

Enough, Already

My hearts breaks a little at this week's *parashah*. Moses tells the People of Israel: וַאֲתַתְּנֵן, "I begged the Eternal at that time, saying: 'O Lord Eternal, 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...'" (Deuteronomy 3:23-25). But God says no. "The Eternal was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Eternal said to me, "רַב־לְךָ, That's too much from you! Never speak to Me of this matter again!" (Deut. 3:26). This from the God who gave as the divine name אֱלֹהֵי רַחוּם וְרַחֲמִין, "Merciful and compassionate God" (Exodus 34:6)? Holding Moses back from the Land of Promise seems unbearably harsh. And I ask this year as every year: What are we supposed to learn from this story?

I often find that the hardest texts yield the richest teachings, and this one is no exception. God refuses to bring Moses to Canaan, and in so doing, reveals a core Jewish value: the acceptance of *enough*.

/

Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac, known as the Bechor Shor, explains what God means by רַב־לְךָ, "That's too much from you!" He teaches that it's as if God said, "I've done enough miracles for you. Leave space for others to feel that they have been distinguished by me. Because there won't be an end to what you want me to do for you. After you enter the Land, you will then ask to see the Temple."¹ In other words, God knows the human urge for *more*. God knows that Moses can't just want to "see the good land" as he says; for once he does, he will want to see more and more and more. As Kohelet observes, לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע עֵין לְרֵאוֹת, "The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing" (1:8). Moses is as human as the rest of us, struggling mightily with the concept of *enough*.

That's why, teaches the contemporary rabbi Mychal Springer, "God is instructing [Moses] to see the abundance. God is helping [him] to cultivate a sense of gratitude in the face of brokenness."² After all, teaches Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot, "Who is rich? הַשִּׂמְחָה בְּחֵלקוֹ, the one who rejoices in their portion" (4:1). Moses needs help – as do we all – recognizing when he has *enough*.

¹ Bechor Shor at Deut. 3:26. Translation by Mychal Springer in "Holding Fast," Available: <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/holding-fast-2/>. I discovered this text through Rabbi Springer's d'var Torah.

² "Holding Fast."

This is a lesson we have the chance to learn every Passover. Everyone's favorite seder song, *Dayenu*, repeats the refrain over and over again: "It would have been enough." Had God only brought us out of Egypt, that would have been enough. But God did more! God split the sea and gave us Torah and Shabbat and took us to a land of safety and independence. As the introduction to *Dayneu* affirms: כָּמָה מַעֲלֹת טוֹבוֹת לַמָּקוֹם עָלֵינוּ, "How many excellent things the Eternal has done for us!" Miracle stacked upon miracle.

The challenge of *Dayenu*, I think, is to accept that any one of those things really would have been enough. After all, over and over again, the Hebrews in the Torah fail in this basic understanding. The Exodus, Revelation at Sinai, the miracle of manna... none of these gifts quiet their grumbling and their desire for *more*.

And in this, I think we can easily see a reflection of ourselves and the world in which we live. Wherever we look, the most prevalent and alluring alternative to *enough* is *more*. No matter how much I have, there can always be more – and that yearning is exactly what God is protecting against by keeping Moses out of the land. *Dayenu*, God seems to be telling him: Let the experiences you've had be enough. Wish not for more, and find gratitude for what you have.

This point is driven home again in next week's Torah portion, where we read the famous line that underscores Birkat Hamazon, the Jewish blessing recited after completing a meal. We read וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, "And you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless the Eternal your God" (Deut. 8:10). I love this way of thinking about meals: We ask not, "Are you full?" but rather שָׂבַעְתָּ, "Are you satisfied?" Honestly, once I stumbled on this perspective, I adopted it right away. When the Kirzane family dinner draws to a close, I ask my kids if they're satisfied – not full – and I hope it cultivates in all of us an appreciation for having *enough* even if we could have more. This ancient Hebrew wisdom pushes against the modern American drive to *fill* ourselves, to eat (or own or do) *as much as possible*. Being satisfied means knowing that I *could* have more but acknowledging that I have enough, and this earns my gratitude.

Indeed, I believe even our vision of a Messianic Age is based on the concept of *enough*. We are trained to think of heaven, or even of an earth in its ideal form, as *perfect*, and life in the World to Come as flawless and pristine. But along comes Isaiah and says of the Messiah, וְשָׁפַט בְּצִדְקָה דְלֵים, "he shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land" (Isaiah 11:4). In other words, the Messianic Age will still have people who are relatively poor and relatively wealthy, but all will have justice. In an era where the wolf lies down with the lamb (11:6) and babies play by viper's dens (11:8), the miracle seems to be that all people – no matter how much they have – have *enough* and know that it is *enough*.

/

Acknowledging we have *enough* contrasts with *more*, or, to the extreme, *all*. But it also contrasts with *nothing*. Unlike some other traditions, Judaism gives dim regard to asceticism and vows of poverty; and our prayers do not seek to draw us to oblivion. This is why our ethics emphasize the importance not only of basic physical needs but spiritual, emotional, and communal needs as well. God warns Moses against wanting *too much*, but we can also fall prey to the allure of *less and less*. It is possible to say with sincerity and truth, “I do *not* have enough,” and the Book of Deuteronomy specifically and Jewish ethics more broadly will insist that the community has an obligation to right that wrong.

This, of course, leads to the imperatives of volunteering, social action, and political change. It can be alluring to seek public policies that make our own lives better, but this falls into the trap of *wanting more*. If an honest accounting suggests that we truly do have *enough*, but others do not, then we have a social responsibility to spread *enough* far and wide. This is not an endorsement of Manifest Destiny or Delusions of Grandeur; we must resist the temptation to think that everyone in our society can be rich and prosperous and, indeed, even equal. Instead, we have the counter-cultural opportunity not only to advocate that everyone in society has *enough* but also to champion the honest notion that enough really is enough.

We need not always seek *more* or *all*—even as we also turn away from *nothing*—yearning instead for a stable, reliable, and ultimately *satisfying* sense of *enough*.

/

Immediately after prohibiting Moses from crossing into the Promised Land, God instructs him, “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 אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה, the land that you shall see” (Deut. 3:28-29). So in the end, when Moses gets half his wish; he does not “cross over,” but he does get to *see*. And indeed, in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, we read, “The Eternal showed [Moses] the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan” (Deut. 34:1). Though Moses dies outside of Canaan, he does, in the end, get his wish *enough*.

And this may be the most powerful lesson to us all. It is possible to be satisfied, to have enough, even when we know there could be more. And though Moses feels the pain—so familiar to so many of us—of a dream never fulfilled, he nevertheless reminds us that there is grace in gratitude and peace in giving thanks for what we have.