

Parashat Vaetchanan

What Do We Do When God Says No?

Text 1: Deuteronomy 3:23–26

[Biblical Scripture]

I pleaded with the Eternal at that time, saying... Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land... But the Eternal was wrathful with me... and would not listen to me. The Eternal said to me, “Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again.”

- How does it feel to be told by God that a dream is off-limits?
- Does this mark a moment of punishment or intimacy?

Text 2: Aviva Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*

[1944-Present, Jerusalem, Israel]

Moses’ prayer is refused, and God tells him, “Do not speak to Me further of this matter.” What kind of relationship is this? It is at once intimate and violent. God listens, and then closes the door. But the door closes with a kind of tenderness, as if God cannot bear to hear any more from the one God loves most. In this denial, there is the pathos of intimacy interrupted; not apathy or distance, but a pain that marks love’s limits.

- Can divine refusal still be rooted in love?
- How might we understand this “no” as relational rather than punitive?

Text 3: Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*

[1971-Present, New York, America]

Moses has given his life to God’s mission, and still he is told no. What are we to learn? That faithfulness does not guarantee fulfillment. That love and obedience are not transactional. That even the greatest among us must live with unfulfilled dreams. Moses’ greatness lies not only in his vision but in his acceptance, in his willingness to bless a future he will not enter.

- What does it mean to bless what you cannot touch?
- Can we find purpose in limitation?

Text 4: Psalm 13:1–2

[Around 1000 BCE, Attributed to King David]

How long, O Lord, will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

- What is the spiritual function of protest?
- How might anger coexist with belief?

Text 5: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*

[1907-1972, New York, America]

Prayer begins at the edge of emptiness. It is not about petition but presence. When God says no, and when no answer comes, the act of reaching out is still sacred. Even unanswered prayers are heard, not always in the way we hope, but always in the relationship they maintain. God may be silent, but God is not absent.

- Is the act of prayer itself an answer?
- What does it mean to be heard but not answered?

Text 6: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 10a

[3rd-6th centuries CE, Persia (modern Iraq)]

Rabbi Yohanan said: “Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person’s neck, they should not withhold themselves from praying for mercy.”

- How do we reconcile this with God's directive to Moses to never speak of this matter again?
- Is persistence in prayer faithful or defiant—or both?

Text 7: Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim*

[1905-1997, Jerusalem, Israel]

The Midrash suggests that Moses prayed 515 times to enter the land. The verb ‘*vaetchanan*’ is linked to the word ‘*chanun*’—grace. This prayer is not a demand based on merit but a plea for unearned compassion. Moses, of all people, models that even the most righteous must sometimes beg without expectation. This humbles us all.

- What is the role of grace in a merit-based tradition?
- How does this shift our understanding of leadership and reward?

Text 8: Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, *HaNeshamah LaYamim HaNora'im*
[1974-Present, Jerusalem, Israel]

We do not always get to cross into our dreams. But we do get to stand on the mountain, look out over the land, and teach the next generation where to go. The “no” of God is not only a wall; it can be a gateway for others. Our legacy may come not from what we complete, but what we begin.

- Can a denied dream still become a gift?
- How might vision outlive possession?

Text 9: Leonard Cohen, *You Want It Darker*
[1934-2016, Los Angeles, America]

Hineni, hineni—I’m ready, my Lord.

- What does it mean to say 'here I am' after a 'no'?
- Is readiness a surrender or a statement of trust?

Text 10: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*
[1903-1993, Boston, America]

The tragic individual is the man who cannot renounce, who cannot make peace with God’s silence. The man of faith is not he who has all prayers answered, but he who continues the dialogue even when he hears nothing in return. Faith is born not of certainty, but of commitment to relationship in mystery.

- Can silence be a form of sacred communication?
- What kind of strength is required to stay in relationship with mystery?

Text 11: Rabbi Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*
[1934-2009, Washington, DC, America]

Teshuvah, prayer, and tzedakah will not change the decree, but they can change us. This is not magic. It is transformation. When we stop believing that every “no” is the end of the story, we open ourselves to the deepest work of the High Holidays: becoming who we are meant to be, even when our wishes remain unanswered.

- How can ritual help us reframe rejection?
- What does it mean to change ourselves when we cannot change the outcome?