depths of our despair, looking only to God in hope. Actionable hope comes only toward the end of the day, when, though clinging to God for ultimate hope, we take the steps ourselves to transform the proximate hope in our human domain.
  
- David Hartman articulates this much better than I can:
  - "[There are] two significant...dimensions of hope. (1) the courage to bear human responsibility in partial solutions, and to accept the burden of living and building within contexts of uncertainty (2) the expectancy of a future solution to all human problems." The first Hartman calls "halakhic" or "proximate" hope, and he grounds it in the ongoing yet imperfect covenant concretized between God and B'nai Yisrael at Sinai. The second he calls "radical" or "ultimate" hope, which he grounds in the experience of the Exodus, when God unilaterally brings redemption to the children of Israel.
  - "Halakhic hope," he argues, "liberates action, for it provides a means by which to overcome the paralysis of dejection," when we just wait for God.
  
- Tisha B'Av, as we know, is burdened with dejection and self-pity, at its start. We mourn intensively. We daven in soft, mournful tones -- as if to suggest that God does not hear our prayers. The world turned on its head, we daven without tallit and tefillin in the morning, our shining symbols of connection to God and our responsibility for mitzvot. We remove the decorative covers of our shulchan and our ark, and lay the Torah bare on a flimsy tallit, invoking scary, morbid vi-

sions of a dying tradition. We purposely don't study Torah, stripping ourselves of our guidebook to the potentialities of human tasks and achievements, and miring us in despondency. The message is not one of impending unilateral redemption by God.

- As the day progresses, we return from visions of death and mourning, and from the vain hope of an Exodus-like redemption of our people, of the hope, in Hartman's words, "that a divine hand will pluck us from our beds and finally bring us home." We don our tallit and tefillin for mincha, making a strong statement about the practical hope of transformation inherent in the mitzvot and in the Sinai covenant. We raise our voices in prayer, recognizing that actionable hope comes from our inner strength, the bonds of community, and the comfort (the nachama) of routine -- which is reinstated as we finish the day. We read in the Torah for Mincha of Moses' intercession on behalf of the people after the sin of the Golden Calf, teaching us that teshuva is possible even in the worst-case scenarios. We once again sit on regular chairs, a sign of our return from mourning.
- Tisha B'Av points the way from the lessons of one historical experience, Exodus, to another, the covenant at Sinai. It points the way from the despair of the Israelites prior to the Exodus -- and after the destruction of the Temples -- to our potency with Torah and the mitzvot, in an era well beyond God's direct and radical intervention in human affairs -- an era that really depends on us to actively reach out for consistent connection with God. An era where "clinging to God" is

an appropos metaphor for the effort that our relationship with the divine requires.

- ואתם הדבקים בה" אלקיכם חיים כלכם היום
- We say these words immediately before the first aliyah blessing of each and every Torah reading. Why? There is a message in this placement. Saying a beracha over the torah is one of the greatest privileges of our tradition, and it is one with which we mark a young person's maturation into adulthood and responsibility for the mitzvot. What's the message? How do we cling to God? We don't depend on the open air for that connection, nor in miracles. We depend on Torah, its mitzvot, their routine and regularity, to cling to God.
- We're each climbing up the ladder of mitzvot en route to relationship with God, never to fully get *there*. We have to hold fast to that ladder even in moments of despair. As we turn towards the month of Elul, I ask you, as I ask myself, what's your next rung?