

From the Gush

Rav Moshe Taragin

V'etchanan: Declaration of Dependence



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 forty days, desperately defending his beloved rebels. Moshe was our supreme Torah teacher and our greatest prophet, but additionally, he also demonstrated that prayer can bend the will of God.

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 sentence, he furiously prays to repeal the harsh ban, so he can voyage into the land of his dreams. According to some accounts he bids five hundred different prayers, but, sadly, he never succeeded in overturning the verdict.

Throughout his many years of prayer, Moshe had assembled a vast "arsenal" of tefilla. As an emotional encounter with God, prayer, spans a broad spectrum of voices and "tones". From this expansive menu of tefilla choices, Moshe selects an interesting option: he begins with the word "V'etchanan"- which denotes a "petition" or an undeserved "appeal". The term V'etchanan is analogous to the word 'chanan' or even 'chinam', each of which evokes the notion of something 'free' rather than merited. We would have expected Moshe to lodge his request based on his past accomplishments. Given his years of endless self-sacrifice, and devoted public service, this modest request to enter Israel 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 God.

Often, we pray by invoking our merits or our virtues, praying for an outcome we believe we deserve. Still other times, we ask God to freely grant us unmerited mercy. We stare at our own frailty, and, out of our weakness, we call to God for mercy. Moshe chooses the latter form of prayer, pleading for an outcome he doesn't believe he deserves.

Humility and Dependency

This decision spotlights just how humble Moshe was. Scaling the heavens and splitting the sea, didn't inflate his ego, nor did it yield any entitlement or claim to God. Standing at the doorstep of Israel he pleaded as a beggar would. It is always easier to sense humility when we are content in life and when our basic needs are filled. Desperation and urgency, however, play tricks with our minds, "convincing" us that we deserve our wants and our unfulfilled needs. 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 value of receiving favors. Receiving something we *deserve* is transactional and doesn't deepen interpersonal bonds. By contrast, the provision of undeserved favors forges relationships. The impact of a favor

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is felt both by the provider and by the recipient. Obviously, the recipient of a favor is grateful and appreciative for an 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. This is true in our interpersonal relationships, just as it is true in our relationship with God. Moshe prefers a divine *gift*, recognizing that it will deepen his relationship with God. Favors and underserved kindness are the building blocks of relationships and of friendship.

Independence and Dependence

We all cycle through two different phases of human experience: independence and dependence. God fashioned us free and capable, empowering us with great potential and tasking us with grand mission. At our best, when we properly utilize our independence and our talents we maximize divine potential and fulfill God's best hopes for Man.

Yet, God also desires that we acknowledge our own dependence and form relationships based upon mutual dependency. God desires that we concede our inherent limits and resolve them by leaning on others for that which he can't achieve on our own. By providing a spouse, God introduced Man to the general concept of "relationships" and to the redeeming experience of dependency.

Success in life requires careful calibration between these two "frequencies" of the human condition. Hillel, the sage famously distilled these two contrasting phases of human experience: "If I am not independent and personally competent what am I; if I stand alone, I am futile!". We are meant to be self-sufficient, and, at other times, we are meant to be dependent upon the favors and kindness of others. Too much independence and we live in solitude. Too much dependence and we squander our divine potential and human talent.

Addicted to Independence

The modern world encourages independence while devaluing dependence. Democracy sanctifies the value of each citizen, prioritizing the individual over the state and the collective. Modern culture respects rugged individualists who can "go it alone" and provide for themselves. Even the word "independent" is venerated, while the word "dependent" is sometimes seen as a pejorative.

Technology has dramatically altered our work habits. Projects which traditionally required collaborative teamwork is often partitioned into self-contained or stand-alone segments which are performed independently and without direct collaboration. In the home environment, household appliances have reduced our dependence upon family teamwork in the performance of domestic chores. Social media has replaced actual communities with virtual ones, and we are no longer dependent upon personal relationships for social interaction. In a society of political, professional, and cultural independence we are quickly forgetting the joys of dependency.

Relationships of dependency demand emotional courage. It is easier to take pride at our independence than it is to admit weakness, personal limits, and reliance. We are more comfortable posing as strong and self-sufficient. Dependence demands vulnerability



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which is often frightening. However, acknowledging frailty allows us to be more authentic versions of ourselves and to forge more honest relationships.

It is much easier in today's democratic and technologically advanced society to live "independently". However, independence carries a steep price of solitude and loneliness. The strongest relationships, such as marriage and friendship are built upon mutual dependency. Without "leaning" into dependence, our relationships stall or remain shallow. Moshe's begging reminds us that we sometimes must learn how to accept favors. Though self-sufficiency boots our self-regard, dependency is a gateway to relationships which are always far more important for self-esteem than accomplishments.

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