

If you could only study one Torah portion for the rest of your life, which one would you choose. If the question was about *books* of the Torah, which one *book* of the Torah would you pick to study for the rest of your life, I would pick Genesis. That is probably not a surprise—I've made no secret of my passion for studying Genesis. But if I had to pick only one weekly portion, my choice would not be one of the portions from Genesis. It would be ואתחנן (*v'Etchanan*), which just happens to be the Torah portion for this week.

Why would this be my choice? Not to denigrate other *parshiyot*, but this one has just about everything you need to learn in life.

First of all, this Torah portion contains the Shema. Judaism is a religion that has a great to say about how to behave, but very little to say about what to believe. The signal exception is the Shema, which tells us to pay attention to

the fact that Adonai is our God, and that there are no other gods.

Judaism is a large theological tent. You can believe that God controls how much each blade of grass bends in a breeze, or you can believe God is an real but nonsentient force in the universe like gravity and stay within that Jewish tent. But if you say there is no God, or if you believe there are more than one, you may be Jewish, but your theology is not. Why is it so important to believe in one God? Because one God means one ultimate moral authority—when you believe in one God, you believe in moral absolutes, not moral relativism.

The next reason I would pick this *sedra* if I could only study one is that this one also includes the Ten Commandments. Many people say the only religion they need is the Ten Commandments. I could see their point if they really meant all ten. Most who say that mean nine of

the ten. They forget that observing Shabbat is one of the Ten Commandments. My friends, it is as simple as this: life is enhanced by devoting one day out of seven to letting the world run on its own and directing your mind and heart to God, family, and the ultimate issues of life. Whether it is the Jewish ritual Shabbat that I believe in or some other form of weekly spiritual immersion, it will enhance life. But the third of the Ten Commandments is also crucial. It's the only one that says God will not forgive anyone who transgresses it. Unfortunately, we mistranslate it as something like *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*, and that leads to the misconception that it's a sin to say God except in certain circumstances. What the commandment really says is that we cannot link the name of God to that which is false. If you cut your finger with a knife, feel free to say "Oh, God, that hurts!" But you can't take that knife and cut off an innocent person's head while shouting *Allah hu akbar*, God is great.

This brings us back to the Shema. The second sentence of the Shema tells us to love God. A god whose name is linked to the murder of innocents is not a lovable God. That's the secret to the powerful and beautiful Third Commandment.

But with all of these famous passages, there is at least one more that leads me to choose this as my one Torah portion. Moses asks God to change His mind, to allow Moses to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. God's answer is no.

My friends, who could be more worthy of a second chance than Moses? Who is more deserving to enter the Promised Land? But it is not to be. We know Moses will die on the east side of the Jordan River.

This may be the most important lesson in the entire, rich *parashah*. It does not matter who you are—Moses, Bill

Gates, the President of the United States—you will experience disappointment in your life. Most if not all of us will experience profound disappointment at some point in our lives. Life will disappoint us at times, and at other times, those whom we love will disappoint us as well.

Part of becoming an adult is accepting that disappointment is part of life. Dealing with disappointment is not easy. Sometimes we react to disappointment caused by others by cutting them out of our lives. Ending a relationship because someone disappointed you is a good recipe for ending up alone.

All of this and more is in our Torah reading tomorrow. It is easy to focus on the stars of the portion, the Shema and the Ten Commandments. But as important as they are, if you fail to learn to accept and deal with disappointment, your personal growth is incomplete. If you can deal with disappointment, you can deal with life.

Let me conclude by pointing out that the last thing I spoke about is the first thing in the Torah reading. Is God trying to tell us that unless we accept that disappointment is part of life, the rest pales in comparison? Or perhaps God is telling us that to deal with disappointment in life, we need a belief in a God we can love and a set of laws that require us to keep God the focus of our lives at least one day out of seven? I don't know if I'll ever know that answer to that one. I'll be wrestling with it for a long time, maybe for the rest of my life. I guess in the end, that's a fourth reason that this would be my choice if I could only study one *sedra* for the rest of my life. After Shabbat, send me an email and let me know what your choice would be. You might disagree with my choice, and if you do, I might feel disappointed. If that happens, don't worry. I'll just get a little extra practice at developing one of the most important abilities in life.