

Parshat Va'etchanan
Finding Purpose in Recovery
Yali Szulanski - Class of 2025

Parshat Va'etchanan pulls us in with a scene of longing and heartbreak: Moshe pleads with God to let him cross into the Promised Land:

ואתחנן אל-ה' בעת ההוא לאמר...אעברה-נא ואראה את-הארץ הטובה אשר בעבר הירדן ההר הטוב הזה (דברים ג:לג-לה)

“Please,” begs Moshe, “please let me cross over and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan River.” (Deuteronomy 3:23-25). Please let me enjoy the fruits of the journey on which I have so obediently labored.

God tells him no, saying “רב-לך” (Ibid. 3:26). On the first reading, God seems to punish Moshe for his pleading, saying “Enough! Stop pleading with me. You have heard My decision, and it is final!”

Interestingly though, our commentators suggest that this wording—“רב-לך”—might just offer Moshe a moment of unexpected grace. There is nuance in God’s seeming refusal of Moshe’s pleading.

Rashi interprets “רב-לך” here in more than one way:

1. “Let this be enough” i.e. Moshe should plead no more.
2. “There is much for you,” a direct reference to Sifrei Bamidbar’s interpretation.

The latter opens the door to there being more for Moshe in the world to come. Digging deeper into Sifrei’s interpretation, we also find it to mean “you are a teacher - a Rav - in this matter”—meaning that Moshe’s entire journey has been designed to serve as an example to future leaders. (Sifrei Devarim 29:3)

Many of us—perhaps more so those of us on a journey to recovery—can see ourselves in Moshe’s final moments with God. We gather in basements, rec rooms, back offices, and classrooms after hours. We meet in circles—sometimes weekly and sometimes daily. On the surface, many of us do not look like we share much in common. Some wear suits



and ties and some are in the clothing we slept in; some are young and some old; some hold positions of power and some are barely making ends meet. Heads bowed, hands clasped, and hearts heavy we plead to God to grant us one thing: serenity.

Some of us whisper and some shout: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can. And wisdom to know the difference.”

Someone will squeeze another’s hand, and it will travel around the circle. We will tell each other, “Keep coming back”—and silently hope that we see the same faces again next time. It scares us when a face disappears from the circle. A common thread ties our longing together: we all desire access to a Promised Land, a place where we can live in freedom. Freedom from illness, from addiction, from intrusive thoughts that prevent us from living in our full selves, and freedom from unending pain. Who we are as individuals no longer matters. What matters is this moment of unified pleading with God. We hold our broken spirits inside bodies battered by the journeys we’ve traveled thus far in our recovery, and we plead, “Please let us see the Promised Land.”

Even before we find our way to the meeting rooms, we have already met with God through individual moments of pleading. We plead for the pain to stop, the urges to go away, and for survival in the moment of diagnosis. We plead with God to remove the burden of this struggle from us, to let us be normal, to be *part of the people who get to go across*.

One literal translation of “רב-לך” is *this is too much for you*. This reads as God telling Moshe that Moshe’s own reserves of strength were limited to bringing the People of Israel to the edge of the Promised Land and not to cross over with them. Every person in a recovery process has heard these words—*this is too much for you*. We have either heard it from loved ones, professional caregivers—or most likely, we have said this to ourselves in our darkest moments. The burden of a journey of recovery often feels like *too much*.

It is in these darkest moments that we find ourselves pleading, when we hold our broken bodies and beg for mercy. It is in these moments that Moshe’s poignant pleading with God reverberates down through the generations to us, who are pleading for release from the pain of our affliction. Recovery is constant pleading and negotiation—with the self, with God, with the people who care for us. We hold the raw truth of our mistakes on



one side of our hearts, while pleading for the chance to see life without illness in the other. It is here that we look to the alternate interpretations of “רב-לך,” and see that we do live in strength, and that there is learning within our pain.

God further explains that Moshe should “look at [the land] well, for [he] will not go across” (Deut. 3:27). There is a moment in recovery when we are at the top of the mountain, where we can see what a life without illness, without addiction, without pain could be—but we are not guaranteed passage of entry to it. Just as Moshe did not get to cross into the land, not everyone enters full recovery. This moment of deep existential pain, however, is often the very moment where strength finally blooms.

Moshe is told that he should “imbue Yehoshua with strength and courage, for he shall go across” (Deut. 3:28). No, Moshe will not be allowed to know the fruits of freedom, but his journey forever lives with the generations of leaders that will come after him. Moshe is to become a רב—a teacher in the ways in which he has led *B’nai Israel*. Moshe’s journey becomes our Torah—the ultimate truth and guiding principle for the people of God. Moshe’s journey is not in vain, as it becomes inspiration that transcends time.

It is still heartbreaking - the image of Moshe, his face full of longing, as he sees the land before him, and the truth that even some of us who battle bravely, will not know full recovery. What we know, however, are the constantly expanding depths of our strength. We know that we can overcome hard things, even if more comes our way, and we know that we can teach others to move through pain, even when the happy ending isn’t guaranteed. We come to learn that there are still huge victories in the smallest wins. Life in recovery is a tremendous act of courage, and no matter the ending, it teaches us to live each day with grace.

Each one of our journeys, whether known or unknown, private or public, has worth. Moshe’s journey becomes our Torah—our truth. The journey of a person in recovery, no matter how it ends, is a story of a valiant warrior living with grace. The rest of the serenity prayer has us saying that we will “live one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, taking this world as it is.” It is in these commitments—of living one day at a time without a guarantee of freedom, that we too become רב—teachers in the ways of strength and finding purpose.





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