



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### VaEtchanan: When God says “No!”

In October 1994 a young IDF soldier was kidnapped and held for ransom by Hamas terrorists. His name was Nachshon Wachsman. For six days, the population of Israel was on edge, praying and hoping for his release. I recall going to the Kotel (Western Wall) to pray for his safe return, along with another 50,000 (!) people. But when the terrorists' ultimatum came, although Tzahal had broken into the building where he was held, the terrorists got to him first, and murdered him. The country was heartbroken.

At the tear-filled funeral, his father publicly raised the theological question that we were all feeling: “You will be asking,” he said, “where did all our prayers go? Why were they not accepted?” He responded: “God **did** hear our prayers. But sometimes, just like a caring and merciful parent to his children; sometimes God’s response is – No”.

The opening of our parsha is a story where God says “No” It opens with Moses’ desperate and beautiful prayer:

Let me, please, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.

But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me.

The Lord said to me, Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! (3:24-26)

Moses had spent forty years leading the Jewish people to the promised land. It is difficult to imagine the pain that Moses felt at the rejection of his plea to enter “the good land,” Eretz Canaan. But God refused.

#### **So, please discuss:**

- Why was Moses not allowed to enter the land? Does it seem fair?

- Why was God so obstinate? Couldn't he have been merciful?
- In general, should we anticipate that God will listen to our prayers, accede to our requests?
- How should we relate to a situation in which we pray for something, and our request is not granted?

Rabbi Sacks tried to answer this question in the following manner. He essentially suggests that as much as we cannot comply with every demand made of ourselves, God too cannot respond positively to each and every plea sent His way. Saying yes to one thing or person means saying no to another. A second point that he makes is that sometimes, for our own education, for our own betterment, God needs to say "No".

Every affirmation is also a denial. Every commitment is also a gesture of self-restraint. Without the strength to say 'No', we lack the ability to say 'Yes'. When two people pledge themselves to one another in marriage, they are saying 'No' to adultery. When two friends speak in confidence, they are tacitly agreeing not to share their remarks with others. Without restraint there can be no trust. Our 'Yes' implies a 'No'.

Something of the kind applies to every serious achievement unless we can say 'No' to distractions, we will never finish the book, or run the marathon, or fix the leaking tap, or take the time we promised to spend with our children. Something always crops up to turn our mind to other things.

One of the siren calls of our culture is 'having it all'. Behind it lies the idea that we can do, or be, or have everything - if not all at once, then at least serially. There are no hard choices, no irreconcilable conflicts, no genuine dilemmas. There is no 'Yes' to something that entails a definite 'No' to something else.

This is the ethics of fantasy. Fortunately, the real world regularly reminds us that there are things that need genuine commitment, even courage. To be a faithful marriage partner, a good parent, a true friend, a decent employer or employee, involves the kind of loyalty that says 'No' to a hundred temptations. Out of such 'No'-saying, moral strength is forged.

I will never forget the woman I met who spent her life curing teenagers of drug addiction. What, I asked her, did she do that made the difference to their lives? She replied, 'I'm probably the first person they've met who cared enough about them to say "No".'

As she to them, so God to us. (Rabbi Sacks. "Celebrating Life" pg.123)



With this in mind, let us return to Moses. If God is saying “Yes” to one thing and “No” to Moses, then to what is he saying “Yes!?” What point is God making by denying Moses entry to the land? Here are some commentaries that attempt to grapple with God’s response to Moses. You may like or not like these interpretations, but they will open an interesting discussion:

### **Rav David Zvi Hoffman**

Through Moses death in the wilderness, a punishment that was decreed for a slight offence, God demonstrated His great and unsurpassed holiness, similar to the death of Nadav and Avihu. This serves as an eternal lesson to Israel. That is why God did not accept Moses’ prayer.

Hoffman refers to the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bamidbar/Num 20:12:

The grave of the great leader at the very border of the Promised Land ... next to the graves of those who died in the wilderness now bears everlasting witness to the impartial justice of Divine rule, in the scales of which the slightest errors of the great saintly men so close to God in their service, weigh equally to the worst sins of ordinary mortals.

For Rabbis Hoffman and Hirsch God wants to make the point that leaders are expected to have high religious and moral standards; higher than the average citizen and that God’s law bends before no mortal, not even the great Moses.

A second approach may be offered by Rav Yoseph **Bechor Shor**:

Enough! The miracles and wonders that I have performed for you are enough. Leave room for others to excel and progress in what I will do for them. Because if I grant you this, there is no limit. After you enter the land you will ask to see the Temple!

For the Bechor Shor, it sounds that God is saying to Moshe that he has done “enough”; it is time for a new leader. As humans we always have another project to complete, another dream to fulfil. But at a certain point, every life comes to an end. So Moses has to accept that his dream cannot be fulfilled, but it will be continued by others.

But there is another dimension to this:

And I implored: That is what Daniel says – “He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others” (Dan. 2:21) Rabbi Abin said, to what may it be compared. To a king who has a cherished advisor who appoints commanders, officers and governors. After some time, he saw that this advisor was remonstrating with the guard to allow him entrance and that he was denied entry. Everyone was shocked! They said: Yesterday, he appointed commanders,

officers and governors and now he pleads with the guard and is not admitted!  
They responded: "Your tenure has ended." (Devarim Rabba 2:3)

A man can be president one day, and the next day he is a commoner; one day he holds the nuclear briefcase, the next day he has power only over himself. Imagine if Moses had remained alive, when Joshua became the next leader. Could Joshua have functioned successfully with Moses in the vicinity? Could Moses have coped with the emotional torment of being rejected? Here is one final Midrash which imagines a scenario in which Moses agrees to function as a regular citizen after Joshua had assumed the leadership:

When they [Joshua and Moses] entered the Tent of Meeting, the pillar of cloud came down and formed a partition between the two [God spoke to Joshua, the new leader, and excluded Moses.] After the cloud departed, Moses went over to Joshua and asked, "What did the Word say to you?" Joshua replied, "When the Word used to reveal itself to you, did I know what it said to you?" In that instant, Moses cried out in anguish and said, "Rather a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy. Master of universes, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to You." (Devarim Rabba 9:5)

Shabbat Shalom!