

While grand and inspiring, our Sinai covenant is also deeply challenging and demanding. It is hard to be a Jew, not only or even primarily because of the particular mitzvot we observe, and not only or even primarily because of our painful history of persecution. The Torah's vision is challenging because it demands that we embrace paradox and complexity without the false comfort of overly simplistic answers. It is hard to be a Jew because our magnificent theology does not always square with our experience, and because we are asked to hold in our minds and hearts at one and the same time practical reality and visionary ideals, reason, experience, and faith. It is hard to be a Jew because Judaism demands that we both accept our human limitations and strive to surpass them—or, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, that “to be fully human [we] must be more than human.”

Standing not at Sinai itself but at the edge of the Land, neither Moses nor the people of Israel can reaffirm this covenant in the naive and simple faith they once had. Forty years of experience have taught them that a religious life—a life of blessing in relationship with God—will be neither easy nor straightforward. The people will disappoint and anger God, and sometimes God will disappoint and anger them. There will be unanswerable conflicts and unresolvable dilemmas. What can they/we do with our inner conflicts—with our questions and doubts, fears and shame, disappointments and anger?

We can pray. Sometimes what we pray for will indeed come to pass; sometimes it will not. Sometimes prayer may yield a clear vision for the path ahead, and sometimes it will not. But regardless of any specific “outcome,” a prayer practice offers an ongoing opportunity for connection with God and the deepest parts of ourselves. It can provide a kind of therapeutic container, allowing us to experience and explore our inner conflicts, and reminding us that even in our greatest turmoil, we are not alone. In this way, Moses's prayer becomes the model for the comfort of Shabbat Nahamu, the comfort and solace that enables us to reaffirm our covenant with God.

May God bless the people of Israel and all humanity with a full measure of comfort and peace on this Shabbat Nahamu.

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## PARASHAH COMMENTARY

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### The Comfort of Prayer

Parashat Va-ethannan contains some of the most inspiring and sweepingly grand passages in the entire Torah, and some of the best known, including the Ten Commandments and the first paragraph of the Shema'. Always read on Shabbat Nahamu (the “Shabbat of Comfort” following Tish'ah Be'Av and the previous three weeks of mourning, rebuke, and spiritual vulnerability), Parashat Va-ethannan serves almost as a theological national anthem or pledge of allegiance, reconnecting us conceptually and viscerally with our core commitments as Jews.

It is all the more striking, then, that the parashah opens on such a different note:

I [Moses] pleaded (*va-ethannan*) with the Lord at that time, saying, “O Lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.” But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, “Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see.” (Deut. 3:23–28, trans. *The JPS Torah Commentary*)

This intimate and poignant peek into Moses's private prayer life stands in sharp contrast to the grand scale and vision of the remainder of the reading. From a narrative perspective, these six verses conclude last week's parashah, Moses's historical recap to the people, and ought to have been included there. From here on, Moses's speech will focus on the experience, content, and significance of the revelation at Sinai. Indeed, lest we miss the connection to the previous week's reading, the Torah highlights it for us:

this is the fifth incident in the historical narrative described by Moses as having happened “at that time” (*ba’et hahi*). Yet, the new Torah portion begins here, singling out this moment as distinct from the rest of the historical summary.

It is distinguished also (though not uniquely) in being new information. Moses has twice before been told by God that he will die without entering the Land (Num. 20:12, 27:12). Presumably, the people are informed of this when Moses appoints Joshua as his successor (see Num. 27:12), and Moses clearly tells them early in his recap (Deut. 1:37). However, only here do we (and they) learn that Moses suffered personal distress at the decree, such that he passionately prayed to reverse it.

What is this passage doing here? Why did Moses open to the people this window into his inner life in hindsight? And why is it separated from the remainder of his retrospective, to be highlighted here in such a way that, structurally, it serves as an introduction to the entire parashah?

Certainly, it offers a model of religious leadership that does not deny personal vulnerability and need, but leads through it. Had this passage been omitted, we might have been left with the mistaken impression of Moses as an emotional stoic who simply accepts without protest or pain God’s decree barring him from entering the Land (Num. 20:12). Or, we could have imagined him an utterly selfless public servant, who upon hearing the reaffirmation of that same decree, is concerned only for the future of the people, without thought of the loss of his own hopes and dreams (Num. 27:15). The Torah’s original account permits—even suggests—such a reading. But Moses himself corrects the record, revealing that in fact he deeply yearns to cross over into the Land with the people, and that he had pleaded with God in heartfelt prayer to change God’s mind, only to be met with a disappointing, perhaps crushing, “no.” What a gift to his successor Joshua, and to us, that Moses unburdens from our expectations of leadership such impossible and unhealthy fantasies of implacable emotional stoicism and pure selflessness.

In addition to lessons of leadership, however, this passage—and its structural position here as a lead-in to the central teachings of the Torah—teaches us about the significance and role of *prayer* in religious life. Indeed, the midrashim and commentaries on this passage amount to an entire curriculum on prayer, two of which I want to highlight here.

The first, Midrash Tanhuma, imagines Moses feeling not merely disappointed by God’s decree, but theologically shaken. The word *va-ethannan*, translated here as “I pleaded,” is usually understood to refer to a mode of praying in which one seeks an unearned, unmerited gift from God (see, e.g., Rashi). This mode of prayer emerges from deep humility, in which one understands that existentially, we human beings have nothing to offer

God in exchange for the miracle of our lives. Given that all we are and all we do is ultimately attributable back to God, we have no real merit to offer as *quid pro quo* for what we seek. Without explicitly rejecting this notion, the Tanhuma nevertheless simultaneously reads against it, aligning Moses’s prayer with the theological challenges raised by Job and Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): the suffering of the righteous, the prospering of the wicked, and the seeming lack of justice in our world. “There is one fate for both the righteous and the wicked!,” the midrash imagines Moses crying out.

Moses knows and understands intellectually, from a theological perspective, that he is owed nothing. So he ought to be praying in the *va-ethannan* mode, and he does, at least on the surface. But emotionally, this is unacceptable; Moses *feels* wronged, and his heart cries out in prayer, “how can it be that there is one fate for both the righteous and the wicked?!” Just as the outward request of Moses’s prayer is denied (“Please can I enter the Land?” “No”), so too the underlying inner conflict is unresolvable—Moses’s challenge is left hanging without a response.

The second reading, by Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev centuries later, provides a different perspective on Moses’s inner conflicts. Picking up on the seemingly superfluous word *lemor* (to say) in the first verse (“I pleaded with the Lord at that time *lemor*, to say”), Levi Yitzhak reads as follows: initially, Moses would plead (*va-ethannan*) for the ability to pray, for he had a need to speak (*lemor*), but was unable to. Why? Because *he was ashamed in the presence of God*. The specific source of Moses’s shame is left to our imagination. Perhaps he felt ashamed of the intensity of his own longing for that which was not meant for him. Perhaps he felt ashamed of his inability to accept that he was going to die with unfulfilled dreams and goals, or that he would die at all. Or perhaps he was ashamed of his own theological conflicts, his doubts and questions about God’s justice. Whatever the specific basis for the shame, in this reading, Moses prays not to change his situation (the decree, or even his own feelings), but in order to better discern and articulate his own longings and needs, to bring to the surface an inner life otherwise hidden by shame. “For he had a need to speak.”

In both readings, then, prayer emerges as a path to expressing the inexpressible, the modality through which inner conflicts, though unresolvable, can nevertheless be voiced and thereby better tolerated and managed. Moses’s prayer is not “answered” in the usual sense; he doesn’t get what he wants. But the process of praying somehow enables him to move forward, to affirm his faith, and continue to speak in God’s name—for nearly the rest of Sefer Devarim, or Deuteronomy. In other words, just before laying out the magnificent Sinai covenant which makes up the remainder of the parashah, Moses reveals to the people not only his vulnerability—his longings, frustration, confusion, shame, disappointment, and even anger—but also how he manages that vulnerability: *va-ethannan* (I prayed).