

V'etchanan: Declaration of Dependence

Moshe Taragin

Where would the desert generation be without the heroic prayers of Moshe? Twice the young nation rebelled, first betraying their vows at Sinai, and, subsequently, scorning an invitation to enter the promised land. Twice, Moshe's prayers rescued the Jewish people from Divine wrath and possible annihilation. At one point Moshe even fasted 40 days, desperately battling for the survival of his beloved rebels. Though our Avot modelled the original concept of tefilla, Moshe provided much of its architecture as well as some of its basic content. Moshe was our supreme Torah teacher and our greatest prophet. Additionally, he demonstrated, that tefilla can bend the will of G-d.

After a lifetime of praying for others, Moshe now prays for himself and for passage into a homeland from which he was barred. Facing a crushing punishment, he furiously prays to repeal the decree so he can voyage into the land of his dreams. According to the midrash he prays 500 different prayers, but, sadly, never received the response he coveted. Throughout his many years of prayer, Moshe had assembled a vast "arsenal" of different forms of tefilla. Prayer, as an emotional encounter between Man and G-d, spans a broad spectrum of voices and "tones". Our Chazal delineate seven basic brands of tefilla, but, clearly, there are many more variants and countless "derivatives" of these basic seven.

From this expansive menu of tefilla choices, Moshe selects an interesting option: he begins with the word "V'eatchanan"- a word which lends the parsha its title. This term "V'etchanan" possesses dual meaning. Firstly, it refers to a "petition" or an "appeal"- in this instance Moshe's plea to enter Israel. Yet, the word also refers to a request which is "undeserved". The term V'etchanan is analogous to the word 'chanan' or even 'chinam', each of which evokes the concept of something 'free' rather than merited. Often, we pray for an outcome we believe we deserve. We invoke our own virtues, and we also summon the achievements of earlier generations- zechut avot. Still other times, we ask G-d to freely grant us unmerited mercy. We stare at our own frailty,

and, out of our weakness, we call to G-d for mercy. We would have expected Moshe to lodge his request based on his past accomplishments. Given his years of endless self-sacrifice, this modest request seems fully warranted. Yet Moshe requests a "free pass" into Israel because, in his own mind, he doesn't deserve this grant. By praying with the word V'etchanan, he requests an undeserved "favor" from G-d.

This decision spotlights just how humble Moshe was. He had scaled the heavens and split the sea, but this didn't inflate his ego, nor did it yield any sense of entitlement or claim to G-d. Standing at the door of the land of Israel he pleaded as a beggar would. When we are content, and our needs are filled, it is generally easier to feel "humble". However, desperation and urgency plays tricks with our minds, "convincing" us that we deserve our wants and desires. Sometimes, we justify our deepest desires by persuading ourselves that we deserve them. Moshe is humble even under duress, meekly requesting a favor he doesn't believe is his "right". His plea of "V'etchanan" spotlights his uncanny humility.

More importantly, Moshe's tefilla underscores the power of receiving favors. Receiving something we deserve is transactional and doesn't further any interpersonal bonds. By contrast, the provision of undeserved favors forges relationships. The impact of a favor is felt both by the provider and by the recipient. Obviously, the recipient of a favor is grateful and appreciative for his underserved gift. Equally important though, providing help and assistance, bonds us more deeply to the recipient of our kindness. It is human nature to become emotionally invested in the subjects of our compassion and of our altruism. It is true in our interpersonal relationships, just as it is true in our relationship with G-d. Moshe prefers a Divine gift, recognizing that it will deepen his relationship with G-d. Favors and underserved kindness are the building blocks of relationships and of friendship.

We all cycle through two very different phases of human experience: independence and dependence. G-d fashioned us free and capable, empowering us with great potential and tasking us with grand mission. Human proficiency capitalizes upon those gifts while incompetence and ineptitude squanders them.

Yet, G-d also desired that Man live a life of dependence. By providing a spouse, G-d introduced Man to the concept of "relationships" and to the experience of dependency. G-d desires that we acknowledge our inherent limits and resolve them by leaning on others for that which he can't achieve independently. Our success in life rests on our ability to carefully calibrate between these two frequencies of the human condition. Hillel's famous statement distills these two phases of human experience: "If I am not independently competent what am I; if I stand alone I am futile!". We are meant to be self-sufficient, and, other times, we are meant to be dependent upon the favors and kindness of others.

Numerous factors in modern society motivate human independence while devaluing human dependence. Democracy sanctifies human independence and the value of each citizen, prioritizing the individual over the state and the collective. Our culture celebrates individual effort and respects rugged individualists who can "go it alone" and provide for themselves and for their own needs. Politics and culture have each promoted independence at the cost of dependence. The word "independent" is venerated, while the word "dependent" is sometimes seen as a pejorative.

Technology has expedited work which, in previous generations required collaboration and teamwork. Life has become easier and household appliances have eliminated our dependence upon the teamwork of a family. Social media has replaced actual communities with virtual ones, and we are no longer dependent upon relationships for our social interaction. In a society of political, economic and cultural independence we are quickly forgetting how to be "dependent".

Dependence also carries personal costs. We take great pride at our own independence and the dignity of self-sufficiency. Embracing 'dependence' shines a light on our personal limits and weaknesses. Dependence demands vulnerability which is frightening. We are more comfortable when posing as strong and self-sufficient. In addition to the emotional cost of dependence there is also a behavioral cost. When we enter relationships of dependence, we are forced to compromise our own needs while making room for others. Independence allows us to control our personal space and preserve our private interests. Independence is cost-free- at least to our personal lifestyles.

Ironically, it is much easier- especially in today's democratic and technologically advanced society- to live independently. However, the temptation of "independence" hampers deep relationships. The strongest relationships, such as marriage and friendship are built upon mutual dependency. Without leaning into dependence sometimes our relationships stall or remain shallow. Moshe's begging reminds us that sometimes we have to learn how to accept favors.