



The Smell of Canaan

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The smell of Canaan he has had for all his life; that he should see the land only before his death is hard to believe. . . . Not because his life was too short does Moses not reach Canaan, but because it was a human life.

—Franz Kafka, in a diary entry from 1921

I am always moved by how human Moses appears as *Va'et-hannan* opens. He has already passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua, yet he still pleads with God, still hoping to enter the Promised Land. Perhaps uncomfortable with Moses's appeal to see the "goodly hill and Lebanon," to focus on natural beauty and the concrete, the commentators read this as his longing for Jerusalem and the Temple. But I can easily understand Moses's desire to engage his sense of sight, which had been deprived for so long while wandering in the desert wilderness.

Kafka identifies Moses's struggle and disappointment with the human experience, and picks up on the sensory in a different way. He understands human life as a never-ending struggle toward liberation, a struggle concluded only by death. We persist in pursuing goals, all the while knowing they cannot be achieved in our lifetime. What is Moses's goal? I think Kafka's choice of "the smell of Canaan" is telling. The image I have is of the scent-hound, who pursues his prey even though he cannot see it. Scent-hounds do not need to be fast—they can stick with a scent and follow it for long distances over all kinds of terrain. But how did Moses, who had never been to Canaan, recognize the scent to begin with?

What Kafka understands about Moses's journey is that it is not only a struggle *toward* something but also a kind of *return*. Moses was striving for a place that promised freedom and where the Israelite community could flourish, one he already knew. His longing, which Kafka reads as our longing, a human one, is for the safety and security of home.



Shabbat Nahamu
Va'et-hannan 5779

שבת נחמו
ואתחנן תשע"ט



A Leader's Limits

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The very title of this week's parashah, *Va'et-hannan* ("and I pleaded"), presents the larger-than-life figure of Moses in a humbling place. Before sharing with the people fundamental elements of the faith that they have taken on and the civilization that they aspire to become, Moses confessed to them that his exclusion from the destined land of promise was against his will, and in spite of emotional pleas to God (Deut. 3:23–26). The man who chose to forgo the trappings of a life among the royal Egyptian elite to lead an at-times ungrateful band of liberated slaves through the desert would ultimately be barred from tasting the final fruit of his sacrifice.

Commentators suggest a variety of reasons for God's refusal to let Moses enter the Land, including his striking of the rock at the waters of Meribah (Num. 20:9–12, Rashi); his impetuous rebuke of his people in this episode (*ibid.*, Rambam); and his behavior in the dispatch of spies to the Land of Israel (Num. 13, Abarbanel). However, we might take a step back to explore the question of why Moses *should not* have entered the Land despite everything he did in the service of God and his people.

Let us consider for a moment Moses's own biography: he went from being a member of the Egyptian royal house, unaware of his true origins yet not entirely comfortable with his supposed family's oppression of another people, to an exiled prince resigned to a simpler life in the desert, and then on to become a liberator, teacher, and preacher to his people. Moreover, Moses came to his leadership role somewhat begrudgingly, humbly expressing at the outset of the Exodus saga that he was *aral sefatayim*, "deficient of speech," (Exod. 6:12) and might not be suited to the

monumental task of speaking to the ruler of a great civilization or navigating an unwieldy group of recently freed slaves through an unforgiving desert.

With this, we must consider how different experiences, characteristics, and skills can equip people for different forms and contexts of leadership. It is difficult to deny that Moses's leadership as conveyed to us in the biblical narrative is anything short of awe-inspiring, whether in relation to the personal impediments he overcame, the life of luxury he gave up, or the sheer magnitude of the task of guiding a fractious multitude through the desert. However, different challenges call for different solutions depending on their context and, by extension, demand different sorts of people to effectively face particular tests and trials.

As Jews, we believe that *Moshe Rabbenu*, Moses our teacher, was alone in his ability to meet the task of guiding the people of Israel through the desert and imparting the morality and rituals of the Torah on a people who remained otherwise ignorant of such matters as they emerged from the shadow of subjugation. However, the skills and abilities that made him so unparalleled in this regard were not necessarily transferable to the baser and more brutal work of generals and politicians that would be unavoidable following the people's entry into the Holy Land.

One might be tempted to ask why, despite this conclusion, Moses couldn't simply enter the Land as a private citizen, conceding his all-powerful leadership roles for a simpler life, like the Roman dictator Cincinnatus who chose to forgo absolute power in favor of the quiet existence of a farmer. To answer this, we can look to the 17th century commentator *Or Hahayyim*, who argues that implicit in Moses's request for entry was a willingness to resign from his position of leadership. However, the *Or Hahayyim* contends, Moses's particular leadership role was so immense and so unique that resigning from it would essentially be impossible. We can extrapolate further that Moses's very presence was so overarching for the people in his charge that it would always serve as a challenge to the authority of Moses's successor, Joshua, whatever Moses intended.

Considering that both Moses's essence and experience precluded his entry into the Land as the Children of Israel transitioned to the reality of life in their new land, leads us back to the first word and title of this parashah, *Va'et-hannan*. This word is directly related to *hen*, grace, and Rashi points out that all forms of the connected verb *hanan* denote requests for an "*ex gratia* gift," meaning one that is not in return for any specific good deeds or worthy action. In addition to this, earlier in the Torah we see that one of the thirteen attributes of God is *hanun*, gracious. We might then assume that a more gracious response to Moses's late-in-life request would be to allow him to enter the Land rather than a curt refusal paired with a command to "never speak to Me of this matter again!" (Deut. 3:24).

However, God's true grace here may be in recognizing that Moses could not enter the Land, both because of the potential negative impact it could have on his people's survival and cohesion in their new land, and because Moses was just as ill-suited to the upcoming tasks of conquest and governance as his persona was indomitable and irreplaceable in the eyes of his people. In telling Moses to immediately cease discussion of this request, God may merely have been shifting Moses's gaze inward, pushing him to see what perhaps he already knew—that both in spite and because of his deeds and status as the unparalleled leader of the people, he could not, for their sake, join them in this new chapter in their collective history.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).