

Parashat Va'etchanan וַאֲתַחֲנֶנּוּ

Torah: Devarim (Deuteronomy) 3:23–7:11

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:1–26

God Is a Consuming Fire

General Overview

I know I shouldn't do this, but let me ask you anyway. What is your favorite part of the Torah? Is it perhaps the Creation story? Or, maybe you like the Exodus account. You say the story of Joseph is your favorite? What about the giving of the Ten Commandments?

All of these are certainly highlights in the Torah, but as for me, there are two *parashiyot* that really stand out. One is *Parasha Nitzavim*. The other is our present one, *Va'etchanan*. Just take a quick glance at this week's parasha and you will see why. It contains such important and provocative passages as the Ten Commandments and the *Shema* — two of the most important pieces of Scripture in Jewish liturgy and theology. In addition, this parasha discusses why Israel was chosen and how Israel is to be a witness among the nations. Furthermore, this *sidra* teaches some of the most fundamental truths about God.

Exposition

As we study this week, pay careful attention, for we will discover that when the Torah teaches us something about the Lord, it usually tells us something about Israel as well. Therefore, this week's commentary will examine the five declarative statements in the parasha concerning the nature of God and how they relate to the nation of Israel. We shall also consider how these statements might apply to all believers in Yeshua. Here is the outline:

- I. God Is a Consuming Fire
- II. God Is a Jealous God
- III. God Is a Merciful God
- IV. God Is a Unique God
- V. God Is a Faithful God

In this excerpt from Parashat Va'etchanan, we will focus on section I, God Is a Consuming Fire.

I. God Is a Consuming Fire

We often think of Moshe as a prophet and lawgiver. However, sometimes in the Torah we get a glimpse of his talent for writing. This parasha provides one of these occasions.

In 4:1–24, Moshe builds on the theme of fire. First, he reminds Israel that the mountain from which God spoke to them was “burning with fire up to the heart of heaven ...” (4:11). Then in 4:12, he relates how the Lord actually “spoke to you out of the fire.” Continuing the motif of fire, Moshe says in 4:20, that the Holy

One brought Israel up “out of the iron-smelting furnace (a method for refining metal using fire,) out of Egypt” Finally, the point to which Moshe was building, he declares in 4:24, “God is a consuming fire.” What are we to learn from this image of fire?

A. To Purge

In the Scripture, fire, among other things, was used to indicate both God’s wrath and God’s purification. First, our parasha speaks about the Holy One warning Israel not to follow the ways of idolatry (verses 16–18). One who practiced idolatry could not have been a believer. To such, God would be a consuming fire, unleashing His wrath upon all who worship anything or any one other than Him who deserves full allegiance.

In this context, therefore, the fire of a God as a Consuming Fire

is a figurative representation of refining affliction and destroying punishment, or a symbol of the chastening and punitive justice of the indignation and wrath of God. It is in the fire that the Lord comes in judgment.¹

B. To Purify

On the other hand, when we learn that God is a Consuming Fire, it can also indicate His purifying process rather than His stern judgment. In this sense, the fire does not really consume in order to destroy, it merely consumes one’s flesh and helps to sanctify and purify God’s own people.

Moshe also knew first hand that God’s fire did not always consume. He saw this happen at the burning bush. There, God was giving a lesson on how He would act toward His People. The remnant who believed among the children of Israel would be just like the bush — purified by God, yet not consumed.

In other words, to those who are His Own, whose flesh may want to stray after other gods or practice things that are prohibited in the Covenant, God is a *purifying* God. In fact, Moshe specifically says this in 4:20 when he reminds Israel that they were once in the “iron-smelting furnace” of Egypt. This was a purifying furnace. This “crucible” was really an iron “vessel in which one refines gold.”² It was a good symbol to use to describe what the Holy One was doing to Israel in Egypt. “The reason God subjected Israel to the harsh and cruel years of Egyptian exile was to purge them”³

However, to those whose life is bent on idolatry from the start — whether outward idolatry or inward idolatry — the Lord is a *consuming* fire. He acts in justice and wrath toward all that are opposed to Him.

A vivid picture of this is in Revelation 19:11–12. Here we see a vision of Yeshua, the Judge, standing against the nations of the world who are gathered to oppose Him and His righteousness. It says that to these, the non-elect, the non-believers, “with justice He judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire”

¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1: *The Pentateuch*, 438.

² *Rashi: Devarim*, ArtScroll Edition, 55.

³ *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 963.

C. *The Pure One*

There is one more point we need to make here. Notice that the text does not only state that God *has* a consuming fire. Both the Hebrew and the English are clear when 4:24 teaches that it is God who *is* the Consuming Fire. The stress is on the fact that we are learning something about the very make-up of God Himself.

Notice, for example, in Revelation 19:12 that the text describes the Holy One as having eyes of fire. This characteristic for purgative or punitive fire is not just an extra tag-along for God. It is deeply ingrained into the very fabric of God Himself.

This means, among other things, that in order to be a Purifier, the Lord must first be a Pure One. God can only act according to His nature. He cannot function outside of it. If, therefore, it is His nature to purify and react against all unholiness, it is only because He Himself is so innately Holy and Pure. Moreover, because that is His essence, He also desires all His creation to reflect that attribute. When something He has created fails to do so or purposely displays the opposite characteristic of the Creator, it must be purged out, for it is not an accurate representation of who He is.

Hence, when we see God in His wrath as the Consuming Fire, or when we see Him as the Purifying Fire, cleansing His Own, it is not because He sits smugly on His eternal throne pompously throwing down lightning bolts to impress His puny subjects! It is because He is in such deep pain that His dear Creations are not reflecting to the rest of the universe who their Creator really is. Thus, He purifies both to protect the Creature, but also to accurately present His real nature to the rest of Creation.

If we can understand this, we can then understand the intensity with which Moshe (who did understand it) taught against idolatry to the redeemed community.