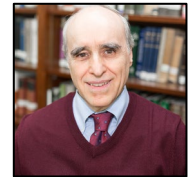


## Where Did Moses Go—and Why?

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Deuteronomy 31:1 begins with the following statement: “Moses went and spoke these words to all of Israel.” And it continues with the words of Moses to the people and to Joshua as follows:

And he said to them: “I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no longer go out and come in; and the Lord has said to me: You shall not go over this Jordan. The Lord your God, He will go over before you, and you shall dispossess them; and Joshua shall go over before you, as the Lord has spoken.” (2–3)

And Moses called to Joshua and said to him in the sight of all of Israel: “Be strong and of good courage. For you shall go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers; and you shall cause them to inherit it.” (7)

### The question:

Keli Yekar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, 1550–1619, Prague) articulates our question as follows: “All the commentators were challenged by this “going” because the text does not mention where he [Moses] went . . .” But before I get to his *teshuvah* (repentance)-centered interpretation and how it can inform our own behavior as we approach the Days of Awe, I will share the explanations of three other commentators.

### Reassuring people

Ibn Ezra (R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089–1164, Spain) explains that “Moses went to each and every tribe to inform them that he was about to die so that they should not fear, and reassured them with his words concerning Joshua, stating

that Joshua would lead them into the land and cause them to inherit it.” He infers that Moses literally went/walked to the people by reading 31:1 as if the concluding words “to all of Israel” refer to both the walking and the speaking: “Moses went [to all of Israel] and spoke these words to all of Israel.”

Moses anticipated the reaction of the people to the news that their leader of 40 years would no longer be accompanying them. He proactively took the initiative to allay their fears and reassure them that they would be in the trusted hands of Joshua, designated and supported by Moses. These implied qualities are ones that leaders (and all of us in positions of authority) might wish to emulate: anticipating the needs of others; offering encouragement; taking the initiative to meet people where they are—both literally and figuratively.

### Honoring People

Ramban (R. Nahman ben Moses, 1194–1270, Spain) offers a similar interpretation suggesting that “Moses [literally] went from the camp of the Levites to the camp of the Israelites in order to show them honor. Like someone who wishes to take leave of his friend and comes to ask permission of him . . .”

In addition, Ramban indicates that Moses mentioned his advanced age of 120 years to the people:

to comfort them concerning his condition [his approaching death], as if to say ‘I am old and you have no more benefit from me . . . fear not (v. 6), for the Eternal will go over with you; He will not remove his presence from you on my account [because of my absence] and Joshua will go over before you, in my place . . .’

Although Ramban's approach is similar to Ibn Ezra's, he highlights additional attributes: Moses *honors* the people he has led by humbly requesting permission, so to speak, before taking leave of them. How much more so should we all be cognizant of the importance of respectfully taking leave of others in a variety of life situations.

### Comforting Mourners before One Dies

Ramban also frames Moses's actions in relation to the mitzvah of comforting the mourners (he actually uses the Hebrew word for engaging in the mitzvah of comforting a mourner, *nihum aveilim*). However, Moses has not yet passed away, so the people are technically not mourners. Nevertheless, in this psychologically resonant interpretation, we can think of Moses as comforting the mourners to be! We often begin the process of mourning when first receiving news of a person's impending death—sometimes long before the person passes away. I remember when my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, how, in a sense, the mourning process began at that very moment. Just as Moses comforted the mourners before his own death, we may have encountered people who were able to comfort their family members and friends before their own passing, helping them begin the healing process.

### Inspiring Others

Shem Mishmuel ( Shmuel Bornsztain, Socachover Rebbe, 1855–1926, Poland) understands Moses's "going" differently from the preceding commentaries stating that "And Moses went" is not referring to a literal going or walking but rather a spiritual one, i.e., he [Moses] walked into the hearts of Israel and imbued them with the intuitive potential to look at the past and the future with clarity . . ." and that "one can also say that 'Moses went' means that he walked into the hearts of each and every Israelite in those generations 'and he spoke these words' which sets the heart right—for speech is suited to arouse the heart/emotions."

Shem Mishmuel seems to be suggesting that Moses figuratively walked into the hearts of the Israelites via his words—leaving them with the legacy of his inspiring words to help them face challenging situations in their lives. We,

too, should not underestimate the power of our words to inspire and influence others for their benefit.

### Engaging with Individuals and Repentance

We return to Keli Yekar for the final explanation of Moses's "walking," which combines a literal and figurative reading (the literal walking of Ibn Ezra and Ramban and the "figurative" walking of Shem Mishmuel) and focuses on the power of words:

Moses spoke to all the people concerning matters of *teshuvah* (repentance) which are dependent on "words." And since a person never considers himself blameworthy and every sinner and rebellious person will never go to the wise person, the doctor, to request a remedy for the malady of his soul, hopefully he will pay heed when the wise person [takes the initiative] to go to him and speak to his heart to encourage him concerning matters of *teshuvah*. Therefore, [the Torah] states that "Moses went/walked" meaning that he [literally] went from tent to tent of each one of the Israelites and spoke to their hearts "these words" namely matters of *teshuvah* which are dependent on words.

Moses was modelling behavior by reaching out to each and every individual. In support of this interpretation, Keli Yekar quotes the rabbis from the Talmud (Yoma 86b): "*Teshuvah* is so great—that on account of one person's repentance, both the individual and the entire world are forgiven." If so, he concludes, "this [figurative] peace that [one brings] to individuals redounds to one's own benefit" [and the world's] as well. Therefore, "you must pursue it" [by reaching out to individuals] as did Moses.

At this challenging time for Israel and the entire world, may we merit to bring redemption to the world through seeking out and approaching individuals—one by one.