

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vaetchanan
July 25, 2026 *** 11 Av, 5786

Vaetchanan in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Va'etchanan," means "I entreated," and it is found in Deuteronomy 3:23.

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 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: *Isaiah* 40:1-26

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

This week's haftarah 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 First Commandment by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5769)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vaetchanan/the-first-commandment/>

One of the most profound disagreements in Judaism is the one between Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi on the meaning of the first of the Ten Commandments.

For Maimonides (1135-1204), the first command is to believe in God, Creator of Heaven and Earth:

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realise that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist . . . To acknowledge this truth is a positive command, as it is said: “I am the Lord your God”.

[Ex. 20:2](#), [Deut 5:7](#), *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1-5

Judah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1145) disagreed. The greatest of medieval Hebrew poets, Halevi also wrote one of Judaism’s philosophical masterpieces, *The Kuzari*. It is framed as a dialogue between a Rabbi and the King of the Khazars. Historically, the Khazars were a Turkish people who, between the seventh and eleventh centuries, ruled a considerable area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, including southern Russia, northern Caucasus, eastern Ukraine, Western Kazakhstan, and northwestern Uzbekistan.

Many Jewish traders and refugees lived there, and in 838 the Khazar King Bulan converted to Judaism, after supposedly holding a debate between representatives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. The Arabic writer Dimashqi notes that the Khazars, having encountered the Jewish faith, “found it better than their own and accepted it”. Khazaria thus became, spiritually as well as geographically, an independent third force between the Muslim Caliphate and the Christian Byzantine Empire. After their conversion, the Khazar people used Jewish personal names, spoke and wrote in Hebrew,

were circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the Torah and Talmud, and observed the Jewish festivals.

The *Kuzari* is Judah Halevi's philosophy of Judaism, cast in the form of the imagined conversation between the king and a rabbi that led to the king's conversion. In it, Halevi draws a portrait that is diametrically opposed to what would later become Maimonides' account. Judaism, for Halevi, is not Aristotelian but counter-Aristotelian. The God of the prophets, says Halevi, is not the God of the philosophers. The key difference is that whereas the philosophers found God in metaphysics, the prophets found God in history.

This is how Halevi's rabbi states his faith in *The Kuzari*:

I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, who led the Children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land, after having brought them through the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way . . . [*Kuzari* I:11](#)

He goes on to emphasise that God's opening words in the revelation at Mount Sinai were not, "I am the Lord your God, Creator of Heaven and Earth" but "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" ([*Kuzari* I:25](#)).

Halevi lived before Maimonides. Nahmanides (R. Mosheh ben Nachman, 1194-1270) lived after, but he too disagreed with Maimonides' interpretation of the opening verse of the Ten Commandments. His objection is based on a passage in the *Mechilta*:

"You shall have no other gods besides Me." Why is this said? Because it says, "I am the Lord your God." To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province. His servants said to him, "Issue decrees for

the people.” He, however, told them, “No. When they accept my sovereignty, I will issue decrees. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, how will they carry out my decrees?”

According to Nahmanides, the verse, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is not a command, but a *preliminary* to the commands. It explains *why* the Israelites should be bound by the will of God. He had rescued them, liberated them, and brought them to safety. The first verse of the Decalogue is not a law but a statement of fact, a reason why the Israelites should accept God’s sovereignty.

Thanks to a series of archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century, we now know that Nahmanides was right. The biblical covenant has the same literary structure as ancient near eastern political treaties, of which the oldest known are the “Stele of the Vultures” (before 2500 BCE), recording the victory of Eannatum, king of Lagash, over the people of Umma, both in southern Mesopotamia, and the treaty of Naram-Sin, king of Kish and Akkad, with the people of Elam (c. 2280 BCE). Other, later treaties have also been discovered, involving Hittites, Arameans, and Assyrians. One details a pact between the Hittite king Hattusilis III and the Pharaoh Rameses II, regarded by some scholars as the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

These treaties usually follow a six-part pattern, of which the first three elements were [1] the *preamble*, identifying the initiator of the treaty, [2] a *historical review*, summarising the past relationship between the parties, and [3] the *stipulations*, namely the terms and conditions of the covenant. The first verse of the Ten Commandments is a highly abridged form of

[1] and [2]. “I am the Lord your God” is the preamble. “Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is the historical review. The verses that follow are the stipulations, or as we would call them, the commands. Nahmanides and the Midrash are therefore correct in seeing the verse as an introduction, not a command.

What is at stake in this difference of opinion between Maimonides on the one hand, Judah Halevi and Nahmanides on the other? At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of the nature of God and His relationship to the universe. God is *Creator of the universe* and the maker of the human person “in His image”. This aspect of God is universal. It is accessible to anyone, Jew or Gentile. Aristotle arrived at it through logic and metaphysics. For him, God was the “prime mover” who set the universe into motion. Today, many people reach the same conclusion through science: the universe is too finely tuned for the emergence of life to have come into being through chance (this is sometimes called the Anthropic Principle). Some arrive at it not through logic or science but through a simple sense of awe and wonder (“Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical” said Wittgenstein). This aspect of God is called by the Torah, *Elokim*.

There is, however, a quite different aspect of God which predominates throughout most of *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible. This is God as He is involved in the fate of one family, one nation: the Children of Israel. He intervenes in their history. He makes a highly specific covenant with them at Sinai – not at all like the general one He made with Noah and all humanity after the Flood. The Noahide covenant is simple and basic. The Sages said it involved a mere seven commands. The Sinai covenant, by contrast, is highly articulated, covering almost every conceivable aspect of life. This aspect of God is

signalled by the use of the four-letter name for which we traditionally substitute (since the word itself is holy and could only be pronounced by the High Priest) the word *Hashem*.^[1]

Maimonides, the philosopher, emphasised the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of God. Judah Halevi and Nahmanides, one a poet, the other a mystic, were more sensitive to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of God in the historical drama of the covenant. Both are true and valid, but in this case, Halevi and Nahmanides are closer to the meaning of the biblical text.

Judaism needs both voices: the philosopher who teaches us to seek God in creation, and the prophet who teaches us to find Him in history. But when the Torah introduces the Ten Commandments, it begins with a hint to the story of our redemption before the command of law, a reminder of the journey from liberation to the constitution of liberty. ^[1] On the two aspects and names, see Kuzari IV:1-3; and Ramban to Exodus 3:13.

[The Hidden Meaning of the Shema by Chancellor Mike Uram](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-hidden-meaning-of-the-shema/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-hidden-meaning-of-the-shema/>

There is a story about a rabbi who traveled through Europe after the Holocaust searching for Jewish children hidden in churches during the war. In one Catholic orphanage, the priest assured him there were none. The rabbi did not believe him but had no way to prove it. So he asked to watch the sisters put the children to bed that night, just to see how they were cared for. The priest agreed. As the nuns tucked the children in, the rabbi stood in the doorway and began to sing the Shema. Several of the children immediately began to cry for

their parents, revealing that they were, in fact, Jewish. The story may be apocryphal, but it highlights just how foundational the Shema is to Jewish consciousness.

This week's portion, Va'et-hannan, is the very source of the Shema prayer. In studying the parashah, I found myself reading it with new eyes. During prayer it's easy to cruise through the words but studying them as text raised questions I'd never asked before.

Two questions jumped out at me. First, if the Shema is meant to remind us about the nature of God, why does it say "listen" rather than "look" or "see?" Second, what does the Hebrew Adonai Ehad, "God is One," actually mean?

The nineteenth-century rabbi Adolf Altmann wrote:

Sound stands nearest to the purely spiritual among the phenomena of the world of the senses. Therefore, God has chosen it to be the medium of sensory revelation. Since what is heard is the least dimensional, it is easier to imagine it as something unlimited, and extendable into infinity, than what is visible or tactile.[1]

Sound has no edges. It cannot be held, weighed, or framed. It passes through walls and doorways and reaches even a child asleep in an orphanage, with only trace memories of their Jewish identity.

The historian Hans Kohn drew a similar contrast. The Greeks, he wrote, were "the people of sight, of the spatial and plastic sense" But "the Jew did not see so much as he heard . . . His organ was the ear . . . When Elijah perceived God, he heard only a still, small voice." [2]

No image. No statue. Only a voice, and the demand to listen to it.

Sight functions differently. It lets us draw conclusions quickly and viscerally from superficial attributes. Entire worldviews and prejudices can be built from a single glance. But the eye is also easily tricked. A person can be beautiful without being healthy. Something can be shiny without being valuable. Our eyes are easily seduced into idolatry, a false belief that something has more meaning than it actually does.

This understanding of the power of hearing opens up a new understanding of the Shema. While an image might be worth a thousand words, truth is found only through deeper, more nuanced engagement. Hearing is a tool for understanding people, politics, and values far beyond what a glance can reveal, a powerful reminder in a world of Instagram and TikTok that captures more images of us than at any point in human history. We need to guard against assuming that seeing is the only tool we have for discerning truth.

The second half of the verse is no simpler. Adonai Ehad has been translated in markedly different ways, and the sages devoted considerable attention to what it means.

For Rashi (11th century, France), it is less a statement about God's present state than an aspiration: a future when God's unity is recognized by all and brings humanity together. For Rashbam (12th century, France), it is simpler still: Ehad expresses exclusivity, a covenantal claim that this God, and no other, is the one to whom Israel is bound. Rambam (12th century, Spain/Egypt) takes it further: God's oneness is unlike any we can conceive of, not a matter of counting to one, but a unity with no comparison in creation.

The interpretation that inspires me most comes from Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (1749–1821), who puts it starkly in his *Nefesh Hahayyim*: “ ‘There is no other’ other than Him [must

be taken] literally: there is nothing at all in all the worlds . . . all is filled with the simple essence of His oneness.”[3]

God, in other words, is not confined to the heavens. God is in the blades of grass in a field, in the force of a thunderstorm, in an act of human courage, in the love shared between two people. Scholars call this more mystical conception of God immanentism.

Understood this way, the Shema is not simply the assertion most of us grew up with, that Jews believe in one God rather than many. It is a claim that God is anywhere and everywhere, and that widens the prayer’s meaning considerably. If God is present in everything, the implications are moral and environmental: to hurt or diminish another person is to hurt or diminish God’s presence in the world, and to pollute or damage the earth is to dim God’s light within it.

What I love about approaching the Shema this way is that even though the prayer is so familiar, studying it closely reveals new meaning and amplifies its power today. When we say the Shema, we are not only asserting the essential Jewish belief in one God. We are reminding ourselves that our eyes cannot be our only tools for understanding (especially in a world of screens, Instagram, and TikTok); we must also listen deeply to others, to our past, and to our own hearts. And when we proclaim that God is one, we are asserting that in order to embody that statement by acting as if we really believe that each and every person and the world in which we live are all connected and all extensions of the Divine. All of sudden, gossip, discrimination, dishonesty, careless use of resources, and damage to the natural world are values that are now as central as Judaism’s commitment to one God.

As we recite the Shema this week and read it from the Torah, I

hope it offers new meaning and a recommitment to the values that can help make our lives and our world better. (

[1] As quoted in Norman Lamm, *The Shema* (Philadelphia: JPS. 1998) 13 [2] Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 2005) 30-32 [3] As quoted in Lamm, 49.

[Va'etchanan: Moshe the Pedagogue by Zan Alhadeff
https://yeshivatmaharat.org/vaetchanan-moshe-the-pedagogue/](https://yeshivatmaharat.org/vaetchanan-moshe-the-pedagogue/)

Do you remember your fifth grade teacher? For good or ill, our teachers leave a lasting imprint on us. Veteran teachers will tell you that years later, they receive letters from students, thanking them for the positive impact they made on their lives. Teachers can lift up students, helping to start them on a path for the rest of their lives. On the other hand, teachers can discourage students, and harsh words from a trusted teacher can affect children for years afterwards. We see both of these qualities—rebuke, and lasting guidance—in the life of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Parshat Va'etchanan opens with one of the most poignant scenes in the Torah. Moshe, after learning that he is to die in the wilderness, begs God yet again to be let into the Land of Israel: “I pleaded (va'etchanan) with the LORD at that time, saying...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” (Devarim 3:24). Why was God so angry with Moshe? What could Moshe have done so wrong, prompting God's harsh response: “Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again!” (Devarim 3:26).

The Midrash Tanchuma answers this question with a parable

about education. According to the Midrash, God is compared to a father who hears his son angrily rebuked by a paedagogus, a teacher entrusted with moral development:

Why was the Holy One angry with Moses? Because he had rebuked Israel. A parable: To what is the matter comparable? To a king who had a son...When the paedagogus became angry with [his son] and reprimanded him, the king heard and said: By the life of my kingdom, you are not entering my palace (Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Appendix to Va'etchanan).

So too, just as Moshe had angrily rebuked the people of Israel at the Waters of Merivah (Bamidbar 20:10-11), God heard and decreed that he would not enter the “palace,” the Land of Israel. This midrash sees Moshe as a humble teacher, wrongly rebuking his student in a moment of anger. In this Midrash, God does not accept angry rebukes from teachers and leaders—whether they are a paedagogus or Moshe Rabbeinu. When we rebuke others, (tochecha) it is only a mitzvah if we do it in such a way that it can be heard (Yevamot 65b).

According to this Midrash, God requires teachers who speak with gentleness, even when the message is a reprimand. Although we could see this as a minor infraction, God the Parent takes it seriously. After all, angry words from a trusted teacher can affect a child for the rest of her life. And in Moshe's own moments of rage and rebuke, God sees a flaw in his leadership. According to Rambam, Moshe's sin was that he tended toward anger—and it was not appropriate to be angry as a leader of Israel (Introduction to Rambam's Commentary on Pirkei Avot). And so, he is forbidden from entering the Land of Israel. Moshe is not the leader that Bnei Israel need as they travel into the next phase of their journey

as a people.

The simple understanding of Devarim 3:24 was that God rejected Moshe's heartfelt prayer and refused to let him into the Land. However, the Ishbitzer rebbe, R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854), has a radically different understanding. He asks why Moshe Rabbeinu chose to include this moment in the Torah ("And Moshe pleaded...") if Moshe's own prayer was rejected by God? He writes in the Mei haShiloach:

Even though on the surface it seems as if his prayer had no effect at all, nonetheless, he caused them to understand that his prayer was not in vain. [It is as if he is saying to them] even in the course of actions in the land of Israel I am your teacher and Rabbi, and likewise [Moshe] showed them that his prayer was effective...(Vol. 1, Deuteronomy, Vaetchanan 1).

The Mei haShiloach teaches that in reality, Moshe Rabbeinu's prayer was answered. Although his mortal life was ending, Moshe did enter the Land of Israel—in the hearts and memories of the Jewish people. "I am your teacher and Rabbi" teaches us that Moshe was still their rabbi, and would be for all future generations. The Mei haShiloach further teaches that Moshe is showing us that we can always pray for God's mercy, even when the outcome seems inevitable. This teaching is powerful for several reasons. It shows us that even if Moshe was not able to enter the Land physically, his impact was eternal. In this way, Moshe was with the people even in the Land of Israel because he was still their teacher. So too, our important teachers never truly leave us. Even though they cannot walk with us throughout our lives, their wisdom and guidance stays with us.

Bringing these two texts together, perhaps Moshe is both the

angry paedagogus and the Rav b'chol hadorot (Rabbi for all generations). Moshe was a complex leader and a complicated personality. Even the greatest teachers have moments of frustration. For Moshe, those moments of harsh rebuke had serious consequences. But he was still the Rav that Bnei Israel brought with them in their hearts, and who was memorialized in the Torah for all time. In a way, the Torah itself (and Deuteronomy in particular) is a record of how future generations bring Moshe's teachings with them, far beyond the physical Land of Israel. May we learn to distinguish lasting wisdom from harsh moments, and may we merit to carry our greatest teachers with us throughout all of our journeys.

(Zan Alhadeff grew up in Portland, Oregon and had a career as an urban planning consultant. She learned Torah at Hadar and Drisha and is a graduate of Maharat's Beit Midrash Program (2023).)

[The Postive Within the Negative by Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz](https://thekotel.org/en/157011/)
<https://thekotel.org/en/157011/>

At the Giving of the Torah, we received the Ten Commandments. In many synagogues, the Tablets of the Ten Commandments are displayed above the Holy Ark, leading many to assume that they constitute the very foundation of Judaism, while the rest of the commandments were added only at a later stage. Our Sages, however, taught that the entire Torah was given to Moses at Sinai and during the forty days that followed that momentous revelation. Accordingly, the Ten Commandments are not an independent list of fundamental principles, but rather the nucleus from which the entire Torah unfolds – its genetic code.

This idea was articulated explicitly by Rabbi Saadia Gaon,

who devoted an entire work to demonstrating how all 613 commandments are encompassed within the Ten Commandments. Likewise, Rashi, one of the greatest commentators on the Torah, wrote:

“All six hundred and thirteen commandments are included within the Ten Commandments.”
(Exodus24:12)

This understanding also influenced Jewish law. The Talmud relates that during the Temple period, the kohanim would recite the passage of the Ten Commandments as part of the daily Temple service. When the Sages later considered incorporating this reading into the public prayers, they ultimately abolished the practice out of concern that heretics would claim that only the Ten Commandments were divinely revealed, while the rest of the Torah consisted merely of later rabbinic enactments.

Rashi explains:

“So that the unlearned should not say: ‘The rest of the Torah is not true. You see, they recite only what the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke and they heard directly from Him at Sinai.’” (Berachot 12a)

From this, we can appreciate how important it was to the Sages to emphasize that the Torah is a single, indivisible whole, rather than a collection of commandments of varying significance.

This concept becomes especially clear when we compare the two places in the Torah where the Ten Commandments appear: first in Parashat Yitro in the Book of Exodus, and again here in Parashat Va’etchanan. At first glance, the second version appears to be a simple repetition. Yet the

Torah commentators point to numerous differences between the two texts. These are not different commandments; rather, Moses reveals additional layers that were already embedded within the revelation at Sinai. One striking example concerns the commandment of Shabbat.

In Parashat Yitro, the Torah commands:

“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”
(Exodus 20:8)

In Parashat Vaetchanan, however, it states:

“Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”
(Deuteronomy 5:12)

In the language of the Sages, remember refers to the positive obligations of Shabbat – honoring it, delighting in it, and making it a day of joy, rest, and spiritual elevation. Observe, by contrast, refers to the prohibitions of Shabbat – refraining from all forms of labor defined by Jewish law.

The Sages therefore taught:

“‘Remember’ and ‘Observe’ were spoken in a single utterance – something that the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear.”
(Rosh Hashanah 27a)

In other words, at Mount Sinai both commands were delivered simultaneously – both the obligation to remember Shabbat and the obligation to observe it. The people heard them in a miraculous manner that transcended the limitations of human language.

This raises an important question: Why was it necessary for these commandments to be delivered in such an extraordinary

way? Why were they not stated separately, as so many other commandments were?

This question speaks directly to the modern human experience.

Many people today are naturally drawn to the idea of Shabbat as a day of rest – a pause from life's relentless pace, a time for family, friends, and emotional renewal. In that sense, they readily embrace the concept of remember. But when it comes to observe – the system of restrictions that limits what one may do – resistance often arises. Why shouldn't each person simply decide for themselves what constitutes rest?

The answer lies in the fact that the Jewish people were commanded through a single divine utterance that contained both ideas together. This teaches us that remember and observe are not two alternative approaches, but one inseparable system. Refraining from labor is not an end in itself; it is the condition that enables a person to truly step away from the demands of ordinary life.

According to the Torah's perspective, the Creator, who knows human nature, understands that genuine inner rest cannot be achieved merely by stopping work. It requires creating a sacred space in which the practical concerns of everyday life no longer demand our attention. Shabbat is not merely a day for physical recovery; it is also intended for spiritual renewal – and that dimension can be attained only when both aspects are observed together.

For this reason, remember and observe were spoken in one utterance. In the Torah's vision, Shabbat is not a coincidental combination of rest and restrictions. Rather, it is a unified reality in which delight and boundaries, freedom and discipline, come together to create a complete human

experience. The true essence of Shabbat cannot be understood when these two dimensions are separated.

(Rabbi Shumuel Rabinowitz is the Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites)

Yahrtzeits

Mel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Rose Zwillenberg on Saturday July 25th

Marianne Sender remembers her mother Helen Popiel on Tuesday July 28th

Lisa Small remembers her Aunt Edith Berman on Wednesday July 29th

Mike Hessdorf remembers his mother Regina Hessdorf on Thursday July 30th

Shari Mevorah remembers her grandmother Yetta Jablonek on Friday July 31st