



Moses wants so much to enter the Land of Israel, but God has banned him because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it, back when the Israelites were complaining to

Moses that they were dying of thirst. While Moses' violent act unleashed a torrent of water, it also resulted in a slight breach in his relationship with God. As we join Moses' grand valedictory at the edge of the Jordan, already in progress, we hear how he recalls the events. He takes us into the realm of his relationship with God and describes what happened:

וְאֶתְחַנֵּן אֶל ה' בַּעַת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר...אֶעֱפְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ  
 הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה וְהַלְבֵּנִן. (דב' ג:כג-כה)

*And I pleaded with God at that time, saying: My Lord God, you yourself have started to let your servant see your greatness and your strong hand, that who is a god in heaven and on earth that can do according to your deeds and according to your power! Pray let me cross over that I may see the good land that is in [the country] across the Jordan, these good highlands, and the Lebanon! (Deut. 3:23-25)*

But God responded angrily at Moses:

רַב לָךְ אֵל תּוֹסֵף דִּבֵּר אֵלַי עוֹד בְּדִבְרֵי הַזֶּה. עַל־הָרֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְשָׂא  
 עֵינֶיךָ יָמָּה וְצִפְנָה וְתִימְנָה וּמִזְרְחָהּ וְרָאֵה בְּעֵינֶיךָ כִּי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת  
 הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה. וְצֹו אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְסִזְקֵהוּ וְאִמְצֵהוּ כִּי הוּא יַעֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם  
 הַזֶּה וְהוּא יַנְחִיל אוֹתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה.

*Enough for you! Do not speak to me any more again about this matter! Go up to the top of the Pisga [Range] 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! But command Joshua; make-him-strong, make-him-courageous, for he will cross over before this people, and he will cause them to inherit the land that you see.*

Moses wants to go into the land and see it. God adamantly denies that request but offers him a consolation: *you can see the land but only from the vista on top of the summit opposite it. You can extend your gaze in all directions. You can take in as much of the land as you can see, but you will not be crossing the boundary line, the Jordan, to enter it.* Tourists who have visited Jordan recount the extraordinary view from the summit where Moses was to take this look at the land. But even on a clear day it is hard to make out the topography. Moses would not have seen much other than the north end of the Dead Sea and not much beyond the top of the Judean plateau. Perhaps God gave him a high altitude view! When God himself finally



shows Moses the land at the end of the book, in the last moments of his life, the land is described in elaborate terms, reiterating of course, that he will not be going there:

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מֵעֵרֶב מוֹאָב אֶל הָר נֶבֹו רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי יְרֵחוֹ  
 וַיִּרְאֶהוּ יְהוָה אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֶת הַגִּלְעָד עַד דָּן. וְאֶת כָּל נַפְתָּלִי וְאֶת  
 אֶרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה עַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרֹן. וְאֶת הַנֶּגֶב  
 וְאֶת הַכְּכַר בִּקְעַת יְרֵחוֹ עִיר הַתְּמָרִים עַד צֹעַר. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו זֹאת  
 הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לֵיכָחֵק וּלְיִצְחָק לֵאמֹר לְיִרְעָה אֶתְנֶנָּה  
 לְרֵאשִׁיתֶיךָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְשָׂמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר. (דב' לד:א-ד)

*Moses went up from the Plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, at the top of the Pisga [Range] that faces Jericho; and God showed him all the land: 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. And God said to him: This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying: To your seed I give it! I have let you see it with your eyes, but there you shall not cross. (Deut. 34:1-4)*

Would have been so bad if Moses went into the land? Why does God have to be so harsh here? What in the end, is the difference between *seeing the land* from afar and *crossing over into the land on foot* and seeing it while situated in it?

**1. Moses vs. Abraham.** When God first guides Abraham to the land, Abraham sets foot in it and builds altars. Abraham descends to Egypt, returns, and separates from Lot. It is at that point that God tells Abraham to look at the land. Sound familiar? God says to Abraham (Gen. 13:14-16):

שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מִן הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אִתָּה שְׂפֵנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְקִדְמָה  
 וְיָמָּה. כִּי אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִתָּה רָאֵה לְךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה וּלְיִרְעָה עַד  
 עוֹלָם. וְשָׂמַתִּי אֶת יִרְעָה כְּעַפְרָה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִם יוֹכֵל אִישׁ לִמְנוֹת אֶת  
 עֲפֶר הָאָרֶץ גַּם יִרְעָה יָמָּה.

*God said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him: Pray lift up your eyes and see from the place where you are, to the north, to the Negev, to the east, to the Sea: indeed, all the land that you see, I give it to you and to your seed, for the ages. I will make your seed like the dust of the earth, so that if a man were able to measure the dust of the earth, so too could your seed be measured.*

Like Moses, Abraham was also told to gaze in different directions. Just slightly before this (Gen. 13:4) we learn that Abraham is situated *at the place of his first altar* which would have been in the vicinity of Elon Moreh, near Shechem (see Gen. 12:6). So, while Moses was to gaze primarily westward, and then northward, Abraham was instructed to gaze first to the north and then to the south. But here is the subtle difference. Just after God tells Abraham to look at the land, he adds this instruction:

קוּם וְהִתְהַלֵּךְ בָּאָרֶץ לְאָרְכָּהּ וּלְרֵחְבָּהּ כִּי לְךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה. (בר' יג:יז)

*Arise, walk about through the land in its length and in its breadth, for I give it to you! (Gen. 13:17)*

Nahum Sarna's comment on this verse is instructive:

*Early Jewish exegesis understood this traversing of the length and breadth of the land to be a symbolic act constituting a mode of legal acquisition termed hazakah in rabbinic Hebrew...The existence of this practice in one form or another is attested over a wide area of the ancient world. In both the Egyptian and Hittite spheres, the king had to undertake a periodic ceremonial walk around a field or a tour of his realm in order to symbolize the renewal of his sovereignty over the land...Nahum Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis p. 100.*

Moses cannot traverse the land, even in a minimal, symbolic conciliatory way, *because doing could contest God's promise to Abraham*. Keeping Moses from entering the land removes the possibility of any ambiguity regarding title. A summary comparison:

| Moses at Mount Nebo                                                                                                    | Abraham near Shechem                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| West, North, South, East.                                                                                              | North, South, East, West.                                                                                                                                       |
| Restricted movement: he cannot move forward toward the land.<br>As a punishment for his lack of loyalty.               | Commanded movement: he traverses the full length and breadth of the land.<br>As a reward for his loyalty. <sup>1</sup>                                          |
| By not entering the land, God eliminates any rival claim of title.                                                     | By walking the length and breadth of the land, Abraham's demonstrates title.                                                                                    |
| He dies following this moment.                                                                                         | He goes on to live for ~100 years.                                                                                                                              |
| Unlike Abraham, Moses is the archetypal Prophet. He leads, prods, communicates, intercedes between God and the people. | Unlike Moses, Abraham is the archetypal Patriarch. He is obedient, faces tests, has a family, and sets in motion the generational transmission of the Covenant. |

**2. Time and Space.** Like all human beings, Moses would eventually be gathered to his kin. His death outside the land allows the people to mourn him and then transition to a new era. If he died after entering the land, it would have complicated the conquest. When he died, they mourned for thirty days, in a space and time "zone" outside of the land. and most importantly, those days ended. Only then could they take up the challenge of the conquest.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Magic, Myth, and Idolatry.

Keeping Moses outside the land diminishes any possibility of attributing magical life-giving or life-sustaining qualities to the land. To be sure, the land is uniquely blessed, but it confers its blessings to its inhabi-



<sup>1</sup>Regarding the loyalty of Moses (and Aaron) it says, **וְעַן לֹא בִי הָאֲמֵנָתִים**-Because you were not **loyal** to me...therefore: you [two] shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them! (Num. 20:12). Regarding Abraham: **וְהָאֵם** **וְיִחְשְׁבָהּ לוֹ צְדָקָה**-And he was **loyal** to God, who reckoned it to his merit (Gen. 15:6).

<sup>2</sup> See Deut. 34:8, and Josh. 1:2.

<sup>3</sup> The shrinification of graves is an old phenomenon, but lately, pilgrimages to them are gaining in popularity. Over the

tants not because it has any inherent magical properties but because God is attentive to it. The death and burial of Moses outside the land meant that no tribe could claim his burial place. Moreover, it meant that there would never be a shrine erected over it.<sup>3</sup>

**4. The Deeper Message.** Moses' life is enclosed by two rivers: the Nile and the Jordan. Found in the Nile, he is raised in Pharaoh's palace and goes into exile after committing an act of manslaughter. He returns to redeem the people, traverses the Sea of Reeds, but is destined to remain outside the land, in a state of permanent exile. *The redeemer remains eternally unredeemed*. Leaders are tempted to see themselves as indispensable, but redemption is never complete. Even a Moses must exit the stage. The Exodus required one type of leader, and the Conquest would require another.

**A Speculation.** The image of Moses overlooking the land of Israel captivates the imagination. It is, in the very technical sense of the term, *a colossal image*. The Statue of Liberty intentionally gazes at the entrance to the New York harbor, welcoming the *huddled masses yearning to breathe free*. A seated Abraham Lincoln gazes out at the Capitol to signal a message of reconciliation to a fractured nation. Moses could never be depicted as a colossus, like the Statue of Liberty or Lincoln or others.<sup>4</sup> Nor would any



Israelite or Jew every sculpted one out of fear of creating an idol for worship. However, an abstract image of Moses standing on the summit is

fixed in our imaginations. And to where is he fixing his gaze? To the land. Though his *grave* is unknown, the last enduring image of his life is *engraved* in our imaginations. He is looking at the land, not as a patriarch, but as a prophet and later as a teacher. His job is never finished. And we are still in the process of becoming the nation that he envisioned. Shabbat Shalom!



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last few decades, hundreds of thousands arrive annually at the grave of R. Shimon bar Yohai at Mt. Meron on Lag Ba'Omer. Tens of thousands of hasidim now make an annual pilgrimage to Uman in Ukraine to celebrate Rosh Hashanah at the grave of R. Nahman of Bratzlav. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's grave draws approximately 1 million visitors a year.

<sup>4</sup> *Motherland Calls*, (Volgograd, Russia), *Buddha Ushiku Daibutsu* (Ushiku, Japan) (pictured above left to right) and more.