

Parashat Va'etchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

PARASHAH OVERVIEW

- Moses pleads with God to let him enter the Land of Israel with the people, but God once more refuses his request. (3:23–28)
- Moses orders the Children of Israel to pay attention and follow the laws given by God in order to be worthy of the land they are about to receive. (4:1–40)
- Specific areas of the land are set aside to serve as cities of refuge. (4:41–43)
- The covenant at Sinai and the Ten Commandments are recalled. Once again, the people are exhorted to heed God's commandments. (5:1–30)
- Moses speaks the words of the Sh'ma, the credo of Judaism, and commands Israel to show their love for *Adonai* and keep God's laws and ordinances. (6:1–25)
- Moses warns the people not to commit idolatry by worshiping the gods of the nations they will conquer in Israel. (7:1–11)

VISIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND BEGINNINGS

Michael A. Signer

In this week's parashah we observe the continuing majestic sweep of Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah. Instruction and reflection on the early experience of the Exodus and desert wanderings as well as their implications for future settlement in the Land of Israel are summarized in three parts: Moses' final plea for entry into the land (3:23-29); the reception of Torah as instruction that includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments and the ethical consequences for dwelling in the land (4-6); and the instructions for how the Israelites are to maintain their distinctive nature when they dwell among the Canaanites in the land. (7:1-9)

When juxtaposed to the first reception of God's revelation at Sinai (Exod. 19-23), Parashat Va'etchanan offers some penetrating insights into the personality of Moses. He is no longer the great intermediary between God and the people of Israel. Now he pleads with God to allow his entry into the land.

His request seems perfectly reasonable when he pleads, "O God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand...let me cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan." (3:24-25) Why shouldn't Moses be permitted to complete the work he began? Midrash Tanchuma captures the pathos of Moses' request, "Master of the universe! Are all equal before You? Will You destroy the innocent and the guilty in the same way?" Tanchuma helps us feel great empathy with Moses. Shouldn't the faithful shepherd of Israel who had intervened on its behalf time and again be granted some special consideration? Is it really "fair" that for one error Moses should suffer the same fate as an ordinary person?

Abravanel presses the image of Midrash Tanchuma one step further. If Moses was not permitted to enter the land, wouldn't future generations ascribe to him the same fate as the generation who listened to the spies and didn't want to enter the land of promise? Moses had heroically opposed the report of the spies who had seen the land with their own eyes. They reported that despite the beauty of the land, the Israelites were incapable of conquering it. It was Moses, having never even seen the land, who opposed them. It would seem only just that he enter the land that he might see with his own eyes the land he had defended only on faith. Moses' plea is denied. He blames Israel claiming that "God was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me." (3:26) There is no elaborate explanation of God's response. God states simply, "Enough for you!" Some midrashim indicate that Moses might have been willing to enter the land as an ordinary person under the leadership of Joshua. Abravanel, therefore, explains that the phrase "Enough for you!" (*rav lach* in Hebrew) might also be understood as an ironic question, "Would you have Joshua as your *rav*, your master?" To grant this request would have surely been an even greater diminution of Moses' greatness.

In the Talmud (Berachot 32b), our sages offer a more satisfying resolution to the divine refusal of Moses' plea. They asserted, "Prayer is greater than deeds of loving-kindness. No one had done more deeds than Moses; yet he was answered only through prayer. He asked, 'Let me cross over and see.' Then God responded, 'Go up and see.'" (3:27) Rashi explains

the divine response: "I was pleased to answer the prayer and show the land to you." For the rabbis in the Talmud, God had not entirely shunted Moses but had responded only to part of his request.

A modern proverb that asserts that expectations are planned disappointments may be most appropriate to describe the sad moment in Moses' life when he realizes that there will be no more pleading. He must simply accept the fact that he will not complete the task according to his own vision. Our own need to control our fate and have the validation of the complete fulfillment of our labors may find resonance in the exchange between Moses and God.

Perhaps we may take comfort in the way Gersonides summarizes the most important lesson of our parashah: "It is appropriate for human beings not to glory in their wisdom and achievements, making the claim that they have achieved many things. Rather we should always be aware that we are missing a great deal, and we are only beginners. When all is considered, who was greater than Moses? With all the greatness of his achievements, he considered himself only a beginner. We learn this from the prayer that outlined all his previous accomplishments: 'You yourself have started to let Your servant see.'" Gersonides offers a profound insight. Moses was only a beginner. Despite his disappointment with God's answer, he continued teaching and ultimately was content only with a vision.

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THE HUMAN SIDE OF A LEADER

Lisa Langer

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you were willing to beg? Have you ever thought you deserved something so clearly that you were willing to plead? Have you ever been disappointed when your efforts failed to fulfill your dreams? If so, you can relate to Moses.

In his comments on Parashat Va'etchanan Rabbi Signer calls our attention to the final stages of Moses' efforts to convince God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, the land he has been wandering towards for forty years. This encounter is significant in our understanding of Moses because it reveals some of his very human characteristics.

Moses is a leader of great proportions. His tireless leadership of the Israelites through unimaginable situations is extraordinary. His ability to bring about change and guide others through transition is significant. Throughout the Torah we are reminded of Moses' greatness, his uniqueness, and his strength of character.

In Parashat Va'etchanan we finally see Moses turn his focus onto himself. After many examples of Moses' selflessness as a heroic leader, here is a moment of selfishness. It is now that he is forced to plead for his own, personal future. His leadership position has already been transferred; this request, therefore, is for private closure to his life's adventure.

His fate has been decided by God and revealed to Moses. Yet God's decision not to let Moses into the Promised Land is not satisfactory to Moses. He believes that he has earned the right to "cross over and see the good land." (Deut. 3:25) As Rabbi Signer brings to our attention, the commentaries indicate that Moses was willing to take great steps to fulfill this dream. In fact he employed a variety of tactics to influence God to change the decision. Yet despite his efforts, Moses' request was denied, and he was forced to accept God's decision to view the Promised Land from afar. It is a fate that Moses finally accepts.

While his style, relationships, and perspectives change until his last days, Moses' development as a leader and as a human being is admired and emulated. As Moses advocates for his personal needs and accepts his limitations, we come to appreciate the human side of this leader.

Questions to consider:

How do you react when you realize that something you want or expect will not happen? What can you learn from how Moses handled his disappointment?

Describe some characteristics that you look for in leaders.

What human limitations do you allow and accept in your leaders?

As a leader, when and how regularly do you focus on your personal needs?

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RETIREMENT WITH GRACE

Alexandria Shuval-Weiner

The following sounds like the opening to a "true life" television drama. Imagine this scenario: An executive is arguing with the CEO of a company. The executive has recently been told that he is expected to announce his retirement. The company is preparing to enter a new phase, and they want someone else to head that initiative. The company expects a smooth transition. End of story. The next segment finds the executive in the bathroom, looking in the mirror and saying to himself: "I can't believe that this is happening. I have given my whole life to this company! They owe me."

As we discover over and over, the Torah mirrors life. This Shabbat's portion, Parashat Va'etchanan, opens with a scene that resembles the one described above. Moses is at the end of his tenure as leader of the Israelites. Joshua has been groomed to lead the people across the Jordan into the land that is their inheritance. We are privy to the conversation between Moses and God in which Moses pleads (*va'etchanan*) with God to allow him to enter the Promised Land with the people. God harshly rejects Moses' pleas, declaring: "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!... Give Joshua his instructions and imbue him with strength and courage." (Deuteronomy 3:26, 28) With that, God walks away from the encounter, so to speak.

According to a midrash, Moses isn't willing to drop the subject. He feels he is owed the right to enter the Promised Land. Moses points out that he has always been God's obedient servant, who has sacrificed so much to serve God and lead the Israelites. Yet God refuses to grant Moses permission to enter the land of Israel. Moses even tries to negotiate a compromise: "Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land." (Deuteronomy 3:25) But despite Moses' pleas, God stands firm and decrees that not even Moses' bones will be carried into the land. Instead God sends Moses up to the summit of Pisgah to look across the Jordan and says, "Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan." (Deuteronomy 3:27) Is this a cruel ending to a long distinguished career? Perhaps.

And what are we to make of Moses' reaction to this rebuke? In today's society his reaction might be compared to that of a disgruntled employee who goes on a rampage, hurting as many people as he can. After all, Moses was frustrated, made to give up his position and lose everything that he had worked for. Yet, what we see is the model of leadership that we have come to admire in Moses. He fulfills his responsibilities to the end, giving the people his final words of wisdom, reiterating the major themes of law and order, and declaring that the people must remain faithful to God.

But the question still remains: Was it fair of God to punish Moses by not allowing him to enter the land? What does this incident teach us about task commitment? Why should a person put his or her heart and soul into a job if there are to be no rewards at the end?

While we are each required to strive to be the best that we can be, we often feel the need for completeness, the need to see the fruits of our labors and the outcomes of our endeavors. We constantly struggle against our need for ego massage and attempt to learn how to accept our lot. At first glance, God's denying Moses his brief moment of success does seem terribly cruel. To stand in the Land of Israel would have been Moses' sweetest, most gratifying experience. But it was not to be, and although Moses knew this all along, he continued diligently with his mission, his "calling." As it is said: *Lo alecha hamalachah ligmor, velo atah ben-chorin lehibateil mimenah*, "You are not required to finish the task, but neither are you free to abstain from it." (Pirke Avot 2:21)

Why did God not give Moses the chance to visit *Eretz Hakodesh*, the "Holy Land"? Some say that Moses couldn't go into the land for the same reason that he does not appear in the haggadah narrative: Had Moses entered the land with the people, they would have deemed him and not God the Redeemer. From this we can learn that we should not determine success based on the final outcome. Instead, we should examine the steps along the way. And if the key to a person's success is how he or she dealt with life's blessings and its inequities, then Moses' life is a triumph, and he never ceases to be the great leader whom we have encountered throughout the narrative.

It will take Moses the rest of Deuteronomy to complete his orations, remind the people of all that he has taught them in the name of God, and finally say farewell to them with his blessing. This process will allow Moses that much-needed transition that we as humans all need when making change. It also provides the narrative a powerful ending: *Velo kam navi od beYisrael keMoshe*, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses." (Deuteronomy 34:10)

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Adonai is Our Elohim **Edwin C. Goldberg**

"Hear, O Israel! *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4) The precise meaning of these words-which are found in this week's Torah portion, *Va-etchanan*, and are collectively known as the *Sh'ma*-has been debated for centuries. The words are, of course, cited as a call for monotheism, but even this interpretation is not without its critics. Some translate the *Sh'ma* as "Hear, O Israel! *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* alone," as if to indicate the existence of other gods but at the same time proclaim their irrelevance.

I believe the most important interpretation of the *Sh'ma* centers on the two names for God that appear in the text-*Adonai* and *Elohim*. On its most simple level, the *Sh'ma* declares that *Adonai* and *Elohim* are the same God. This information is important because traditionally, *Adonai* and *Elohim* reflect very different characteristics of God: *Adonai* refers to God's merciful, compassionate side, and *Elohim* indicates God's stern, judgmental aspect. By saying that we believe our God possesses both characteristics, we proclaim that all things that happen in the universe originate with God.

In his book titled *For Those Who Can't Believe*, Rabbi Harold Schulweis addresses the two portraits of God rendered in the *Sh'ma*. According to Schulweis, *Elohim* stands for the way things are. *Elohim* is in the law of gravity: If you let go of an apple, it will drop because the law of gravity works that way. If an earthquake occurs, buildings may be destroyed because that's how the laws of physics operate. Likewise, if you break a law, punishment will probably follow.

Adonai, on the other hand, stands not for what *is* but for what *ought to be*. *Elohim* prescribes punishment, while *Adonai* teaches transformation. *Elohim* creates the world and all its dangers. *Adonai* inspires human beings to overcome those dangers. *Elohim* brings an earthquake or a hurricane. *Adonai* brings rescuers who risk their lives to save the victims and give their own possessions to help the unfortunate cope. *Elohim* is about facts, while *Adonai* is about faith.

We know that there is a natural cause and effect in the world: Smoking can lead to lung cancer. Two automobiles can't inhabit the same space at the same time without some consequence. And moral delinquency affects the innocent as well as the guilty. Therefore, the characteristics inherent in *Elohim* do reflect reality.

But where would we be without the qualities of *Adonai*, motivating us to work and hope for a better world? Where would we be without *Adonai*'s compassion, inspiring us to care for people who can never repay us? Where would we be without the belief that our lives matter largely because of the examples we set for others? Where would we be without the faith that after we're gone, our love and kindness will continue?

Regarding the fact that millions of people in our country have no health care, *Elohim* might say: "If people work, then they deserve a doctor's care. If they don't, then it's their fault." On the other hand, *Adonai* might say: "We have to take care of the poor and the needy, despite the drain on our society." Regarding illegal immigrants who flock to our state, *Elohim* might say: "If people are not here legally, then they have no right to our services," whereas *Adonai* might remind us: "Take care of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Regarding our children's being enticed to smoke cigarettes by the sophisticated marketing of tobacco companies, *Elohim* might say: "If you smoke tobacco, you may very well get cancer," while *Adonai* might remind us: "It's our task to protect youngsters from being led astray."

Both views of God are necessary. We need to be reminded of nature's power, the law of consequences, and the omnipotence of our Creator. But we also need the hope and inspiration of *Adonai*: We need to possess the vision of a compassionate society, the dream of peace and healing, and the hope of a world that gives us second chances and free-flowing forgiveness. In short, we need to be aware of both what reality is and what reality should be. The *Sh'ma* reminds us to look beyond the laws of the universe for the beating heart within.

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Learning About God *Melanie Cole Goldberg*

The complexity of understanding the various characteristics of our God is an issue with which we as adults must surely grapple. As Rabbi Goldberg explained in his commentary, we can find this multifaceted view of God in the words of the *Sh'ma*, the most central and important prayer for Jews. We say the *Sh'ma* to bind ourselves to our God and to our people. We also recite it as a Jewish mantra. But what do these words mean to us? How do they touch us? How can the words of the *Sh'ma* have both intellectual and spiritual meaning for us? These questions may help us focus more closely on the meaning of the text as we read *Parashat Va-etchanan*.

The *Sh'ma* doesn't stop with a short declaration but continues with a listing of our responsibilities: "You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:5) As we continue reading, we also learn of our responsibility to teach our children about God: "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children." (Deuteronomy 6:6-7) Hence our teaching role as adults must address God's complexity. As we teach, we must consider how God appears to us and to our children through the various stages and ages of development.

A preschooler who is hugged and kissed after reciting the *Sh'ma* at bedtime senses that God is a comforter and protector. A kindergartner learning the *Sh'ma* for her consecration service discovers that God is connected to her Jewish community. A bar mitzvah reciting the *Sh'ma* at his worship service learns that God can be a support and a friend. A young adult attending a *shivah minyan* for the first time may wonder about God in a completely new way. In addition, as children mature, they view the traits of God in a more complex and maybe even confusing way. They will have questions, and as adults (parents, friends, or teachers), we should be able to respond by offering not just one Jewish view of God but the richness that our tradition offers.

That we must first learn about God ourselves in order to be able to love God with all of our hearts and souls and might is the challenge of the *Sh'ma*. It is likely that as we study and learn, our views of God will change: We will see God in a more complex way. Only then will we be able to teach our children so that their understanding of God will also grow. Only then will we be able to help the preschooler develop into an adult with an ever-growing repertoire of understanding of God.

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