

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

VAESCHANAN

Moshe's Prayer to Enter the Land

וַאֲתַחֲנֶן אֵל ה' בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר... אָעֲבֹרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן

I entreated Hashem at that time, saying... Let me please cross and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan.¹

BACKGROUND AND TWO QUESTIONS

In the beginning of our parsha, Moshe relates to the people how he implored Hashem to be able to enter the land of Israel together with them, but Hashem denied his request. When considering this opening section, two basic questions come to mind:

1. On what basis did Moshe feel that Hashem might allow him to enter the land?
2. Why, in the event, was his request not granted?

NO ENTRY – AS A LEADER, OR EVEN AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN?

In order to answer these two questions, we must first consider the basis of Moshe being denied entry into the land. In Parshas Chukas, Hashem informed Moshe that this was a punishment for the episode of Mei Meriva, where Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it.² On a simple level, therefore, we might say that Moshe was praying that this decree be revoked, but was informed by Hashem that it was final and not subject to reversal.

However, if we look closer at those verses, we will discover that it is possible that Moshe's prayer and the decree against him were not directly antithetical one to the other. Hashem's words to Moshe in the aftermath of the Mei Meriva were:

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

¹ Devarim 3:23-25.

² Bamidbar 20:12. See also *ibid.* 27:14 and Devarim 32:51.

Because you did not promote faith in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them.

We see that the decree was that Moshe would not “bring the congregation to the land,” i.e. as their leader, rather, it would be Yehoshua who would bring them in. Coming back to our parsha we note that Moshe did not ask to bring the people in. He rather asked that he should be allowed to “enter the land,” i.e. as a private citizen. Perhaps this, then, was the reason Moshe felt his prayer would be granted, as it did not actually contravene the decree at Mei Meriva. Indeed, the final two verses of Parshas Devarim, which immediately precede Moshe’s prayer,³ describe him charging Yehoshua with leadership of the people. In this way, by handing over the reins of leadership, Moshe felt that he was paving the way for his request to enter together with the rest of the people, as mentioned in the opening of our parsha.⁴

However, if this is the case, we must then ask: *Why* was his request to enter the land, even not as the leader, not granted to him?

To answer this question, we may need to consider that there were other reasons behind Moshe not entering the land, aside from the decree at Mei Meriva...

AN ADDITIONAL ELEMENT? THE SIN OF THE SPIES

In last week’s parsha, in the course of his rebuke over the episode of the spies, resulting in that generation not being allowed to enter the land, Moshe says:

גַּם בִּי הִתְאַנַּף ה' בְּגִלְלַתְכֶם לְאמֹר גַּם אַתָּה לֹא תָבֹא שָׁמָּה

Also with me Hashem became angry because of you, saying: “You too shall not come there.”⁵

Needless to say, this verse requires understanding, as it implies that Moshe’s inability to enter the land was a result of the sin with the spies. Why should that episode be the cause of punishment for Moshe? Additionally, how is this to be reconciled with the verses that state explicitly that the cause for all this was the episode of Mei Meriva, thirty-eight years later?

The Midrash⁶ states that when it was decreed upon the generation of the spies that they die in the wilderness, it was likewise ordained that Moshe die there, so that in future times when the dead are revived, he could then bring them into the land together with him.

However, it seems that this initial decree concerning Moshe was not irrevocable; the matter assumed finality only in the later episode of Mei Meriva, and hence the verse ascribes his punishment to that occurrence.⁷

At any rate, we can now understand why, when the decree was finalized, it precluded the possibility of Moshe entering the land in any capacity – even not as a leader – since he needed to be buried in the wilderness together with his generation. Hence, his request to be allowed to cross over the Jordan even as

3 Devarim 3:21-22.

4 Abarbanel to verse 25, see also Meshech Chochmah ibid.

5 Devarim 1:37.

6 Tanchuma, Parshas Va’eschanan sec. 6.

7 See Rav Yehuda Copperman, *Pshuto Shel Mikra*, Chap. 87.

a private citizen was denied.⁸

WITH AN EYE ON EXILE

This is another approach taken by numerous commentators regarding the connection between the episode of the spies and Moshe being barred from entering the land.⁹ In contrast to the Midrash, this approach focusses, not on the generation that stayed on the wilderness, but on the generation that entered the land.

One of the repercussions of the sin of the spies is that exile was decreed for the Jewish people at a later point. A trademark of Moshe Rabbeinu was that whatever he was instrumental in bequeathing to the people had the quality of permanence. Thus, for example, our freedom from Egypt, becoming Hashem's people and the Torah we received at Sinai were never taken away from us. As such, if Moshe were to bring us into the land of Israel, exile from the land would likewise become an untenable option. Putting these two ideas together thus explains how the sin of the spies had negative repercussions for Moshe as well regarding entering the land: Since exile had been decreed, Moshe could not bring the people in, as that would negate exile as a possibility.

In this light, too, we can understand Moshe's prayer to enter the land. Moshe understood that the problem he would engender in rendering exile untenable was only if he brought the people in to the land as their leader. Therefore, he asked to be allowed to enter as a private citizen such that he would have no such complicating effect. However, Hashem informed him that his entering the land in *any* capacity – even a private one – would preclude the option of subsequent exile and hence his request was denied.¹⁰

“LET ME PLEASE CROSS AND SEE THE LAND”

Thus far, we have considered the question of whether Moshe was requesting to be able to settle in the land as a leader or simply as part of the people. However, it is possible to consider that Moshe's request was more modest than either of these two options. This simple reading of his prayer, “let me cross and see the land,” implies that he was not asking to be allowed to live in the land in any capacity, either public or private. Rather, he was simply asking to be able to cross the Jordan and see the land – after which he would come back. We may ask: what could Moshe have hoped to achieve in such a brief visit? Of course, we could respond simply that even to be in the land of Israel for short while is of great spiritual benefit; after all, the Gemara extolls the virtues of one who even walks four cubits in the land of Israel.¹¹ However, it is possible that Moshe had an additional intention with this request. To understand this matter, let us consult a well-known passage of the Gemara regarding Moshe's prayer on this occasion:

דרש רבי שמלאי מפני מה נתאוה משה רבינו ליכנס לארץ ישראל? וכי לאכול מפריה הוא צריך או לשבוע מטובה הוא צריך? אלא כך אמר משה, הרבה מצוות נצטוו ישראל ואין מתקיימות אלא בארץ ישראל, אכנס אני לארץ כדי שיתקיימו כולן על ידי.

Rav Samlai expounded: Why did Moshe desire to enter the land of Israel? Did he need to eat from its fruit or be satisfied from its goodness?¹² Rather, thus said Moshe: Israel has been commanded with many mitzvos that can only be performed in the land of Israel. I will enter the land so that they will all

8 Perhaps Moshe thought that he could cross the Jordan to live in the land of Israel and then cross back to the wilderness when his time came to leave the world (see *Ohr Hachaim* to our verse). But apparently, this was not deemed feasible.

9 See commentaries of Seforno, *Ohr Hachaim* and Malbim to Devarim 1:37 and *ibid.* 3:26.

10 Malbim.

11 See Kesuvos 111a.

12 Regarding our inclusion and mention of these aspirations in the “*al hamichya*” blessing, in light of the Gemara's comments which appear to diminish their significance as reasons to desire entering the land, see Tur Orach Chaim sec. 208 citing Sma”g, and commentaries of Beis Yosef and Bach there.

*be fulfilled by me.*¹³

If we consider this passage carefully, a number of questions will arise:

1. Why does Moshe say “הרבה מצוות נצטוו ישראל – *Israel has been commanded with many mitzvos,*” referring to the people as an entity distinct from himself? Why not simply say, “We have been commanded with many mitzvos,” or simpler still, “There are many mitzvos”?
2. Why does he use the somewhat wordy phraseology of “יתקיימו כולן על ידי – *they will all be fulfilled by me,*” and not more directly, “אקיים כולן – *and I will fulfill all of them?*”
3. Beyond this, a more fundamental question is raised by the commentators: Why is the Gemara even pondering and investigating the basis of Moshe’s desire to enter the land? Is there not a mitzvah to live in the land of Israel? *That* should be the answer to our question! In fact, there shouldn’t even *be* a question in the first place!

It appears that the Gemara, too, understood Moshe’s request of “let me cross” in its literal sense. He knew that settling in the land in any permanent capacity was being withheld from him and was requesting only to cross the Jordan and see the land for a brief while. Hence, his motivation in his request could not have been the mitzvah to live in the land of Israel. Indeed, as the Gemara expresses it, seemingly all he would have time in such a visit for is to partake of some of its fruit! What then, was his goal?

To this the Gemara answers, although Moshe knew that he himself would not be able to fulfill any of the mitzvos that pertain to the land of Israel, nevertheless, he wanted to have a hand in establishing conditions for those mitzvos to apply. As we know, the sanctity which generates the land-based mitzvos is itself “activated” by the entry and presence of the Jewish people in their land. Moshe wanted to enter the land and thereby make his unique contribution to the sanctity of the land. In this way, the mitzvos that “Israel was commanded to perform in the land,” while not being *performed* by him, could at least be “*fulfilled though him*” as the one who enabled conditions for their obligation.¹⁴

This third approach is, in a sense, the most devastating of all, for it emerges that even crossing the Jordan into the land of Israel for just a few hours – or even moments – was denied Moshe. Perhaps his presence even for a short duration would also have caused the sanctity of the land to be activated to a degree that would preclude the exile of the people, as discussed earlier.

SEEING THE LAND

In the event, as Moshe relates, his request to enter the land was not granted in any capacity. However, this is not to say that his prayer was entirely without result. Moshe’s prayer consisted of two requests: 1) To enter the land, 2) To see the land. Although the first request was denied, the second was granted, as verse 27 relates that Hashem told Moshe to ascend the peak of the mountain and to see the land.¹⁵

What was the purpose of Moshe seeing the land? The commentators explain that this was not merely a compensatory act for Moshe who would not be allowed to enter the land, that he at least be allowed to see it. Rather, in the same way that his wish to enter the land was in order to help activate its sanctity for the Jewish people, so too, his desire to see the land was to bestow blessing on it through visual contact.¹⁶

13 Sotah 14a.

14 See *Derashos Binah le'Itim, drush 46* (cited in commentary *Ge'on Yaakov to Ein Yaakov*, Sotah *ibid.*).

15 See Berachos 32b.

16 Seforno to Devarim 3:25. See also his comments to *ibid.* 32:49 and 33:1.

Indeed, for this reason, he was told to ascend the mountain and look around *in all four directions* – including east. Seemingly, Moshe should have no need to see the east side of the Jordan, as that was where he currently was! Rather, his surveying the land was to bestow blessing upon it, and in this context, the east side of the Jordan, which was also an extension of the Jewish presence in the land of Israel, was also included in that blessing.¹⁷

CONCLUSION: EXPERIENCE AND EXHORTATION

Having discussed the events described in the opening verses of our parsha, the somewhat disarming question that remains is: Why are they in our parsha? The beginning of Chumash Devarim contains Moshe words of rebuke and exhortation to the people. What room is there to include within such a framework an account of Moshe's own personal experiences, deeply significant though they obviously were for him? The simple answer, presumably, is that this is part of Moshe's rebuke, since his inability to enter the land was precipitated by the negative actions of the people – either with the spies or the Mei Meriva.

The Ibn Ezra, however, has a different approach. The goal of Moshe's exhortations in Chumash Devarim is to prepare the people as best he can to enter the land of Israel and fulfill their national destiny there. To this end, he both reviews their past mistakes and also warns them concerning challenges and potential pitfalls that may be waiting for them there. As part of this goal, Moshe seeks to make the land beloved to them, to which end he relates how much he himself prayed to be able to enter it but was denied this request. Thus, Moshe is saying to the people: "Know that I would have done anything to cross the river that you are about to cross, if only for a few moments. In the end I was only able to ascend a mountain and see the land from afar. You who will be entering the land, please be sure to appreciate it, cherish it and take care of it."

¹⁷ See R' Shimon Schwab, *Maayan Beis Hasho'eva*, Devarim 3:27.