



Parshat Va'etchanan—Shabbat Nachamu
August 1, 2020 — 11 Av 5780
Va'etchanan Moments: Sharing Our Vulnerability
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I have a friend who decided after several decades of practicing law to retire from his very successful practice. He wanted to do something else with his life, to retool. Turns out that Harvard has just such a program which attracts students in the middle of their lives who have had a successful career in one field and are looking to make a different kind of contribution.

When he was done with the course, I asked him: what was the single most memorable moment of the course, and what was the single most helpful teaching? He explained that the course was filled with type A personalities. A plus personalities. For many weeks there was an edge in the room: is my resume as strong as your resume, my accomplishments as impressive as yours. In the early weeks there were a lot of war stories about people's triumphs. But war stories about triumphs tend to be off-putting, creating in the listener the feeling of what war story *do I have* of my own comparable triumph.

But one class was unlike any other. The title of this class was the power of sharing your vulnerability. All of these type A plus personalities were asked to share the times they failed, the times they struggled, the times they lost sleep, the times they felt they were losing control of their world, and they didn't know why, and they didn't know what they could do about it. That was the day the class came together. When people started sharing their vulnerabilities, the other students sat on the edge of their chair, listening with real empathy to every word.

Stories of success create distance and resentment.

Stories of failure, frustration, struggle, vulnerability create relatability and relationship.

I thought of that story when reading this morning's portion. The name of our portion is *va'etchanan*, which means I, Moses in this case, I begged. I pleaded with God to let me enter Israel once, for a moment, before I die. This is my life work, God. I am begging you. Please. Just for a moment, and then I'll die. To which God says: no. Don't ever mention this again. Make sure that you transfer your knowledge and authority to Joshua. He is going to be the one to enter the land of Israel, not you. But you can go onto the top of a mountain and see the River Jordan that you can never cross and see the land of Israel that you can never enter.

What is this vignette of Moses begging and being told a hard no doing here?

I think this is the biblical version of the power of sharing your vulnerability. Moses' voice as lawgiver can be harsh and hard to love. But when he tells the Israelites hey, I am not just a law giver, I am a human being, I have my own brokenness, my heart is broken, my life work is unfulfilled, I worked for 40 years trying to get to Israel, and now I am going to die outside of it, I begged, I pleaded, and God said no. When he tells them that, he becomes more human, more relatable. Our member Gary Orren teaches a class on persuasion, and one of his big principles is what he calls the principle of likeability. You are more persuasive when you are likeable. And you are more likeable when you come across as human, meaning that your life is not just a glittering resume of accomplishments and triumphs, but you are a real person with real sorrows that you cannot solve but have had to live with. Moses shares his vulnerability with the hope that that will inspire the Israelites to take his words to heart.

This *va'etchanan* prologue intersects with our lives quite dramatically right now. You don't need me to tell you that in this week when we marked Tisha B'av, our whole nation is going through its own Tisha B'av. You don't need me to tell you about the unrelenting grim news on all fronts. You already know that. You don't need me to tell you how the sickness of

our society seeps into our own souls and lives. You already know that. What might be helpful to think about is the ways in which the vulnerability that is all around us can be helpful, to ourselves and to others. What would our own version of a *va'etchanan* moment look like, when we share the vulnerability we feel in a way that gives us and others strength, and builds a connection in a hard time?

A book just came out which is very much on point. Bruce Feiler begins his new book *Life is in the Transitions* with a bang. Within the first five pages he shares three *va'etchanan* moments. He shares that his father, who was struggling with Parkinson's, tried to commit suicide six times in twelve weeks; and that his father's father, his grandfather, who also got Parkinson's late in life, had shot himself in the head a month before Bruce graduated high school.

He shares that he was diagnosed with a rare, aggressive bone cancer in his left leg that required sixteen rounds of chemo and a 17-hour surgery. He shares that he nearly went bankrupt. He shares: "I woke up three nights a week in a pale sweat, staring at the ceiling, wondering."

Now why share this personal pain? What good does it do? He cites a study from a psychologist at Emory University named Marshall Duke who had been doing work on high-functioning families. He discovered something that is just so important:

"All family narratives take one of three shapes," Marshall explained. First is the ascending family narrative: *We came from nothing, we worked hard, we made it big.* Next, the descending narrative: *We used to have it all. Then we lost everything.*

"The most healthful narrative," he continued, "is the third one." It's called the oscillating family narrative. *We've had ups and downs in our family. Your grandfather was vice president of the bank, but his house burned down. Your aunt was the first girl to go to college, but she got breast cancer.* Children who know that lives take all different shapes are much better equipped to face life's inevitable disruptions. p. 6.

Sharing our vulnerability connects us with others who have their own pain. Bruce's sharing of his vulnerability allows him to have meaningful conversations with 225 people who share their life stories. He calls this The Life Story Project. 225 out of 225 of the people who shared their life stories contended with significant heartbreak and disappointment with which they have to live and from which they have to rebound.

Sharing our vulnerability can be helpful to others. Oh, I am not the only one. Others are going through what I am going through.

Sharing our vulnerability, hearing other people's vulnerability, reinforces that every one of us, literally 100% of us, have lives that are filled with ups and downs, and that the key to life is figuring out, after we have been knocked down, how to get back up.

In other words, sharing our vulnerability is not an act of weakness. It is an act of strength, and it can give strength to others.

Which I know very personally, because Moses not being able to enter the promised land, his *va'etchanan* moment, has been deeply meaningful to me throughout my entire adult life.

When I was 20 years old, and a junior in college, my father died. It was December 14, 1981. After the funeral, and the shiva, I came back to Boston in January, 1982. I came back to exams, and to New England winter in January, back in the old days when it was cold in January. It all felt overwhelming.

From time to time, a wave of sadness would hit me that my Dad was dead. He would never see me graduate college. He would never see me get married. He would never see me have children. He would never know me as an adult. How was I to make peace with that? How was I to make peace with what was just unacceptable?

I remember so vividly, it was 38 years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday, that I would take out my chumash, and I would read about Moses dying on the wrong side of the River Jordan. I would read about Moses not living to see the fulfillment of his dreams. I would read about Moses having to live with sorrow for which there is no answer, you just have to move forward.

Somehow, reading that made me feel better. Somehow, reading that gave me the courage to go on. Not even Moses gets to live forever. Not even Moses fulfills all of his dreams. Not even Moses lives and dies without pain. If it happened to Moses, it could happen to my Dad. It could happen to me. My Dad is in the best company.

We all have our own vulnerability. Always and especially now.

Use it. Share it. Teach it. Learn from it. Redeem it by growing from it. *Va'etchanan*. Like Moses himself. Shabbat shalom.