Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Va'etchanan

August 1, 2020 *** 11 Av, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Va'Etchanan in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2260/jewish/Vaetchanan-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses tells the people of Israel how he implored G-d to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, but G-d refused, instructing him instead to ascend a mountain and see the Promised Land.

Continuing his "review of the Torah," Moses describes the Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah, declaring them unprecedented events in human history. "Has there ever occurred this great thing, or has the likes of it ever been heard? Did ever a people hear the voice of G-d speaking out of the midst of the fire . . . and live? . . . You were shown, to know, that the L-rd is G-d . . . there is none else beside Him."

Moses predicts that in future generations the people will turn away from G-d, worship idols, and be exiled from their land and scattered amongst the nations; but from there they will seek G-d, and return to obey His commandments.

Our Parshah also includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments, and the verses of the Shema, which declare the fundamentals of the Jewish faith: the unity of G-d ("Hear O Israel: the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one"); the mitzvot to love G-d, to study His Torah, and to bind "these words" as tefillin on our arms and heads, and inscribe them in the mezuzot affixed on the doorposts of our homes.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/540269/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah is the first of a series of seven "haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha B'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

This section of Isaiah begins with G-d's exhortation to the prophets: "Console, O console My people . . . Announce to Jerusalem that her period of exile has been fulfilled and that her sins have been forgiven."

Isaiah's prophecy describes some of the miraculous events that will unfold with the onset of the messianic era, such as the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the revelation of G-d's glory, and the rewards and retribution that will then be meted out.

The prophet then goes on to comfort the people, describing G-d's power and might, and reassuring them of His care for His people.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Infinite Game (Va'etchanan 5780) By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
https://rabbisacks.org/vaetchanan-5780/

The popular author and TED lecturer Simon Sinek recently published a book entitled

The Infinite Game.[1] Based on the distinction first articulated by James P. Carse,[2] it is about the difference between two types of enterprise. One, a finite game, has a starting and ending point. It obeys rules, recognises boundaries, and has winners and losers. Most sports are like this. So, often, is politics: there are campaigns, elections, rules and regulations, successful and defeated candidates. Businesses can be run this way, when they focus on quarterly profits, share price, market share and the like.

But there are also infinite games. These have no starting point or finishing line, no clear winners and losers, no agreed rules or boundaries. Art is like this. So are music and literature. Beethoven didn't win. Bach didn't lose. Great artists change the rules. That is what Beethoven, Schoenberg and Stravinsky did; so too did Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso. Politics can be like this when it rises above opinion polls and sets its vision on larger issues of justice, equality and the moral health of society. Education is a finite game when it focuses on exam results and qualifications, or it can be an infinite game when it is about breadth and depth of understanding and character development.

Finite games are played to win. Infinite games are played for their own sake. Finite games are usually performed in front of an audience of some kind. Infinite games are participative. We engage in them because we are changed by them. Van Gogh did not need to sell paintings to regard art as worthwhile. Beethoven was not seeking popularity when he wrote his late sonatas and quartets. James Joyce was not aiming at a bestseller when he wrote Ulysses.

Infinite games are not a means to an end: winning the championship, beating the market, victory in an election. Instead they are what psychologists call autotelic, that is, they contain their purpose within themselves. We do them because the activity is inherently creative, demanding, uplifting and ennobling.

It should be clear by now that these are not simply two types of game. They are two different ways of playing a game. If, in any country at any time, politics is treated as a finite game in which all that matters are popularity ratings and election results, then it quickly becomes superficial, trivial, uninspiring. The quality of leadership declines. The public becomes cynical and disillusioned. Trust is eroded and the social bond becomes frayed. When politics is lifted by a sense of history and destiny on the part its leaders, when it becomes not the pursuit of power but a form of service-to-others and social responsibility, when it is driven by high ideals and ethical aspiration, then leadership becomes statesmanship and politics itself a noble calling.

This is not to denigrate finite games. We need them, because in many spheres of life we need rules, boundaries and time limits. But we must also have space for infinite games because they are among the highest expressions of the human spirit.

These reflections are prompted by two verses in today's parsha:

> Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your

> God has enjoined upon you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord… (Deut. 6:17-18)

The problem here is that the first verse seems to cover all 613 of the Torah's mitzvot. They are commandments, decrees or laws. Why then does the Torah add, "Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord"? Surely doing what is right and good is no more and no less than keeping God's commands, decrees and laws. Are these not two ways of saying the same thing?

However, as the Talmud[3] explains: "And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord" means that one should not perform an action that is not right and good, even if they are legally entitled to do so. This is the basis of an important law in Judaism, dina debar metzra, "the law of the adjoining property." When a landowner comes to sell a tract of land, the owner of the adjacent land has the right to buy it. If it is sold to someone else, the buyer must return the land to the neighbour who then reimburses them for the price they paid for it.

This law is not about land ownership as such. In general, a landowner has the right to sell to whomever they choose. It is about doing "the right and the good" – what people sometimes call menschlichkeit. To the neighbour, the purchase of the land is an immense good. They can expand without dissipating their landholdings in different locations. To the outsider, losing this purchase is not a significant loss because they can acquire other fields elsewhere. The law of bar metzra departs from the usual principles of law in order to achieve a moral end: helping one's neighbour.

Rashi, basing himself on this Talmudic passage , says that doing the right and good in the eyes of the Lord means "compromise, acting beyond the strict demands of the law."[4] Ramban agrees with this but goes on to make a fascinating and fundamental point:

> And the intention of this is that from the beginning God said to keep God's commandments, testimonies, and laws as God has commanded them. And now, it says: even regarding what God did not command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God's eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness. This is important because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people's behaviour with neighbours and friends, or business conduct or local ordinances. The Torah mentions many such laws, such as: "Do not gossip", "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge", "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour", "You shall not insult the deaf", "You shall rise before the aged", and so on. Now it states generally that one should do what is good and right regarding everything, including compromise and acting beyond the strict demands of the law.[5]

Ramban seems to be concurring with Rashi, but actually he is making a somewhat different point. Rashi is saying: keep the law and go beyond it. Ramban is saying that there are some things that cannot be specified by law: "because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people's behaviour." The Torah gives us specific examples: don't gossip, don't take revenge and so on. But the rest depends on the situation, the circumstances, and the person or people you are dealing with.

In the terms we encountered at the beginning of this essay: not all the Torah is a finite game. Much of it is. There are rules, commands, decrees and laws. There is the halachah. There are boundaries: milk, meat, public domain, private domain. There are beginnings and endings: the earliest time to say the morning Shema and the latest time. There are successes and defeats: either one does or doesn't complete the counting of the Omer. All of this is finite even though it is dedicated to the One-who-is-Infinite.

Ramban's point however (made also by the Maggid Mishneh[6]) is that there are significant areas of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules. That is because rules deal in generalities, and human lives are particular. We are all different. So is every situation in which we find ourselves. Good people know when to speak, when to be silent, when to praise, when to challenge. They hear the unspoken word, sense the concealed pain, focus on the other person rather than on themselves, and are guided by a deeply internalised moral sense that leads them instinctively away from anything less than the right and the good. The "right and the good in the sight of the Lord" is about the part of the moral life that is an infinite game.

There is a fine account of such a person in Psalm 15: "One whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart… who does no wrong to a neighbour, and casts no slur on others;… who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind… Whoever does these things will never be shaken."

I believe that we make a fundamental error when we think that all we need to know and keep are the rules governing interactions bein adam le-chavero, between us and our fellows. The rules are essential but also incomplete. We need to develop a conscience that does not permit us to wrong, harm or hurt someone even if the rules permit us to do so.[7] The moral life is an infinite game which cannot be reduced to rules. We need to learn and internalise a sense of "the right and the good."

Shabbat Shalom

[1] Simon Sinek, The Infinite Game, Portfolio Penguin, 2019.

[2] James P. Carse, Finite and Infinite Games, Free Press, 1986.

[3] Baba Metzia 108a.

[4] Lifnim mishurat hadin actually means "within" not "beyond" the strict demands of the law. The meaning is: I have certain rights in law but I may decide not to exercise them because someone else's welfare may be damaged if I do. "Within" means "I do not go up to the boundary in pressing my legitimate claim. I choose to forego my right."

[5] Ramban Commentary to Deut. 6:18; see also

his commentary to Lev. 19:2 where he makes a similar case. [6] See Maggid Mishneh to Rambam, Hilchot Shechenim 14:3. [7] Ramban developed for this and similar cases the idea of naval bi-reshut ha-Torah. See His commentary to Lev. 19:2.

The Wholeness of a Broken Tablet: Va'etchanan by Naomi Kalish
http://www.jtsa.edu/the-wholeness-of-a-broken-tablet

Parashat Va'et-hannan (Deut. 3–7) is always read on Shabbat Nahamu—the "Shabbat of Comfort"—which falls immediately after Tishah Be'av, the day when we commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples. It receives its name from the opening line of the Haftarah: "Comfort, comfort, my people" (Isaiah 40:1). The themes of this Shabbat mirror the process of moving through grief, from the devastation characterized by Tishah Be'av to the comfort expressed by Shabbat Nahamu, and eventually to the renewal hoped for on Rosh Hashanah. When the Temple stood, its service had provided a mechanism to mark, engage, and move through life's experiences, whether joyful or painful. Not only was the destruction of the Temple a calamity; it was also the destruction of the system for coping with calamities, the system for grieving and offering and receiving comfort. The Jewish people were at a loss for how to heal from this disaster and yet, somehow, they managed to do so.

The early rabbinic text *Avot De'Rabbi Natan* shares a story of healing and resiliency in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple. The story begins, "Once, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai left Jerusalem, and Rabbi Joshua followed after him. Rabbi Joshua saw the Holy Temple destroyed, and he lamented: 'Woe to us, for this is destroyed—the place where all of Israel's sins are forgiven!'" The Temple was the place where the people would bring sacrifices to mark significant moments in their lives and to experience spiritual transformation—including when they sinned and sought an intangible sense of forgiveness or atonement. This ritual was a way of spiritually cleansing themselves and starting afresh. Rabbi Joshua feared that without this ritual, they would feel a perpetual sense of guilt and shame and carry with them feelings of sadness and incompletion.

Rabban Yohanan replied, "My child, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of kindness, as it says, 'For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering'" (Psalm 89:3). Rather than feeling bereft, Rabban Yohanan expressed hope, vision, and purpose.

These two individuals had experienced the same loss but each had his own unique process of grieving. The text does not tell us Rabbi Joshua's response to his teacher's words. Was he comforted? Was he angered? Did he feel ignored or misunderstood? We know from other midrashim that Rabban Yohanan and his students, including

Rabbi Joshua, established a yeshiva in Yavneh (BT Gittin 56b) and constructed a new form of Judaism that provided radically different ways to structure a meaningful life and to cope with existential crises, including coping with one's own wrong-doing and regret. A lesson of this text is to make space for the multiplicity of conflicting responses to crisis. The hope of the text is that emotional and spiritual healing are possible.

The Torah reading of Shabbat Nahamu, Parashat Va'et-hannan, also points us toward a teaching about healing from brokenness when the system for coping itself breaks down. Twice our Torah portion refers to how the Ten Commandments were engraved on tablets (Deut. 4:12–13, 5:19). These tablets are the subject of a more in-depth narrative in other parts of the Torah: Moses descends the mountain with the tablets containing the Ten Commandments and sees the people worshipping a golden calf they have built in his absence. He is shocked and smashes the tablets. Eventually, God summons him back up the mountain and he receives a second set of tablets, which he delivers intact to the Israelites.

The Midrash teaches us that both sets of tablets, the broken and the whole, are holy and worthy of our attention and respect. Based on a verse in next week's parashah (Deut. 10:2), Rabbi Yosef taught that "both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the Ark" (BT Bava Batra 14b; also see BT Berakhot 8b). The Israelites literally carry the two sets with them, recognizing that both were sources for guidance and inspiration in their lives.

Imagining the whole tablets and the broken shards side by side in the Ark and thinking of them as metaphors for our spiritual lives, one can wonder what breaks a person's sense of meaning, and how one might reconstruct it.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in a talk to chaplains at Memorial Sloane Kettering Hospital in 1993, taught another midrash from *Avot De'Rabbi Natan* about the breaking of the tablets. According to the Midrash, Moses "looked and saw that the writing was flying off the tablets, and he said: 'How can I give these tablets to Israel?' For there is nothing on them! So instead, I will take ahold of them and smash them!"

In Kushner's interpretation of this midrash, it is at this point that Moses could not carry the stones anymore, and they fell from his hands and shattered. The midrash, Kushner explained, is about how a sense of purpose in a person's life is crucial for their resiliency: "When there is a purpose to what you are doing, you can do things which are too hard for you. When there is a sense of futility, when you're not sure you're doing any good, even a doable task becomes too hard. So one of the things we have to do to avoid burnout is to redefine success" ("Religious Resources for Healing," *The Caregiver Journal* 10:3 [1993]).

Moses experienced moral distress. A concept originally developed within the nursing profession, moral distress occurs "when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" (Andrew Jameton. *Nursing Practice: The Ethical Issues* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984], 6). Moses's distress was also vocational; what he had learned about how to lead people, what to teach them, and how to help better their lives no longer seemed true, or even possible. Indeed, according to the Midrash, when he saw the people dancing around the Golden Calf, he asked himself, "How can I give them these commandments?!" because he knew that they would initially be in violation of the commandment not to worship idols. Moses needed to break and replace not only the literal stones of the tablets, but also his own sense of purpose as a leader.

The Torah teaches that Moses ascended the mountain a second time. Whereas the first tablets were prepared before his arrival—in fact, created by God before the Creation of the world, according to the Midrash—the second tablets required Moses's involvement in their creation. He carved the stones and wrote the words (Exod. 34:27–28).

In order to reconstruct a sense of purpose, Moses needed to be able and willing to start again and to conduct himself differently—just as Rabban Yohanan and Rabbi Joshua needed to imagine different ways of relating to God and one another. Shabbat Nahamu provides comfort in part by reminding us of the flexibility of the human spirit to experience real healing and transformation in new ways. ***(Naomi Kalish is the Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of The Central for Pastoral Education at JTS)***

Ve'etchanan by Rabbi Joe Schwartz

http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=cb2dabb0-c719-4e89-a7ad-885722ddeab3

My son, who will be 7 in November, has discovered mortality.

Until now, I've been able to console my son when he is afraid. "There are no vampires," I've assured him, "and even if there are, the clove of garlic you insist on taking to bed with you will repel them." And: "The cut on your finger will heal. Isn't it amazing how the body heals?"

But then, two nights ago he asked me, "Why do we die? And why do we live if we'll just die in the end?" What could I say? The fear behind his eyes is my fear, too. What consolation could I offer?

We are this week in a paradoxical moment in the Jewish calendar. It is a time of beginnings: Moshe has just begun his great peroration, preparing the people to enter the Land of Israel. But it is also a time of imminent death, as Moses confides to his people that his death has been decreed:

"I begged the Eternal One then, saying: 'O Eternal God . . . Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.'

"But the Eternal One was cross with me for your sakes (למענכם), and would not heed me. The Eternal One said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan." (Devarim 3:24-26)

As the people are about to be reborn in their own land, Moshe is preparing to die. And not only that, but as Samson Raphel Hirsch wrote, Moshe, toward the end of his life, had become "embittered," believing "that his life's work was of no account, and that all he had done for the nation had been in vain." (Comment to Bemidbar 20:12) Here he is, dying unable to taste the fruits of his labor, his work still far from complete. Like so many he will perish, In Naomi Shemer's beautiful words, "in the middle of summer / just when the peaches are bountiful / and all the fruits are laughing in the basket."

And yet this section is always read on Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of Consolation, the Shabbat on which we read Isaiah's prophecy to the exiles in Babylon of national restoration: "נַחֲמ֥וּ נַחֲמ֖וּ עַמִּ֑י יֹאמַ֖ר אֱלֹהֵיכֶֽם: "'Be consoled, be consoled, O My people!' Says your God. 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and declare to her that that her term of service is over, her iniquity expiated.'" (Isaiah 40:1-2)

How can it be that we read of Moshe's tragic death, his unanswered prayers to live to see the conclusion of his mission, on the very Shabbat dedicated to our consolation? Where is the consolation?

There is a hint that Moshe had come to peace, at least to some extent, with his own death. Recall that he said God refused his petition to live long enough to enter the land "למענכם."

Many commentators understand this to mean "on account of you" - i.e., on account of the people's sins. But למען does not mean "on account of" but "for the sake of" - it does not point to the cause, but the purpose of a thing. Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman explains Moshe's meaning this way: Moshe's death is "for the benefit of the Jewish people." God decreed it not out of wrath or as judgment, but in order "to serve as an enduring lesson for the Jewish people - and it was for this reason that God would not, or could not, grant Moshe's plea."

What is that lesson? All human beings die; and even the greatest of us may die without tasting the fruits of our labor. But, God exhorts us, "Be consoled, O my people." There is consolation, but it is not for us as individuals. We are only consoled when we understand ourselves as part of a larger whole - of the Jewish people. Even Moshe Rabbeinu is, in the end, only a small part of a project much greater and longer than himself. And the span of a human life is too short to measure the success or meaning of that project.

This is true for all the great, generational projects of which we are a part - living up to the ideals of Torah, creating a just Jewish state in the Land of Israel, playing our part in

the redemption of humanity. We cannot measure their success by the span of our own lives, and we all of necessity die "in the middle of summer." The work will not be completed in the course of any one life, or even a thousand lives. Our part is to be of service to the great project. And in knowing that we can serve as one link in a long and still unfinished chain, there is consolation.
I don't think this thought will quite put my son's worried mind at ease, not yet. But perhaps in a few years.*(Rabbi Joe Schwartz is the founder and CEO of IDRA which is the online home for creative engagement with the Jewish past and present across the Jewish world. Its mission is to bring people together over Jewish culture, ideas and food https://www.facebook.com/idracafe/)*

Va'etchanan by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt
https://mailchi.mp/2f8a80748116/weekly-davar-ki-sissa-2578014?e=e0f2ca6c0d

Moses is not allowed into the land of Israel. He is accused of losing his temper, forgetting Jewish law and not believing in God. Even though God, and not Moses, is the author of the Bible, the humility of Moses was so great that even if he had written it, he would not have been afraid to expose his own shortcomings. Truth was more important to him than how history judged him.
Some of the most significant sections of the entire Torah are contained within this portion. The 10 Commandments and the Shema are the best known.
We are told that Moses prayed 515 times to be allowed into the land of Israel and at that point, God asked that he stop praying otherwise Moses would have forced God to 'change his mind'.
How many times would I pray for something before I gave up, saying that God just doesn't care? Three or four? Maybe ten? Certainly not 515.
There are at least two understandings that Moses had that allowed him to continue way beyond where most mortals would sign off.
Firstly, prayer is about relationship with God above all else. If prayer is about getting what I want, then as soon as I see it's not working, I'm likely to give up. But if prayer is about relationship, there is no limit. It's like going to a show with my wife. My main goal is to spend the time with my wife; and the show is merely a conduit for the relationship. If the show wasn't very good, we'd still enjoy the time together. So too with us and God; our needs are simply a conduit for our relationship with him. Moses realised this on its ultimate level. If he had to choose between having food on his table or having a meaningful relationship with God, he would have chosen the latter. Because the former is temporary and the latter eternal.
But Moses appreciated something else also; that prayer is not about justifying to God why we want something – it's about justifying it to ourselves. He understood that if God was saying 'no', it meant that Moses wasn't serious enough, Moses wasn't

committed enough, Moses didn't value it enough. Prayer is about changing our relationship with that which we want. And Judaism believes that when our relationship changes one of two things happen. Either we don't want it anymore, or God responds to us. As he did to Moses.

Why God told Moses to stop praying rather than allow him to enter Israel is a topic for another day. Suffice to say, though, that when you appreciate the value of prayer as part of a relationship and when you know that, 'no' is just a request for more soul searching, there's never a good reason to give up on praying and even 515 times isn't too much. As the rabbis say, 'even when the sharp sword is on your neck, never give up on God's mercy'.

Va'etchanan: Beyond the Law by Rabbi Jay Kelman

https://www.torahinmotion.org/civicrm/mailing/view?reset=1&id=2765

The most obvious connection between Tisha b'Av and parshat Vaetchanan—which is always read on the Shabbat following this saddest of days—lies in the opening lines of the parsha, where Moshe pleads to enter the land from which his beloved people would be exiled hundreds of years later.

The origins of Tisha B'Av stem from the chet hameraglim, the sin of the spies, in which the Jewish people lacked the desire to enter the land. Upon hearing the report of the spies—on the 9th day of Av—the Jewish people cried out, causing G-d to exclaim, "You cried a needless cry; I will establish for you [a reason to] a cry for all generations" (Taanit 29a). And it is that error with which Moshe opens up sefer Devarim—always read the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av—as the Jewish people are once again on the verge of entry into the Land. How tragic when those who are able to attain a gift do not want it, and those who desire that same gift are unable to attain it!

The connection between Vaetchanan and Tisha b'Av is further highlighted by the fact that the Torah reading chosen by our Sages for Tisha b'Av comes from this parsha. "When you bear children and grandchildren and will have been long in the land, you will grow corrupt..." (Devarim 4:24)

Yet I would argue that the most important connection between Tisha b'Av and the parsha lies in the verse, "You shall do, hayashar vehatov, what is straight and good in the eyes of G-d, so that it will be good for you; and you will come and inherit the good land that G-d has promised you" (Devarim 6:18). It is this verse which serves as the obligation to act lifnim meshurat hadin, a concept that does not lend itself easily to translation, but incorporates the idea of acting beyond the letter of the law and incorporating the spirit of the law. The Biblical verse itself links the practice of going beyond the law to the inheritance of the land. It is thus no surprise, then, that Rav Yochanan claims that, "Jerusalem was only destroyed... because people insisted on the

strict application of the law and did not practice lifnim meshurat hadin" (Baba Metziah 30b).

As the Ramban explains, the Torah could not possibly legislate all human interaction. The Torah makes mention of a number of various prohibitions, such as slander, revenge, passivity in the face of wrongdoing, and cursing others, as well as obligations such as respecting elders, giving charity, and displaying sensitivity to strangers, and follows up with a general rule to go beyond just what the Torah says. The Ramban notes as an example that of the law of bar metzra, where one who is selling land is obligated to give the right of first refusal to his neighbour - at that same price. The Torah does not allow one to take advantage of the fact that one would generally pay a premium for an abutting property.

This echoes a similar sentiment expressed by the Ramban on the obligation "to be holy" (Vayikra 19:2), where the Ramban notes that one can follow every technical detail of the Torah and yet still be a scoundrel. Whereas being holy relates to our relation to G-d, the mitzva to do "the straight and the good", refers to our interpersonal relations.

Law alone does not make one a better person, and no law can ensure basic human decency in each and every situation. The most important "laws" are the ones not directly mentioned. The Talmud (Yoma 86a)—in commenting on another verse from the week's parsha, "to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart," (Devarim 6:4)—envisions the tragic situation where one studies Torah, honours Torah scholars and yet is dishonest in his business dealings and does not act with kindness towards others. The "Torah" of this person, the Talmud declares, is actually a desecration of the name of G-d. Better that such people would not involve themselves in Torah study or observance, lest a link be made between ritual observance and unethical conduct.

We live in a society in which people often fight for their strict legal rights. The word lifnim means "before", indicating the Torah's desire that we resolve our differences before the shurat din, before we must appear in court, where "the straightness of the law" must be applied, come what may. Only before we get to court can mitigating circumstances play the important role they should. Once we arrive in court, it is strict justice that must apply, notwithstanding the harm that may cause in any given case.

At times, sadly, we may have no choice but to go to court. And Jewish law has many laws pertaining to our justice system. Even before Moshe makes mention of the sin of the spies, he reminds the people of the importance of appointing proper judges. Ideally, we would like our judges to have little to judge, but much time to devote to the study and teaching of Torah. If we would only understand the overarching importance

of lifnim meshura hadin, we would act in such a way that disputes might be avoided rather than adjudicated.

Va'etchanan by Rabbi Shalom Morris

https://www.thejc.com/judaism/sidrah/va-etchanan-1.502012

The repetition of the Ten Commandments in this week's reading highlights a general question with regards to the entirety of the book of Devarim, namely that it seems to be a repetition of what already appeared in the Torah. In fact, the rabbis referred to it as Mishneh Torah, the Second Torah, a view also expressed in its Latin name Deuteronomy.

The sages of the Talmud considered repetition to be an impossibility, as in their view nothing in the Torah appears for no reason. Accordingly, they mined the nuanced differences between the repeated laws and their first appearances to unearth additional legal details.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany) believed that the Torah was repeated as Moshe was speaking to a new generation — their parents had died out during the 40-year wandering in the desert. Hirsch believed that while the laws were the same, their packaging needed to be different. This generation would enter the Land of Israel and be tasked with building a country.

In other words, each new generation must look at the Torah afresh, seeing in its words the wisdom for a new era. While the laws remain the same, what they say to us will often be different as we face new challenges and live in a world which thinks about things in new ways.

Every time the world is upended, we are tasked with making a Mishneh Torah. This is something which our people had to do after the Holocaust and it is something we can do today. Covid-19 has pushed the pause button on life and enabled us to consider if we'd like to do things differently.

This is our generation's opportunity to meditate on how we want our Jewish communities to look and function. I've heard a lot about shorter services and more online content, but it is also about how we look after one another better, and that we now can't help but appreciate that our communities are part of the greater world. What affects one affects all. As we mourn our losses, and adjust to new realities, let us also use this time to shape our future, a better one. (*Rabbi Morris is the Rabbi of Bevis Marks Synagogue in London as well as head teacher of the Shaare Tikva School. He received his Rabbinic Ordination from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. Rabbi Morris is an Early Modern Jewish History PhD candidate at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Judaic Studies. He is particularly interested in the networks of the early Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities and their educational institutions.)*

One more article worth reading…

Singing the siddur: the man who'd like to tune us into prayer

https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/singing-the-siddur-the-man-who-d-like-to-tune-us-into-prayer-1.501702

Sing to the Lord," urged the prophetess Miriam, timbrel in hand, at the Crossing of the Red Sea. For our ancestors, collective prayer was synonymous with song.

But we don't always recognise that. Think of the scene in some old-style central Orthodox synagogue in the suburbs — a snatch of Hebrew from the *shaliach tzibbur* at the bimah, followed by the murmurs of those who can daven their way around the siddur and blank looks from those who don't.

Like many, Richard Collis has bleak childhood recollections of shul but he was determined to do something about it. At his own expense, the Hendon businessman went to a studio to record a singalong version of the main Shabbat service in the hope of helping others to become familiar with the prayers. He calls his project "We Sing, We Stay Together" and his wish is that by learning melodies for the prayers, families will be able to take them to heart.

Growing up in the United Synagogue in North-West London, he recalls, "It was the same for all of my friends. We did our barmitzvah and never went back."

His grandfather had been typical of the middle-of-the-road Jewry of his day — "shul in the morning and Arsenal in the afternoon." But the shul habit had faded with the younger generation.

"I wasn't able to participate in the service," said Mr Collis, 54. "We were never taught what the prayers meant. I thought I might as well have been going to a Buddhist temple. We were disenfranchised, there was no point going to shul because we didn't understand a word. And then I saw friends disappearing off the Jewish radar."

"When I was 19, I'd been travelling in the far east and I remember walking down a mountain in Kashmir and I'd been meeting all these American Jews who were looking for something. I thought, 'This is crazy'. Before I would start learning about other religions, I'd learn about my own."

For his own part, he learned to speak Hebrew. Some years later, the idea began to germinate that the way to connect with the prayers was to sing them. "I wanted to do something to help my community. I started looking — who's got tunes? I went round websites, I visited synagogues — California, Utah, Arizona, I was always the youngest there."

His generation, he believed, would "never go" for traditional chazanut and Chasidic niggunim were not part of his world. Aware of some of the work of Shlomo Carlebach that was becoming increasingly popular, he found his way "to a guy in Safed who had a Carlebach synagogue, Rabbi Steve Ginsberg. He wanted to help."

Together, they bounced around melodies. “We went through every prayer and looked for melodies from within the Carlebach portfolio that might match the meaning of the words and the mood of the prayer,” he said.

“It was the melody inspiration that I was looking for — not the way Carlebach was singing because that was Chasidic and Ashkenaz. I had to have a Hebrew that was universal and modern because the whole idea was to provide an alternative prayer service offering for the majority of diaspora Jews for whom Ashkenaz cantorial style prayer services simply did not appeal.”

Back in London, over the next few years he began recording the melodies with a musician friend from Edgware, Yossi Yoffe. And now he has released a musical double-album of the Shabbat service from Nishmat to Adon Olam with 64 tracks in which pretty every word of the prayers is sung.

The tunes are arranged in an easy listening style with percussion, guitar, keyboard and sometimes multi-layered vocals. “It had to be easy to learn and for people to sing along and we had to make it sufficiently melodic and enjoyable so people would want to listen.”

But they were mindful that “the tune had to reflect the meaning of the prayer— we weren’t going to use Madonna. We had to make sure the tunes were from Jewish sources.”

Most were based on traditional or Carlebach melodies, but sometimes they are “sampled”, adapted from a few bars of the original. He has found tunes for parts of the liturgy not usually sung such as P’tum Haketoret, the Talmud passage about incense, or Al Tirah, the short passage after Aleinu.

The tunes can now all be downloaded free from streaming services such as iTunes or Spotify or heard on Youtube. But a two-disc CD is available for sale as well as a *We Sing We Stay Together* book with a translation of each prayer and a transliteration into English.

He hopes teachers will now disseminate the tunes to children and families will accept his invitation to at least learn to sing one prayer together. The prayers cry out to be sung “with happiness”, he said — there is a particularly lively version of Mizmor L’David, the psalm that accompanies the Torah scroll back to the ark, which you can imagine doing an Israeli-style dance to.

“I’ve had a few people send me videos of singing the prayers,” he says. “I’ve had contact from Jewish communities that I didn’t know existed like Uganda.” He recently received a clip of a woman and her daugher singing the Shema to his setting — in Nigeria. *See www.wesingwestaytogether.com/*