

# *Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

*Parashat Va'etchanan*, Deuteronomy, Chapters 3-7 | August 17, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Ancient Cities and Eternity

The city of Carthage, built on the northern tip of what is now Tunisia, sat at the center of a civilization, and an empire. Carthage waged several wars against Rome, known as the Punic Wars, and the final one took place in the 140s BCE, when the Romans landed on the North African coast with an enormous fleet. As Victor Davis Hanson points out in his fascinating new book, which devotes a chapter to Carthage, the force Rome deployed was massive—as he puts it, “likely larger than the American contingent that landed in France on D-Day.” Though the Carthaginians had already foolishly given up their weapons to the Romans, they somehow made more; besieged by Rome, they held out longer than one might have thought. But the city ultimately fell; almost all its residents were massacred. Carthage was razed to the ground and rebuilt a century later as a Roman city, and today, there are no Carthaginians.

Hanson further notes that this destruction set the stage for a new, much more aggressive posture by Rome against all who challenged its authority and power:

Rome, after obliterating Carthage, had changed from a power that perceived itself as on the defensive; it was now a blatantly aggressive, unrepentant imperial juggernaut . . . integral to this new self-confidence was a growing appreciation that Senate-mandated terror—the ability and willingness to annihilate any state that offered resistance to the imperial agenda—was both an acceptable and effective way of growing an empire.

The reason why Hanson discusses Carthage in his new book, titled *The End of Everything*, is because the book is about civilizations that suddenly disappear and how once mighty peoples can unexpectedly vanish forever. What brings these occurrences about, for Hanson, is the destruction of a capital city, like Carthage. If the capital is destroyed, its civilization and its culture simply cease to exist. It is almost a law of history. Thus Hanson writes:

The wartime end of everything has usually followed from a final siege or invasion. The coup de grâce predictably targeted a capital or the cultural, political, religious, or social center of a state. And the final blow resulted in the erasure of an entire people’s way of life—and often much of the population itself. . . . Often a great city—usually a capital, defined by its prior political centrality and influence or size and wealth—becomes a synecdoche, a shorthand to later generations for the collapse of its entire civilization.

We can therefore understand why, over 200 years later, as Titus sacked Jerusalem, the story of Carthage might have been very much on his mind. Josephus tells us that after the Ninth of Av, with the Temple destroyed but Jews in Jerusalem still fighting, Titus decided to give a speech. He stood on a bridge connecting the Temple Mount to the upper city; below him was the *xystus*, the market, along the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount. He stood, in other words, above the area known today as the Western Wall Plaza. It was a dramatic moment: Titus on one side of the bridge, the leaders of the Jewish revolt on the other. Titus gave a speech scoffing at the Jews' pretensions that Rome could be defeated. Josephus tells us Titus' words:

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Romans? Are your bodies stronger than ours? Nay, you know that the [strong] Germans themselves are our servants. Have you stronger walls than we have? Pray, what greater obstacle is there than the wall of the ocean, with which the Britons are encompassed, and yet do adore the arms of the Romans. **Do you exceed us in courage of soul, and in the sagacity of your commanders? Nay, indeed, you cannot but know that the very Carthaginians have been conquered by us.** [emphasis added]

Titus' troops proceeded to do to Jerusalem what was done to Carthage over two centuries earlier: they slaughtered the city's inhabitants and razed it to the ground, so that it could be rebuilt as a Roman one.

Based on Victor Davis Hanson's understanding of how civilizations disappear—through the destruction of their capital cities—Judaism and the Jews should have disappeared as well. After all, Jerusalem was a capital that was the source and center of a people's cultural, political, and religious life. Based on Hanson's book alone, one might conclude that there should be no Jews; the very statement "I'm Jewish" should be akin today to someone saying, "I'm Carthaginian," which sounds ridiculous, even though there were once many more Carthaginians than Jews. Hanson's book is called *The End of Everything*; but from the Jewish perspective it should have rightly been called "The End of Almost Everything," because one people is an anomaly, one people does not disappear. And it is this mysterious nature of the Jewish people that is the subject of our *parashah*.

After his opening discussion, laid out last week, in which Moses exhorts the people to act with courage, faith, and determination, he devotes the next sections of his address to the unique, covenantal relationship between Israel and the Almighty. This is bound up, of course, with the Torah given at Sinai:



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Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples . . . (Deuteronomy 4:5–6)

Moses then goes on to describe the revelation at Sinai and to reiterate the Ten Commandments. But he simultaneously stresses that Israel's relationship with God is one of profound obligation, but not *only* obligation. The obligations of the Torah are founded upon the intimate, loving relationship between the people and the Almighty, an intimacy and love made manifest at Sinai, through a revelation like no other.

To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you; and on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. **And because he loved your fathers, and chose their descendants after them, and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power.** (Deuteronomy 4:35–37)

God loves the Jewish people because they are, according to Obadiah Sforno (Italy, ca. 1470–1549), “the children of his beloved.” If the Jews are chosen to serve for all eternity as a light unto the nations, it is because God, in the words of the theologian Michael Wyschogrod, “sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved.”

The covenantal love between God and His chosen people is at the heart of perhaps the most famous passage in the *parashah*: the *Sh'ma*. It is seen as an affirmation of monotheism, as indeed it is; but Wyschogrod is, I think, correct to note that the final word of the *Sh'ma*'s first sentence, “*ehad*,” ought to be translated “alone,” rather than “one,” emphasizing the intimacy between God and His covenantal people. Thus, every day, the liturgy of the siddur places the passage within a larger setting that is about love, law, and chosenness. We say every morning:

Blessed are You, God, Who chose His people Israel with love.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone. . . .

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

The *Sh'ma*, in other words, is about a reciprocal relationship.

Moses further stresses what is, for us—thousands of years later—the surest sign of this wondrous relationship: the fact that as a manifestation of this chosenness and love, while God's covenantal people may be punished for failing to live up to its obligations, it will never, ever, disappear:

For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you, or destroy you, or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them. (Deuteronomy 4:31)

It is with Jewish eternity in mind that we may consider the description of chosenness with which the *parashah* concludes:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. **It was not because you were**



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**more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you, and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples;** but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6–8)

Here the Bible stresses that Israel is the “fewest of all peoples;” yet, we know that Abraham was promised, in Genesis, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. For Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, these passages can be reconciled with the understanding that while the Chosen People will not be an enormous nation in any single generation, nevertheless Abraham’s children will be cumulatively abundant because they will endure in every generation, long after other peoples have disappeared.

In other words, in a given era there might have been more Carthaginians than Jews, but Jews will endure, despite it all, long after the Carthaginians are gone.

This, of course, would come as a great surprise to Titus. The remnant of the bridge from which he spoke is now known as Wilson’s Arch, under which many pray at the Kotel, the Western Wall, today—especially when the weather does not permit praying without shelter. In other words, when you pray there, you are standing right beneath where Titus stood invoking the destruction of Carthage, surely unable to imagine that right below where he spoke, Jews would gather many centuries *later*, embodying the faith and identity he had sought to eradicate.

This story is, in fact, anything but over. No modern-day Carthaginians are reading of a defeat by ancient Rome, but Jews observe the Ninth of Av, study the story of the terrible destruction wrought by an empire now long gone, and know that the Jerusalem razed by Titus is a Jewish city today, part of a sovereign Jewish state once again.

It cannot be a coincidence that this *parashah* is always read on *Shabbat Nahamu*, the Sabbath of Consolation that follows the Ninth of Av. The portion is perfectly positioned to remind us, after our mourning, of the eternity of the Jewish people, and that those that sought to destroy the Jews ultimately end up on the ash heap of history.

This week also marks the birthday of Menachem Begin, whose name, meaning “consoler,” was given because he was born near the Sabbath of Consolation. And the name is apt, because Begin himself experienced so much destruction in his early life, and yet always reflected faith in his people’s eternity.

Soon after his election in 1977, Begin came to America in the days before Tisha b’Av. Prior to visiting the White House, he took a trip to Brooklyn to meet with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Asked by curious journalists why a political leader was stopping to speak with a hasidic leader, he said:

I have come tonight to our great master and teacher, the Rabbi, to ask from him his blessings before I

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go to Washington to meet President Carter for the important talks we are going to hold on the future of the Middle East.

The people in Israel pray for the success of these very important meetings.

And then Begin added,

I do not call them 'fateful' meetings, because **the people of Israel, the Jewish People, are an eternal people, and their lot and future are not dependent on a political meeting with the leader of the free world.**  
[emphasis added]

I write these words early in a week filled with tension, a week with a fast, a week in which we are all concerned about the safety of our brethren in Israel. As *Shabbat Nahamu* comes, we continue to pray for their safety, and sustain ourselves with the understanding of the miraculous nature of the Jewish people—the theme of our *parashah*—which a man and leader born at this time of year understood so well.

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## **Additional Resources**

Dovid Zaklikowski on Menechem Begin's Visit to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, "The Israeli Prime Minister's Jewish Pride," Chabad.org. [Click here to read.](#)

