



Choosing to Give

Dena Weiss - weiss@hadar.org

Parashat V'Zot HaBerakhah 5779

This week's reading marks the end of the book of Devarim, the Five Books of Moses, and most tragically, the life of Moshe himself. In the liturgical reading of the Torah, V'Zot HaBerakhah is not read on its own on Shabbat, instead it is read on Simhat Torah, where it is immediately succeeded by the reading of Parashat Bereishit. The difficult experience of concluding the reading of the Torah is softened by the knowledge that the Torah does not really end; we just roll it back to the beginning and start again. However, this is not the case for the life of Moshe; time rolls in just one direction. The pain of the death of Moshe is real, and we experience no immediate resurrection. How are we to think of the great tragedy of Moshe's life, his dying¹ before entering the Land and completing his life's mission? How did Moshe himself think about and deal with it?

We can gain access to Moshe's mindset by looking at the way he prepares for his own death. According to Moshe himself, he begged God to let him enter the land, to walk in it even if he was destined to spend the rest of his life and death outside of it:

דברים ג:כג, כה, כז-כח

וַאֲתַחֲנֶן אֵל ה' בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר... אֶעֱבְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַהוּא הַטּוֹב
הַזֶּה וְהַלְבֵּנָה... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי רַב לָךְ אֵל תּוֹסֵף דְּבַר אֵלַי עוֹד בְּדִבְרֵי הַזֶּה: עָלַה רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְשֵׂא עֵינֶיךָ
יָמָה וְצִפְנָה וְתִימְנָה וּמִזְרָחָה וְרָאֵה בְּעֵינֶיךָ כִּי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה: וְצוּ אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְחִזְקָהוּ וְאַמְצָהוּ
כִּי הוּא יַעֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהוּא יְנַחִיל אוֹתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה:

¹ There is a tradition that, in fact, Moshe did not die, see Sotah 13b.



Devarim 3:23, 25, 27-28

I pleaded with God at that time saying... Let me pass and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and Lebanon... God said to me: This is too much. Do not speak further with Me about this matter. Go up to the top of the peak and raise your eyes west, north, south, and east. See with your eyes, for you will not cross this Jordan. And command Yehoshua, strengthen and support him, for he will go before this people and he will grant their inheritance in the land that you will see.

Why does Moshe ask to walk through the land? Won't being so close to what he can't have make it harder for him? Why does he want to touch what he cannot hold? It appears that his request isn't wise, that he is making his loss even harder, that he is asking God to twist the knife. Yet, perhaps this decision on Moshe's part is strategic. It is the key to his way of dealing with the pain. Moshe asks to make what is already so difficult even harder, and this is how Moshe is able to manage his own pain and successfully support the people who do receive what he can only long for.

The foundation for Moshe's strategy can be found by looking at the earlier example of Avraham who is told to do what Moshe requests: to walk throughout the land of Canaan. Perhaps Moshe so desperately wants to walk in the land, and not merely to gaze upon it, because he wants to follow in the footsteps of his father Avraham:

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא ק.

דתניא הלך בה לארכה ולרחבה קנה מקום הילוכו דברי ר' אליעזר... אמר ר' אלעזר מ"ט דר' אליעזר
דכתיב קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה (בראשית יג:ז)...

Talmud Bavli Bava Kama 100a

It is taught in a *baraita*: By walking the length and breadth of [a parcel of land] one acquires the area he traversed—according to R. Eliezer... R. Elazar said: What is the support for R. Eliezer's opinion? As [God says to Avraham in this verse], **Get up and walk in the land, its length and breadth for I will give it to you** (Bereishit 13:17)...

Moshe's approach to the land is consonant with the opinion of R. Eliezer; he wants to walk through the land in order to acquire it. But in his case, he wants to possess the land so that he can give it away. This view of Moshe's intentions is supported by the *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah on a different instance when God tells Moshe to ascend the mountain to die, rather than cross the Jordan into the land:



במדבר רבה כא:יג

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, עֲלֵה אֶל הַר הָעֲבָרִים הַזֶּה (במדבר כז:יב), מָה רָאָה לֵאמֹר אַחֵר פְּרִשְׁתָּ נְחִלֹת, אֲלֵא שָׁשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה רַבִּינוּ (במדבר כז: ז): **נָתַן תִּתֵּן לָהֶם**, סָבַר שֶׁנִּתְרַצָּה לוֹ הַקְדּוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אָמַר הַרְיֵנִי מִנְחִיל אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדּוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גְזַרְתִּי בִמְקוֹמָהּ עוֹמֶדֶת.

BeMidbar Rabbah 21:13

God spoke to Moshe saying, Ascend this Mountain of Crossings (BeMidbar 27:12)...

What made Him think² to say this right after the chapter on inheritance? Since when Moshe heard [God say regarding the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophhad], **You will surely give them** (BeMidbar 27:7), he thought that God had been appeased, and he said, “I will be granting the inheritance to Israel!” The Holy Blessed One said to him, “[No.] My decree is still in place.”

According to this *midrash*, Moshe does need to be told that he won’t enter the land, but not because Moshe thinks that he will be able to live there; Moshe knows that is impossible. But Moshe does think that he will be in the land just long enough to do what he so dearly wants to do with it—give the land away. This is the secret to Moshe’s ability to confront this unbearable challenge and this inscrutable loss: When he sees that the Land is being taken from him, he decides that he wants to give it away. He decides to transform his loss into a gift.

In the Torah’s telling of the story in Parashat Pinhas, Moshe asks God to appoint a leader to take care of his beloved people.³ Just as when Moshe sees the land slipping away from underneath his feet, Moshe asks to be able to give it away, so too when he realizes that he is losing his leadership status, Moshe asks to appoint a new leader. How painful it must have been for Moshe to watch his replacement act in his stead, but Moshe arranges with love and devotion for Yehoshua to inherit the mantle of his leadership though Moshe himself is still alive.

Moshe’s arranging for the transfer of his authority shows us that when you choose to reframe a loss as a gift rather than thinking of it as a penalty, you end up being able to hold on to what you had—at least in a spiritual sense. The *midrash* in BeMidbar Rabbah links the time that Moshe first distributed his leadership to the seventy elders for the benefit of the people to when he transfers his status to Yehoshua entirely:

² Lit. “What did He see?”

³ In Moshe’s retelling of this exchange in Devarim, it is God who responds by saying that Moshe needs to appoint a leader for the people. See Devarim 3:28.

במדבר רבה טו:כה

...כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה, כשאמר לא אוכל אנכי לבדי לשאת (במדבר יא:יד), אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אני נתתי בך רוח ודעת לפרנס את בני, ולא הייתי מבקש אחר כדי שתתחבר איתו באותה גדולה, ואתה מבקש אחר? תדע שמשלי אינן נוטלין כלום אלא ואצלתי מן הרוח אשר עליך (במדבר יא:יז), ואף על פי כן משה לא חסר כלום, שלסוף ארבעים שנה אמר לו קח לך את יהושע בן נון, ונתתה מהודך עליו (במדבר כז:יח, כ), מה כתיב? ויהושע בן נון מלא רוח חכמה כי סמך משה את ידיו עליו (דברים לד:ט).

BeMidbar Rabbah 15:25

...So⁴ the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe when he said, **“I can not bear alone”** (BeMidbar 11:14). The Holy Blessed One said, “I have given you insight and knowledge to provide for my children, and I didn’t ask for anyone else to join you in this greatness, and you ask for others?! Know that they will not be taking anything from Me, rather, **“I will collect from the spirit that is upon you”** (BeMidbar 11:17). And even so, Moshe did not lack anything for at the end of forty years [God] said to [Moshe], **“Take Yehoshua bin Nun and bestow on him from your splendor”** (BeMidbar 27:18, 20). And what does it say?! **Yehoshua bin Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom because Moshe placed his hands upon him** (BeMidbar 34:9).

In this *midrash*, God does not want Moshe to distribute his own glory. God would prefer that Moshe to keep it for himself, but Moshe chooses to invest in others despite the warnings that it might be costly to him. Because Moshe is so willing to give, when others take from him he does not experience it as a loss. He does not feel that his own status is diminished, nor does he experience any sacrifice of his own honor. Therefore he is able to successfully give to Yehoshua and enable Yehoshua to approximate his greatness.⁵

⁴ In the *midrash*, this exchange is preceded by the following parable:

למה הדבר דומה למלך שהיה לו פרדס ושכר לתוכו שומר ונתן לו שכר השמירה, לאחר זמן אמר לו השומר אני יכול לשמרו כלו לבדי, אלא הבא עוד אחרים שישמרו עמי. אמר לו המלך נתתי לך את הפרדס כלו לשמרו וכל פרות שמירתו לך נתתי, ועכשו אתה אומר הבא לי עוד אחרים שישמרו עמי, הריני מביא אחרים שישמרו עמך והוי יודע שאין אני נותן להם שכר שמירה משלי אלא מתוך שכר שנתתי לך משם הן נוטלין שכר.

To what is this analogous? To a king who had an orchard, and he hired a guard for it and paid him wages for guarding. After some time the guard said, “I can’t guard the entire [orchard] myself, bring others who will guard with me.” The king said to him, “I gave you the entire orchard to guard and all of the benefits of they’re being guarded, I have given to you, and now you ask, ‘bring others who will guard with me?!’ Know that I will not pay them the wages for guarding myself, rather I will take their wages out of yours.”

⁵ This could provide a path to resolving a contradiction found in the *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah (21:15) which contains two images for Moshe’s transfer of his authority to Yehoshua:

וסמכת את ידך עליו (במדבר כז:יח), כמדליק נר מנר. ונתתה מהודך (במדבר כז: כ), כמערה מקלי לכלי.

Moshe's generosity of spirit is also expressed in the way that he gives the Torah away with willingness and with joy, though he himself acquired the Torah with much difficulty:

ספרי דברים פסקא שו

יערף כמטר (דברים לב:ב) - חכמים אומרים: אמר להם משה לישראל, שמא אתם יודעים כמה צער נצטערתי על התורה, וכמה עמל עמלתי בה, ומה יגיעה יגעתי בה, כענין שנא' **ויהי שם עם ה' ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה** (שמות לד:כח). ונכנסתי לבין המלאכים, ונכנסתי לבין החיות, ונכנסתי לבין השרפים שאחד מהם יכול לשרוף את כל העולם כולו, שנאמ' **שרפים עומדים ממעל לו** (ישעיה ו:ב)! נתתי נפשי עליה, דמי נתתי עליה, כשם שלמדתי אותה בצער - כך תהיו אתם למדים אותה בצער...? ת"ל **תזל כטל אמרתי** (דברים לב:ב). תהיו רואים אותה כזול.

Sifrei Devarim #206

Let my teaching fall like rain (Devarim 32:2). The Sages say: Moshe said to Israel, "Perhaps you don't know how much I suffered for the Torah, and how much I labored over it, and how much effort I expended for it, as it says, **He was there with God 40 days and 40 nights** (Shemot 34:28). I entered among the angels, and I entered among the seraphs—one of which could burn the entire world along with its inhabitants as it says, **Seraphs stand above Him** (Yeshayahu 6:2). I have given my breath to it! I have given my blood for it! Could it be that in the manner that I learned it through suffering, you too learn it through suffering...?! The verse teaches, **My speaking will drip (tizal) like dew** (Devarim 32:2). You should look at it as if it is inexpensive (zol) [i.e. easy to acquire].

Moshe went through a tremendous amount of bodily mortification and escaped hosts of fiery angels in order to learn the Torah. But when it comes time for him to give us the Torah, he does so with generosity. He wants it to be easier for us to learn than it was for him. He is happy to have done the difficult labor that will make the Torah a gift that we can receive from him.

And in this week's *parashah*, V'Zot HaBerakhah, Moshe leaves this world with a blessing on his lips. He converts his jealousy of and possible resentment of the people into a blessing for them. He blesses them, in part, because it helps him cope with his loss. In the end, he chooses to give. Moshe could have left the world in a state of silent bitterness, he could have turned his back on the people who had so often turned their back on him. Instead, he leaves

You shall place your hands on him (BeMidbar 27:18)—like lighting a flame from a flame, and **you shall give of your glory** (BeMidbar 27:20)—like pouring from one vessel to the next.

The image of a flame being lit implies that there is no loss from the original flame, and the image of pouring implies that the first vessel is now empty. Perhaps in terms of the reality, Moshe is pouring his glory out into Yeshoshua, losing his own authority as he invests it in his disciple. However, Moshe himself doesn't *feel* that he has been diminished and thinks of his contribution as from a flame to a flame.



the world content. Moshe transforms something that was *taken from him* into something that was *given by him*. This enables him to be happy for the people who have what he does not and allows him to pass away in peace.

This attitude is reflected in Moshe's very first blessing to us, in the beginning of the speech that is Sefer Devarim.

דברים א:ט-יב

וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בָּעֵת הַהוּא לֹא אוֹכַל לְבַדִּי שָׂאת אֶתְכֶם: ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּכֶם הַיּוֹם
כְּכֹזְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב: ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵכֶם יִסֹּף עֲלֵיכֶם כָּכֶם אֶלֶף פְּעָמִים וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶתְכֶם כְּאִשֶּׁר דִּבֶּר לָכֶם:
אֵיכָה אֲשָׂא לְבַדִּי טְרַחְכֶם וּמִשְׁאַכְם וְרִיבְכֶם:

Devarim 1:9-12

I said to you at that time, "I can not bear you alone." God has increased you and behold, you are as numerous as the stars in the sky. HaShem your God should increase you a thousand times like you and should bless you as He spoke to you. How can I bear alone, your trouble, your burden, and your quarrel!

The blessing that Moshe grants is buried in a complaint. It is clear that the reason why Moshe is finding the people difficult to bear is that they are numerous. And yet, as he is complaining about their large number, he asks God to bless the people and make them even greater! This seems contradictory until you understand that this is entirely consistent with Moshe's method. Although he is lamenting his condition, the source of his ability to bear his burden is to think of it as a gift. Therefore, he doesn't want to minimize this gift; he wants the people to grow so that he can give even more.

Instead of trying to avoid what is difficult, Moshe engages with it. Instead of turning his back on the Land, Moshe gazes upon it, attempts to walk through it. When he feels that something is being taken from him, he doesn't try to claw some of it back, he decides to give a little more and to make his sacrifice into a gift. Making it harder, giving more than is asked, is what transforms its nature. There are certain sacrifices that we must make and cannot avoid. However, a sacrifice that is made willingly, one that is a *nedavah*, becomes a precious opportunity. When we are able to give a little more, when we are able to contribute willingly, we are able to release our resentment and serve others with love. Instead of trying to make life easier, lean into the difficulty. Sometimes the hardest things we do end up being the most meaningful.

Wishing you a Shabbat of giving, not losing.

