

Parshat Devarim

Holy Interruption

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After a whirlwind of parshiyot, chagim, global pandemics, and rallying for justice, we have arrived at the beginning of the last stretch, Sefer Devarim, Moshe's book. Though a man of very few devarim (words), Moshe inserts himself and his own narrative into the Torah, speaking in the first person throughout this parsha. He recaps Bnei Yisrael's communal story through his own worn eyes. Parshat Devarim is Moshe's soliloquy of reflection, advice, review, and regret -- and Bnei Yisrael stands as witnesses to his final words.

It is no coincidence that on Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat of Vision, we read the Torah of a Promised Land that Moshe will never see and that we will struggle to keep. We read about a vision of potential and hope from our rearview mirrors. Yet between the strategies for building a future and recounting military history, this parsha allows for brief exhales during which we can see and even feel flickers of vulnerability. Even within the first few pesukim we encounter those feelings in their most raw forms:

רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ בָּאוּ וּרְשׁוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לְתַת לָהֶם וְלִזְרַעָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם. וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר לֹא־אוּכַל לְבַדִּי שְׂאת אֶתְכֶם:

"See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to them and to their heirs after them. **Thereupon I said to you, "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself."** (Devarim 1:8-9)

I cannot carry this burden alone, Moshe reminds himself and us. Moshe's message of "I cannot carry you all by myself" is alive in our lives at this moment, reverberating through the walls as we quarantine in our homes. How often is it that we find our leaders, teachers or parents admitting the moments--even when just reflecting --when they feel small or overwhelmed? This small admission, or perhaps submission, was then repeated by Moshe just moments later:

אֵיכָה אֶשָׂא לְבַדִּי טְרַחְכֶם וּמִשְׁאָכֶם וְרִיבֵיכֶם:

"How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!" (Devarim 1:12)

Perhaps if we read אֵיכָה more existentially, we can turn Moshe's "how" inwardly and read the word instead as *Ayeka*--where are you? The Gemara in Masechet Sanhedrin suggests that this very word is deeper than a particular physical location:

ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב אדם הראשון מין היה שנאמר (בראשית ג, ט) "ויקרא ה' א-להים אל האדם ויאמר לו איכה" אן נטה לברך

And Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: Adam the first man was a heretic, as it is stated:

"And the Lord called to the man and said to him: Where are you"? (Genesis 3:9), meaning, to **where has your heart turned**, indicating that Adam turned from the path of truth. (Sanhedrin 38b, Davidson translation on Sefaria.org)

Ayeka is the question that God knowingly asked Adam and Chava as they hid in Gan Eden, naked and ashamed. Rabbi Art Green writes in his book Radical Judaism: "The creative

force within Being calls out to every human being, surely a call that is not in words and comes from a language deeper than words..." Ayeka is larger than Adam and Chava; it is sometimes the calling each and every one of us needs. Ayeka is the question we ask on Tisha B'Av as we sit in the debris and rubble of our fallen Beit HaMikdash. Where would the center of our identity be without this central place? Where is God now? Ayeka is the question we must ask ourselves during the month of Elul as we contemplate our past year and pursue teshuva.

And then there are those moments during which we cannot answer such a piercing question. Other times, we cannot even bring ourselves to find the words to address such a question in our lives. Moshe was having one of those moments in Parshat Devarim. Throughout his leadership of Bnei Yisrael Moshe expressed this feeling of overwhelming helplessness physically -- as pesukim describe *וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו* ("Moshe fell onto his face"). The times that Moshe fell, his moments of speechlessness, can mirror the times that we feel unable to stand and hold ourselves up. Moreover, it can be a form of *Nefillat Apayim*, another name for Tachanun, a prayer of supplication. For Moshe, *Nefilah* (falling) embodied *tefillah*. His heart ascended to the Heavens when his knees hit the ground.

Something beautiful happens even just in Moshe's retelling of his legacy. Something glimmers in his own rearview mirror. Sandwiched in between the two pesukim--the first of admission and the second of a question--was validation.

ה' אֶ-לֵהֵיכֶם הַרְבֵּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּנִם הַיּוֹם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב:

"The LORD your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky." (Devarim 1:10)

Nearing the end of the journey, Moshe can see the formation of Bnei Yisrael into a nation, the fruits of his labor, and also the hand to pull him through the weight of his tasks and final moments. This pasuk can be read as an abrupt reminder that during the moments when we feel our loneliest, we are surrounded by that very same Am Yisrael. We are not given burdens to carry alone. Our Ayeka moments can and must lean on the shoulders of our families and communities--especially on the darker days when we are unable to answer those questions ourselves.

Imagine if our tradition had even more blatant interruptions of validation. Rabbi Sharon Brous examines a model of this validation through a project she calls The Amen Effect. She re-envisioned the text of the *kaddish yatom* (mourners' kaddish) as an opportunity to literally interrupt the suffering of another person to affirm our very presence. She writes:

The one with a broken heart states, '*Yitgadal v'yitgadash sh'mei raba*'-- or in other words, 'I'm hurting.' and the whole community says 'Amen.'

We don't even let that person finish the first sentence before we interrupt to say 'We're here. You're not alone.'

During these moments of loss and pain, our Amens may not fill the voids, but they address the inescapable reality that our brothers and sisters are hurting and that we stand with them, even if we must stand six feet behind them. God has made Bnei Yisrael *I'rov* (plentiful) and even if we could simply just validate one person in his/her time of falling, we become light. We become extensions of tefillah.

On this Shabbat Chazon, may we be blessed to look back on our journeys of Torah, finding the moments where we and those we love have been unable to muster the physical and spiritual strength to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. May we remind those who need reminding that their very presence may be the answer to someone else's Ayeka question. And most importantly, may we constantly strive to seek blissful interruptions of validation in our lives.

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֵלֶיךָ וְנָשׁוּב [וְנִשְׁוָבָה] חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם

Take us back, God, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!



Emily Goldberg Winer was born and raised in South Florida, but moved to New York City in high school. She loves community building and sharing Torah with people from all walks of life and across generations. She currently works as the intern at Congregation Beth Shalom in Potomac, Maryland. Her most recent positions include rabbinic intern at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, visiting chaplain at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, community educator at Brandeis, and teen coordinator at the Hebrew Home of Riverdale. She completed the Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y, the Join for Justice Fellowship, and the rabbinic student fellowship at Shalom Hartman Institute. A Wexner Graduate Fellow and Master's student at Yeshiva University, Emily loves pluralism and interfaith dialogue. She has engaged in programs rooted in religious diversity, first among fellow Jews at the Bronfman Youth Fellowship and Drisha, and later across faiths at the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, Tanenbaum, and Auburn Seminary. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA with degrees in Religion and Jewish Studies. She lives in Riverdale with her husband Jonah, a student at YCT, and together they can be found petting dogs, adding puns into regular conversations, and facetimeing their friends' grandparents.