

## Moses's Journey, and Ours

Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Professor of American Jewish History, JTS



Whenever I read the opening verse of this week's parashah, I recall the other parashah that opens with the same verb: לך-לך ("Go forth"). Told to go, Abram heeded God's call, uprooting his life and journeying—both physically and emotionally—first to Haran and then to the land of Israel. And now, as we near the end of the Torah reading cycle, Parashat Vayeilekh begins by attributing that very same action of journeying to Moses, as he nears the end of his life. What can we learn from the parallel acts of journeying that these two great leaders of our people undertook?

Abraham set out on a journey about which he knew nothing, spurred to do so in response to God's call. Moses's action of וילך (Deut. 31:1) tells a different story. Commenting on the first verse of our parashah, Seforno (Obadiah ben Jacob, c.1470–1550, Italy) understands וילך משה ("Moses went") to mean that Moses התעורר לזה ("awakened to it"). This awakening connotes self-drive. While Abraham responded to God's call with a leap of faith, Moses was motivated from within. Abraham's journey began without a clear sense of what was to unfold. With Moses, we encounter a leader inspired by a clarity of purpose and mission honed through decades of relationship with both God and his people. He accomplished so much—as his orations that fill the book of Deuteronomy have detailed.

Abraham's "לך-לך" marks the beginning of his journey. Ironically, Moses's act of "וילך" marked some of the final footsteps of his life. It also has no complement—where did Moses go? The next phrase does not tell us where he went; it tells us what he said:

וילך משה וידבר את־הדברים האלה אל־כל־ישראל

"Moses went and spoke these things to all Israel."

Why then does the parashah begin with the verb of movement? At this moment, as B'nei Yisrael prepares for their long-awaited entrance into the Promised Land, Moses's journey is marked by a lack of *physical* movement. He has known for some time that he will not enter the land, the consequence of striking rather than speaking to the rock to extract water. He now must prepare himself to divulge this crucial information to his people. He surely anticipates that they will be frightened, angry, and dejected and that this could turn quickly to self-doubt, as they question whether they are up to this next challenge without him. Moses must undergo an *emotional* journey, moving past lingering feelings of sadness or bitterness to effect a smooth transition of power and give the people the strength and confidence to continue their journey. Thus, the next verb after "went" is "spoke," as Moses shares all of this with the people. He confesses that at the age of 120, he can no longer be active and shares the news that he will not cross the Jordan River.

As we know, some of the most consequential journeys we take in life are invisible to the naked eye. This is, after all, our task during the month of Elul and the Yamim Noraim: to do the internal work to manage sadness, disappointment, frustration, and anger, and to reach out to those in our lives with a generous spirit and an eye toward the future.

Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto, 1800–1865, Italy) makes explicit the connection between the parashah and the Days of Awe, by reminding us that the same verb, לך (go), is also used in reference to the shofar that accompanied the Revelation at Sinai:

ויהי קול השופר הולך וחזק

"The blare of the horn grew louder and louder" (Exod. 19:19).

Several commentators note how this image of increasing, even swelling, sound is unusual, since generally the sound of an instrument grows fainter over time as human breath grows thinner.

This extraordinary image of the shofar blast growing in impact is mirrored by the force of Moses's message. Rather than dwelling on his own disappointment and brooding over his impending death, Moses addresses the people's anxiety head on. He publicly appoints his successor, Joshua, reassuring the people that he had been chosen by God. Moses then offers a rousing charge to both the people (Deut. 31:6) and Joshua (Deut. 31:7) to be strong and resolute. Hoping to bolster their spirits and fortify them, he uses the second verb חזק ("be strong"), that describes the shofar in Exodus and adds another, אִמַּץ ("and resolute"). His words instill in Joshua and the people of Israel the courage and stamina to continue the journey without him. The verb לַךְ makes an additional appearance in this narrative, as Moses provides reassurance to his people. Spiritual, emotional journeys can be scary, grueling, vulnerable, but while they can feel lonely, they are not; God will be with the people of Israel, God will go with the people:

יהוה הוא ההלך לפניך הוא יהיה עמך לא ירפך ולא יעזבך לא תירא  
ולא תחת

"And God, Godself, will go before you. God will be with you; God will not fail you or forsake you. Fear not and be not dismayed! (Deut. 31:8)

When we hear the shofar during these Days of Awe, we hope that it will awaken us, just as Moses awakened, according to Seforno, to do precisely the kind of journeying that Moses models—to consider our own paths, how we have fallen short, and how we might still do better for those we love and those in our charge.

In this way Moses's—and Abraham's—legacies continue to endure through the strength of each generation of Jewish journeyers. The shofar blast is the call to Abraham to set us on our journey; it's also the reminder from Moses that we have the strength and knowledge within us to continue to progress in our life's journey. Our task is not only to listen to

the shofar, but to become the shofar—growing stronger in our conviction, and more resolute in our work of building and rebuilding a better world. When we do that, God will go with us.