

Ha'azinu - Comparing the Instructions Regarding Moses' Death to the Account of Moses' Death
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God instructs Moses about his death (Deut. 32:48-52), but the Torah's account of what happened (Deut. 34:1-5) is slightly different. Let's compare the two accounts.

דברים לד	דברים לב	God's Instruction: Deut. 32	The Account: Deut. 34
	(מח) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לֵאמֹר.	(48) <i>God spoke to Moses on that same day, saying:</i>	
(א) וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה	(מט) עֲלֵה	(49) <i>Go up</i>	(1) <i>Moses went up</i>
מֵעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב	אֶל הַר הָעֵבְרִים הַזֶּה	<i>to the Mount of Avarim (Range), this one</i>	<i>from the Plains of Moav</i>
אֶל הַר נֹבֹ	הַר נֹבֹ	<i>Mount Nevo</i>	<i>to Mount Nevo,</i>
רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה	אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב	<i>that is in the land of Moav,</i>	<i>at the top of the summit</i>
אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי יֶרֶחוֹ	אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי יֶרֶחוֹ	<i>that faces Jericho,</i>	<i>that faces Jericho;</i>

1. Specificity. God instructs Moses to go up to a specific mountain **Har Ha'Avarim, this one, Mount Nevo**. It is as if God is pointing out the mountain to Moses saying: **This one here!** But in Deut. 34 we read that Moses goes to a specific spot on mountain: the **top of the summit**. **The instruction is general; the execution of that instruction is specific.** But something else going on here. Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts that God actually told him to go to **the summit**¹ and uses that specific term: **עֲלֵה רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְשֵׂא עֵינֶיךָ יָמָה וּצְפֹנָה וּמִיָּמִינָה וּמִצְרָחָה וּרְאֵה בְּעֵינֶיךָ כִּי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה—Go up to the top of the summit and lift up your eyes—toward the sea, toward the north, toward the south, and toward sunrise; see [it] with your eyes, for you will not cross this Jordan!** (Deut. 3:27). **Deut. 34 tells us that Moses remembered exactly what God said to him earlier, and by indicating that he did in fact go up to the summit and fulfilled that instruction precisely.** It is not lost on us that Moses dies on the top of the summit, a **fitting topographical metaphor** for the final moments of his life.

2. Going to vs. leaving from. If I tell you **to go to** a place, **I am highlighting the idea of destination and building up anticipation for arrival at the goal.** If I recount that **I left from**

a certain place, **I am highlighting departur and conveying hesitation.**

3. A Subtle Consonantal Cue. The destination is called **Har Ha-Avarim**. The departure is from **Arvot Moav**. Notice the subtle consonantal reversal: from **ע.ר.ב.** to **ב.ר.ב.** (**AVR-ARV**). **Characters in the Torah carry out God's instructions often in ways that are subtly different from what was said. This is a case in point hinted by the consonants.**

4. Parallelism. Notice that God's instruction has a little parallelism in it: **Mount Avarim(Range)-Har Nevo//Land of Moab-facing Jericho**. This is a literary way of zooming in on **Har Nevo** from the wider lens of the **Mount Avarim(Range)** and zooming in on the mountain that is directly opposite



Jericho from the wider lens of the entire **Moabean** plateau. We get the sense that while the instruction is clear and direct, the execution is arduous and quite lengthy. If we were to walk alongside Moses, which is what the text is intending us to do, we would feel the strain and see the sweat.

דברים לד	דברים לב	God's Instruction: Deut. 32	The Account: Deut. 34
וַיֵּרָאֵהוּ ה'	וּרְאֵה	<i>and see</i>	<i>and God showed him</i>
אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ	אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֶחְזָה.	<i>the land of Canaan that I am giving to the Children of Israel for a holding.</i>	<i>the whole land:</i>
אֶת הַגִּלְעָד עַד דָּן. (ב) וְאֵת כָּל נַפְתָּלִי וְאֵת אֶרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה וְאֵת כָּל אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה עַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרִי. (ג) וְאֵת הַנֶּגֶב וְאֵת הַבֶּקֶר בִּקְעַת יֶרֶחוֹ עֵיר הַתְּמָרִים עַד צֹ'ר.			<i>Gil'ad as far as Dan, and all Naftali, and the land of Efrayim and Menashe, and all the land of Yehuda, as far as the Hindmost Sea, and the Negev and the round-plain, the cleft of Jericho, the town of palms, as far as Tzo'ar.</i>

1. See vs. He showed. God's instruction to Moses makes us think that Moses is supposed to go to mountain and see the land **by himself for himself**. But when the text tells us that God **showed him the whole land** we get the sense that God is standing beside him, as it were, pointing things out. Moses is not alone. He is with God. Incidentally, God also **shows** another thing to Moses on top of a mountain (Sinai). The Tabernacle. (Exod. 26:30). At the very least, there is a homiletical connection: God **dwells** in the Land just as he **dwells** in the Tabernacle.

2. Generalities vs. Specifics. God describes the of Canaan in **generalities**. But when God shows Moses the land, we get **specific** details. **Gil'ad to Dan** is the northern region. **Ephraim-Menashe** is the plateau region in the center-north. **Judah to the Sea** is the central region. The **Negev to the plain to Jericho** is the southern region circling back to the region right opposite Nevo. In Deut. 3:27 (see above) the directions are different: west (towards the Sea), north, south, then east.

¹In Parashat Vaethanan, Moses tells the people how he pleaded to God after the hitting-the-rock-for-water incident (Num. 20:7-

13) to let him in the land, but God turned down his appeal and told him that he would see the land instead of going into it.

(ה) וימת שם משה עבד ה' בארץ מואב	(ג) וימת בהר אשר אתה עלה שמה	<i>You are to die on the mountain that you are going up,</i>	<i>So there died there Moses, the servant of God, in the land of Moav,</i>
	והאסף אל עמיו	<i>and are to be gathered to your kinspeople,</i>	
על פי ה'.	באשר מת אהרן אחיו בהר ההר ויאסף אל עמיו.	<i>as Aaron your brother died on Hill's Hill and was gathered to his kinspeople</i>	<i>at the order (mouth) of God.</i>

1. Servant of God. The Torah bestows the title on him posthumously. The only other person in the Bible that will get that title is Joshua.

2. Gathered to his people. When Moses dies, the Torah conspicuously leaves out that he was **gathered to his people**. This is a further demonstration of the uniqueness of Moses and the uniqueness of his death. He will remain differentiated from the people and his kin in death as he was in life.

3. A death unlike Aaron's. When God tells Moses that he is to die like his brother, it is a way for God to alleviate some of the mystery of death for Moses. But what happens in the end is a total surprise. Moses does not die like Aaron. Moses dies at **the order of God** literally by the **mouth of God** which the rabbis famously characterize as a kiss.²

	(נא) על אשר מעלתם בי בתוך בני ישראל במי מריבת קדש מדבר צן על אשר לא קדשתם אותי בתוך בני ישראל. (נב) כי מנגד תראה את הארץ	<i>—because you [both] broke-faith with me in the midst of the Children of Israel at the waters of Merivat Kadesh, in the Wilderness of Tzyn, because you did not treat-me-as-holy in the midst of the Children of Israel. Indeed, at a distance you shall see the land,</i>	
ושמה לא תעבר.	ושמה לא תבוא...	<i>but there you shall not enter...</i>	<i>but there you shall not cross.</i>

1. Explanation vs. No Explanation. When God instructs Moses about his death, he gives the reason (once again) why he is not letting him enter the land. But when the death is recounted, the reason Moses remains outside the land is not given. Perhaps it is not necessary. But perhaps we can read a form of pardon in this omission. Once Moses has died, the sin no longer needs to be mentioned. Death atones for all sins. Because the slate is clean, there is no need to mention his transgression anymore. There is a tinge of divine forgiveness here, and perhaps even a tinge of divine regret. It is as if by not mentioning the infraction again God is saying, *This was my decree, Moses. Early on, when you pleaded with me to let you in the land I asked you not to bring it up with me again (Deut. 3:23-26). Now that you have died, I will no longer bring it up either.*

2. Entering vs. Crossing. Here is a very subtle subtlety. **תבוא** means *you shall enter*. But there is also one instance in a text just a couple of chapters ago where **תבוא** means *bring*. Moses declares before the entire



people that Joshua will lead them into the promised land: **כי אתה תבוא את העם הזה אל הארץ אשר נשבע ה' לאבותם לתת להם ואתה תנחילנה אותם- Be strong and courageous, for you yourself will enter with this people the land about which God swore to your fathers, to give them; you yourself will allot-it-as-inheritance to them** (Deut. 31:7). When God says to Moses **וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תָבֹא**-*you will not enter there* it is shorthand for *you will not enter with the people*. You are not going to lead them into the land. But **וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר**-*you will not cross* is personal. In other words, the instructions related to his role as a leader, but the account of his death relates to him personally. There are many subtle differences between the two passages. When we examine them, an entire story emerges filled with pathos, character, and a deep sense of appreciation for the way the Torah invites us into a conversation about what happened on the summit. **Shabbat Shalom.**

In memory of Adrian Daulby and Melvin Kravitz z'l, murdered by a terrorist in Manchester, England Yom Kippur.



We mark 729 days for the hostages. We pray for their return and an end to the war. May God shield Israel, protect the IDF, heal the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and spare innocents from suffering.

² רצחת נשמתו בגשיקה. *His soul left with a kiss.* Tan. Vaethanan 6:1