



Seeking Acceptance

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Parashat Va'Ethanan 5784

This week's *parashah* begins with Moshe recalling a dramatic moment in his life:

דברים ג:כד

וַאֲתַחֲנֶן אֶל ה' בָּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר... אֶעֱבְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַהוּא הַטּוֹב
הַזֶּה וְהַלְבָּנוֹ.

Deuteronomy 3:23-4

And I pleaded with the Eternal One at that time, saying... “Let me, please, cross over and see that good Land, on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.”

Moshe is hoping for a reversal of the punishment he received in Parashat Hukkat:

במדבר כ"ב

יַעַן לֹא הָאֵמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם.

Numbers 20:12

“Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Children of Israel, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the Land that I have given them.”



It is surely a devastating punishment: Moshe, the greatest of all the prophets, who led the people out of Egypt and worked tirelessly for 40 years to bring them to the Promised Land, will not be allowed to enter it himself.

Yet Moshe does not utter a word of protest when the punishment is issued. It is only now, here in Parashat Va'Ethanan, that we learn that Moshe pleaded to be allowed into the Land. But Moshe is reporting something that happened sometime in the past, “at that time.” At one point between Parashat Hukkat and Moshe’s final speech, Moshe made his plea. But when was this? When does “at that time” refer to?

If we turn back to the final lines in last week’s *parashah* (Parashat Devarim) we see that Moshe’s narration in Parashat Va'Ethanan picks up immediately after a conversation he had with Yehoshua, which he also marks as happening “at that time”:

דברים ג:כא

וְאֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ צִוִּיתִי בָּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר עֵינֶיךָ הָרְאִיתָ אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם לְשְׁנֵי הַמְּלָכִים הָאֵלֶּה בֵּן
יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לְכָל הַמַּמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹבֵר שָׁמָּה. לֹא תִירָאוּם כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא הַנִּלְחָם לָכֶם.

Deuteronomy 3:21

I also charged Joshua **at that time**, saying, “You have seen with your own eyes all that your Eternal God has done to these two kings; so shall the Eternal do to all the kingdoms into which you shall cross over. Do not fear them, for the Eternal your God will do battle for you.”

There’s that phrase again, “בָּעֵת הַהוּא.” So when did this happen? The Hizkuni makes the connection for us:



חזקוני דברים ג:כא

היינו דכתיב בפרשת פנחס ויסמוך ידיו עליו ויצוהו.

Hizkuni on Deuteronomy 3:21

This is what was written in Parashat Pinchas: “And [Moshe] placed his hands on [Yehoshua’s] head and charged him” (Numbers 27:23).

In other words, “at that time” is the very moment that Moshe officially appointed Yehoshua as the leader who would succeed him. Moshe had asked God directly to appoint someone over the community, so that they not become “like a sheep with no shepherd” (Numbers 27:20). It was “at that time” (בעת ההוא), when the consequences of Moshe’s punishment had come into focus for him, that Moshe pleaded to enter the Land—at the very moment that he transferred the future authority of leadership over to Yehoshua. A *midrash* in Devarim Rabbah makes precisely this linguistic connection, and gives a parable to explain its meaning:

דברים רבה ב:ה

למה הדבר דומה לאיפרכוס שהיה בארצי שלו, והיה גוזר על המלך והוא עושה, היה פודה למי שרוצה, וחובש למי שרוצה, וכיון שנתחלף ונתמנה אחר תחתיו, התחיל לבקש מן השוער לכנס ולא היה מניח לו. כך משה, כל ימים שהיה בארצי שלו, היה חובש למי שרוצה, שנאמר (במדבר טז, לג): “ויידו הם וכל אשר להם חיים” וגו’... וכיון שנתחלף ונתמנה יהושע תחתיו, שנאמר (במדבר כז, יח): “קח לך את יהושע בן נון”, התחיל להתחנן לכנס לארץ, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא (דברים ג, כו): “רב לך”.

Devarim Rabbah 2:5

To what is the matter comparable? To a governor who, during his tenure, would issue decrees and the king would fulfill them. He would redeem whom he wanted and imprison whom he wanted. When he was replaced and another was appointed in his stead, he began asking the gatekeeper to enter, but he would not let him. So, Moshe, all the days of his tenure he would imprison whom he wanted, as it is stated: “They, and everything that was theirs, descended alive [into the abyss]” (Numbers 16:33)... When he was replaced and Yehoshua was appointed in his stead, as it is stated: “Take for yourself Yehoshua bin



Nun” (Numbers 27:18), he began pleading to enter the Land. The Holy Blessed One said to him: “It is enough for you!” (Deuteronomy 3:26).

The *midrash* is calling back to the moment of Korah’s rebellion and, in doing so, highlighting the nature of Moshe’s authority during his long life. Moshe responded to the rebellion by calling for the ground to “open its mouth and swallow them” (Numbers 16:30). As far as we can tell from the account, this was Moshe’s own idea, not something that God commanded. When God then fulfills Moshe’s demand, “וַתִּפְתָּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ” - the **land** opened its mouth,” Moshe had total control over the land; he was like a governor whose decree was always upheld by the king. How ironic (and perhaps intentional, measure for measure) that Moshe later loses the power to enter the Land (הארץ).

But the connection to Parashat Korah is even more illuminating. The *midrash* ends with God’s response to Moshe’s request, “רַב לָךְ – It is enough for you!” But with the Korah story now in mind, we are reminded that this was the language that Korah and his group used to challenge Moshe’s authority:

במדבר טז:

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב לָכֶם.

Numbers 16:3

They gathered against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “**It is enough for you!**”

It is also the language with which Moshe rebukes Korah and the Levites who have sided with him, reminding them that they have already been given sacred status, with access to the *mikdash* (sanctuary): “רַב לָכֶם בְּנֵי לֵוִי” - It is enough for you, sons of Levi!” (Numbers 16:7).

God’s רַב לָךְ response to Moshe in our *parashah*, then, is a way of reminding him of the great



authority that he was given—an authority even enforced by God when it was challenged. The phrase also reminds Moshe—through words that he himself had spoken—of the way that those who have been given great privileges sometimes cannot help but seek even more.

Did Moshe fall prey to that temptation that power breeds? Did he become so presumptuous that he thought he could ask God for anything, even to take back God’s own decree? Is that why God became so cross¹ with him?

There is another way to read Moshe’s making his plea “at that time,” which is that it was directly connected to his transfer of power to Yehoshua. This was not a decision suddenly imposed on him by God, after all, but a request that Moshe had made that God find his replacement. Moshe was not attempting to hold on to power, but to give it away. And perhaps this is the very reason why it occurred to Moshe to ask if he could be allowed to cross over into the Land.

For if we turn back to the original wording of Moshe’s punishment, we find that God did not say explicitly that Moshe could not enter the land at all. Rather, God says:

לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם

“You will not **bring this congregation** to the Land I have given them.”

Moshe will not be entering the Land as the **leader** of the people, that much is clear. But if he is no longer the one “bringing the congregation in,” he thinks, perhaps he can still cross over

¹ My colleague, R. Ethan Tucker, brought my attention to Everett Fox’s rendering of יתעבר, “God was **cross** with me.” It is a lovely translation because it manages to preserve the linguistic connection between this word for God’s disapproval and the word Moshe uses for, “I will **cross** over” (אעברה). They are the first words in two successive verses (Deuteronomy 3:25-36).



with them (or even alone) as a private citizen. Moshe willingly surrendered his authority, and then wondered if he could just fade back into the crowd and be forgotten, no longer Moshe Rabbeinu, but just one of the many Children of Israel crossing over in search of a new beginning.

Considering that version of the Va'Ethanan plea, we might also soften our reading of God's response, רב לך—not "It is enough for you," but "You **are** enough." Moshe, You have led a life of such profound meaning and service, nothing else could possibly add to it. You have done your part and you will always be remembered for it. We might even say, in the spirit of midrashic reading, that God was cross with Moshe because Moshe, in his extreme humility, wanted to do away with his title and his legacy. God thus responds by saying, "רב לך - You are still a Rav."² You will always be the Rav, the Teacher, of these people; that title endures. For you have given them something even greater than the Land: you have given them Torah, and that will guide their way when they come into the Land, and it will keep them attached to God even when they are forced to leave the Land.

Still, Moshe must have been heartbroken not to achieve his dream of entering into "that good Land." And so he begins this week's *parashah* by remembering the desperation of his plea, and the terrible finality of God's reply. We ache for our teacher when we read these words of loss. And even so, he remains forever Rabbeinu, Our Greatest Teacher.

The opening of Parashat Va'Ethanan can thus serve both as a warning to us all, not to seek more power or privilege than is our due—but also as a reminder to honor our life's accomplishments, and even to acknowledge, every one of us, our own greatness.

"רב לכם, בני ישראל - Children of Israel, you are enough."

² It also may be a play on words in a harsher direction: "You **have** a Rav; Yehoshua is your master now!"

