

## Parshat Va'etchanan

### Dealing with Disappointment

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Parshat Va'etchanan offers a difficult topic that we don't discuss much -- what happens when God doesn't live up to our expectations: when God doesn't answer our prayers, when God seems to allow injustice, when bad things happen to good people. I'm not going to tackle the insoluble problem of *why* this should be so, but consider what responses are possible and what the parshah teaches us about them.

The parshah opens with a poignant episode: Moshe, speaking to the Israelites just before he dies and they are to enter the land of Israel, recalls the occasion on which he begged God to allow him to enter the land -- and was unsuccessful. What an irony -- Moshe, who persuades God not to destroy the people after the sin of the Golden Calf, who insists that God accompany the people on their journey through the desert -- is refused the simple, apparently eminently reasonable request to see the land to which he has been leading his people for the last forty years. What went wrong? Yes, there was that episode of the striking of the rock, but the exact nature of Moses' sin then is never clarified in the Torah -- was it really bad enough to justify God's refusal to let him enter the land? What about God's forgiveness and mercy?

Several midrashic works use this episode as a starting point for multiple meditations on the injustice of life. One parable from *Midrash Tanhuma* compares it to a story of a king who wants to marry a woman who lives far away. He sends his advisers to see her and report back, but when they return they tell him that she is ugly. However, the king's companion, who has never seen her, insists that they are mistaken and that she is the most beautiful woman in the world. The king decides to marry her and sends his advisers and companion to bring her to him, but when they arrive, the woman's father refuses to let the advisers in, since they disparaged his daughter. The companion approaches, but the father dismisses him too. The companion protests, 'I have never seen her, but I told the king that no other woman in the world is as beautiful, although they told him that no other woman is as ugly. So now let me in, so that I may see whether my words or theirs are true.' The *mashal* ends there, with the *nimshal* or key, explaining that (unusually) the king here represents the people of Israel; the woman is the land of Israel; the advisers represent the spies who speak badly of the land; and Moshe himself is the king's companion, who praises the land even though he has never seen it, and now begs to be allowed to enter it and see whether his description of it or that of the spies is correct. The woman's father corresponds to God, who grants or withholds access to the land. The midrash ends:

'Moshe said: I never saw the land, but yet I praised it to Your children, saying "For the Lord your God is bringing you to a good land"; now let me see it so that I may know whether my

words or theirs are true.' But God said, 'You shall not cross the Jordan.' Moshe said to Him, 'If so, then everything is the same to you, you destroy both the innocent and the wicked.'

This midrash does not offer a happy solution, but rather shockingly ends with a blunt assertion by Moses of God's injustice and indifference to the fate of the innocent and the wicked.

Another passage from *Midrash Tanchuma* takes up this theme and develops it, presenting two texts that echo Moshe's bleak assertion: one is from the book of Iyov: 'It is all one; therefore I say "He destroys the blameless and the guilty"' (9: 22), and the other from Kohelet, 'For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good and pure and for the impure ...' (9: 2) The midrash proceeds to illustrate each pair of opposites by finding a corresponding biblical example - so for example, 'the blameless and the guilty' are identified with King David and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon: the midrash notes that David planned the building of the Temple and reigned for forty years, while Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and reigned for forty years. Even though some people are virtuous and do good in their lives, the midrash concludes, their fate does not differ from that of the worst of sinners.

I find it both amazing and impressive that our tradition -- from Tanakh through the rabbinic literature -- can find room for these expressions of protest against God and the lack of justice that God tolerates. The very first expression of this indignation echoes from Avraham's cry at Sodom -- 'Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?... Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' We expect justice from the True Judge, we are outraged and disappointed when it fails to materialize. Iyov and Kohelet grapple with this problem, and both ultimately resort to the recognition that God is God and cannot be held accountable in human terms.

What fascinates me is how our biblical models deal with this problem, and with the stark -- and deeply amoral -- assertion of God's supremacy and right to do exactly as He wants. The key feature here, I think, is that even faced with injustice in the world, they refuse to abandon God. Avraham continues to argue with God on behalf of Sodom as long as he can, and continues to obey him afterwards; Iyov demands a reaction and an explanation from God and won't be content with the pious, sugary defences of God given by his friends -- and Moshe? Moshe continues to be the loyal servant of God, shepherding God's people and urging them to love God and obey God's laws. A rare example in Jewish tradition of a person who turns his back on God because of injustice is the rabbinic figure Elisha ben Abuyah. After witnessing the death of a child who fell from a tree while obeying his father's command to scare a mother bird off its nest -- thus performing the only two mitzvot in the Torah that promise long life -- Elisha declares 'There is no judge and no justice!' and abandons both God and Judaism. Henceforth, he is known as 'Aher' -- the 'other', the person who is no longer part of the community. But Aher is not typical.



The Jewish response is to continue to protest against injustice but simultaneously to continue to follow God, to argue with God and to love God, to demand justice and to recognize that God is not a supersized human but something -- someone -- completely different. And so like Avraham at Sodom, like King David in the Psalms, like Iyov who declares 'Though he should slay me, yet will I trust in Him', like the talmudic teacher Beruriah accepting the death of her sons, like Rabbi Yitz Greenberg who says that although God abandoned His side of the covenant during the Holocaust, the Jewish people singlehandedly must rebuild that covenant and hold God to its terms -- like all these, Moshe records his passionate request to see the land and God's refusal and appointing of Joshua to take the people across the Jordan instead of him -- and then continues to urge the people to listen to the Torah and obey all its laws, and a few verses later, tells the people: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.' The Torah does not offer any quick fixes for the problem of injustice in the world, but it models a continuing relationship with God in which there is a place for passion, indignation, argument, and love.



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