

Is Prosperity Really Such a Good Thing?
Parsha Va-Ethannan
D'Var Torah by Alan Sherman
August 1, 2015

Shabbat Shalom.

I got the call several months ago.

“Alan, would you be a Summer Shabbat Speaker?”

When Dick Wissoker calls, you answer. So I said yes. Not an easy decision for me, mind you. Nonetheless, I chose today, a Shabbat that worked for mine and my family’s schedule.

Soon after, I opened up the Etz Hayim to read the parsha for this week and began to think about what I wanted to say. By no means did I think it would be easy, but I figured I could read the story, think about the messages, and with some help from the rabbis, find some interesting aspect to explore and discuss.

Well, that was the plan. You see, very quickly, I learned what Va-Ethannan is all about. Va-Ethannan literally means “I beseeched”, or more commonly, “I pleaded”, and it is the story of Moses

pleading with G-d on his own behalf to be able to enter the Promised Land, which G-d denies. But the richness of this parsha goes far deeper than that.

Va-Ethhannan is about Moses recapping the 10 Commandments for our people:

- I am the Lord your G-d
- You Shall Have No Other gods Besides Me
- Remember the Sabbath and Keep It Holy
- and so on...

You know, the 10 most important laws G-d caused to be etched into two stone tablets and obeyed for all time. And if that wasn't enough, the 10 Commandments are followed by the Shema, which declares G-d's One-ness, the duty to love G-d, to study G-d's Torah and teach it to our children; and the mitzvot of tefillin and mezuzah, in what the Etz Hayim commentary refers to as "the quintessential Jewish prayer."

So, while there are of course, no unimportant parshiot, let's just say this one is pretty big!

It was intimidating to realize just how central a parsha Va-Ethannan is, and while it was tempting to discuss the 10 Commandments or the Shema, as I read and re-read the parsha, and discussed it at length with Rabbi Fel, I was struck by something, one seemingly innocuous verse that I'd like to focus on.

In Chapter 6 verse 10, Moses sternly cautions the Jewish people as they are about to enter the land, to remember what it took to achieve this prosperity. That it was not their doing, but the work of those who preceded them and the work of G-d, who freed them from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. In other words, he sternly cautions them, don't forget all that went before you, that led to everything you enjoy today.

Ramban, the 12th century biblical commentator, explains this passage as Moses admonishing the individual Israelite that while there will be an abundance of prosperity, he should remember his "days of affliction and distress" when he was a slave in Egypt, and he should not forget G-d, who removed him from that state of slavery and placed him instead into a state of such prosperity.

In this context, we gain an understanding that revering G-d is about being aware, about recognizing all of G-d's gifts that brought about the moment and the opportunity, and the work done by those who came before you.

As David mentioned, I spent much of my career as a marketing professional in the technology sector. After graduating from business school, I joined a boutique consulting firm which advises technology companies on marketing and strategy. This involved researching and analyzing market opportunities, and developing recommendations for the client that were delivered in the form of a report and presentation.

I spent much of my first few weeks there reviewing several past reports in detail, learning about the various types of projects, and the process of planning, gathering data, analyzing, reporting, and presenting the findings of the project to the client in as succinct and impactful a way as possible. And frankly, I thought after

reading a few of the reports, that I got it. The work seemed pretty straightforward.

Soon enough, it was time for me to start on my first client project. It was a specialty paper company that was looking to grow into a new and higher margin market. I didn't have a background in specialty paper, but I was confident that I could learn quickly and help the client's business. Over the next several weeks, I did the planning, the data gathering, and the analysis. I learned a lot about paper and some applications for it that command a premium if manufactured to some challenging performance standards.

And then it came time to write the report. Have you ever thought something was easy until you tried to do it yourself? Remember those reports that I said seemed straightforward? Now that it was my turn to actually write one, I quickly discovered it wasn't nearly as easy as I had thought. It was hard to write succinctly. Those charts didn't just create themselves. And the recommendations and action steps for what the client needed to do in order to be successful? They didn't just appear on the page!

In fact, I realized that back when I had sat surrounded by the prosperity of already-written reports, I had taken for granted just how challenging it was to create them, and the effort that had been required for all of the work that had come before me.

I've tried to carry this awareness with me throughout my career. Just a few months ago, I transitioned from marketing in the technology sector to heading Marketing and Admissions at Hebrew College. It's a steep learning curve, and in many ways I feel like I've barely scratched the surface. But every day, whether through a conversation, or something I read, or even walking by the portraits of some of the founders and presidents of the institution over the past 94 years, I have an awareness of the tradition and the history of the College, and more broadly, of its role in educating and shaping Jewish leaders, rabbis, cantors, educators, parents, teens, and many others. I think about the impact so many of the College's alumni have gone on to have in the Jewish community and the world. And I feel a part of something much bigger, something that is all at once prosperous as a result of educating thousands of

students over nearly a century, yet still far from resting on its laurels.

Hebrew College is addressing the many challenges of developing and delivering Jewish education that is relevant and timely for today's students. The faculty and staff have more recently crafted Online learning, interfaith degree programs, and adult and teen programming tailored to fit into increasingly busy schedules. The College continues to evolve, and to address students' dynamic educational needs. In the months and years ahead, I hope to be able to help in this process, to continue leveraging the richness of the past to help guide the College's future, not forgetting, but rather building upon that success, and in so doing, gaining the perspective that the College's best days are very much ahead.

We're all a tiny part of a vast continuum. We live in a minuscule moment of time, with the opportunity to do our own small part with the moment we're given. All of us are in a similar position in our own ways as the Jews were when they stood on the cusp of entry into Israel. Much of the hard work was done before we even

got to the moment, yet it's up to us to do our best with it when it is entrusted to us.

All of us share Temple Emunah as one such example, and what an amazing example it is. Created by our visionary founders over 55 years ago, it was through their creativity, financial support, physical labor, and incredible commitment that Temple Emunah was born, and from those efforts that it was built.

It's easy to rest on one's laurels. If the hard work is already done, what do we want to do when we get there? When the Israelites arrived and found the cities already flourishing, the houses full of good things that they didn't fill, vineyards and olive groves that they didn't plant, and they could eat their fill in an already prosperous land, they were warned that it was not time to forget G-d and all that had come before them.

Similarly for us here at Temple Emunah in 2015, it's our turn, our moment to enjoy the prosperity we have been given. Here we are, 543 families strong, the largest membership in our history, a vibrant, multi-generational community, two wonderfully gifted

rabbis; and the list goes on and on. Amazing. This was hard to get to.

So how do we simultaneously recognize our accomplishments, and also recognize that those accomplishments are predicated upon the work of those who came before us?

At the same time that we celebrate success, we also take the opportunity to revere G-d and to continue to build on that success, through the dedication of so many people who put in so much time and effort to ensure that Temple Emunah not only survives, but prospers, as it does in so many ways. We build on the work of our founders and of many others who preceded us as we bring rice and crackers for Family Table, offer financial support through the Kol Nidre appeal, work on a committee, support the twice-daily minyan (and as Kathy wants you to remember, there's still a whole month left to reach your 10-for-10 goal!), and so much more.

As Membership Vice President, I'm part of a wonderful team that works to both bring new families into Temple Emunah, and to help current members to be engaged. Please speak with me if you are

interested in being part of the Membership Committee, or even just serving in a supportive role helping new members find their own connections within our community.

I also encourage you to extend a greeting to an unfamiliar face, to invite a 'temple friend' to your home for a Shabbat dinner, or a prospective member to join you for a temple barbecue, movie, speaker, or service. Help someone else feel more connected, and help strengthen our community even more.

In countless ways large and small, while we enjoy the moment, we each do our part, as Ramban said, to honor all that came before us, as we build the future for all of those who will follow us.

May we always continue in this way, to go from "From Strength to Strength."

Shabbat Shalom.
