

Envisioning the Promised Land

Sara R. Horowitz

Even hailstones glisten when you're glad of heart. So I cannot lay it to coincidence that—on the day before my wedding—I read the Shabbat Torah portion as a love story.

Va-et'chanan (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11) recounts the exhortation that Moses delivers to the Israelites reiterating the terms of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Moses outlines what God expects from the nation, and what God offers in return. Underwriting this set of mutual obligations is a pervasive sense of intimacy between the parties, an underlying love of each for the other. An uncanny air of mystery renders God at once unknowable and familiar.

A bride's predisposition notwithstanding, I was hardly the first to see in the relationship between God and Israel the dimensions of human love. Both the dire castigations and the sweet comfort of the later prophets turn on such a metaphor. In *Va-et'chanan* we come upon God and Israel in the midst of a long and rocky desert courtship. Here, the two parties come to realize that each has gotten more than each had bargained for in the other. Israel is fickle, flighty, and unstable; God is jealous and a perfectionist. Both can be irrational, impatient, and insecure. In other words, neither meets the other's ideal vision of a partner. And yet they come to realize how well suited they are for each other, and they hammer out a covenantal commitment.

But for some reason, what pulled at my thoughts on the week's Torah reading were its opening verses, seemingly disconnected from the story of covenant and love that follows. These narrative lines at the tail end of

chapter 3 are left over from the previous week's summation of the Israelites' desert wandering. They have a sober, dour tone. Moses tells the Israelites how he pleaded (*va-et'chanan*) with God to permit him to enter the promised land, and how God denied this heartfelt request in terms that brooked no appeal. *Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!* (DEUT. 3:26) Instead, God sends Moses to climb the peak of Mount Pisgah, instructing him to "gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east" at the landscape that lay tantalizingly across the Jordan river. *Look at it well*, God tells his longing servant, *for you shall not go across.* (DEUT. 3:27)

These verses that begin the week's reading struck me not as disconnected from the larger motif of *Va-et'chanan*, but as a subplot designed to throw into sharper relief the love story of the central narrative. For the sad story of Moses's unfulfilled yearning for the promised land also tells a kind of love story. From afar, Moses can see his heart's desire, but he is never united with the object of his love.

And it is Moses, the unrequited lover, rather than God and Israel, the betrothed couple, upon whom I chose to pause, perhaps because Moses was destined to go to his grave longing for his heart's desire just when I was united with mine. So I revisited Moses, in the twilight of his life, as he learned that he might see, but never reach, the promised land.

Poignantly, Moses beseeches God: *Let me cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.*

But the text makes abundantly clear that Moses is not to fulfill his desire for this land. In the space of four verses, the verb "to see" is repeated three times, to emphasize that Moses will gaze upon but not actually cross over into this land. Worse yet, he is told that Joshua, his successor, will be the one to conquer and enter the beloved land that Moses can only pine for from afar.

Let's reconsider Moses on the mountaintop, and think for a moment about what it means to see—to see anything, but in particular, to see one's heart's desire, one's beloved. What are the dynamics of seeing?

Ancient philosophers believed that sight occurred because our eyes emitted rays of light and then collected their reflections (a concept not so dissimilar to the way radar and sonar work). This ancient understanding

of the dynamics of sight construes seeing not as a passive act—in which the eye simply discerns what is out there—but as an active process, shooting out beams, gathering them in. We see not because there is an object out in the world, not because there is light by which to see this object, but because our emanation touches that which we choose to see.

This early model of sight has long been superseded by scientific understanding of photons and their effect on the retina. But on the level of metaphor, it still rings true, still offers us some insight into how we see what we see. There are many objects out in the world, many individual components to a landscape or seascape or street scene. But if you were to close your eyes and try to recollect a familiar sight—the street where you live, the building where you work, your closest friend's living room—you would find that you can only reconstruct it partially and imperfectly. Had you the skills to draw your recollection, and were you then to compare your sketch with the original scene, you would find much missing in your representation. In other words, we don't so much see what's out there, we see what strikes us—because we love it, or hate it, or find it beautiful, or useful, or comforting, or disturbing. We see what we see, then, as much because of what is inside us as because of what is out there to be seen. So in a photo we pick the face of a loved one out of a group, or in a crowded airport we pick his face out of all the others, who are waiting for the faces whom *they* will see. And the moment we spot the face we seek, all other faces fade away.

When we look at a face that we love, a house we love, a landscape we love, we don't see it as we see other faces or houses or landscapes. We don't measure it by conventional aesthetic standards. Instead, it is beautiful to us because we love it—or him, or her. Every facet that confirms that this is, indeed, the beloved, adds to its beauty. For example, my father had a small, hard, raised black spot on the palm of his hand. It wasn't a mole, but some sort of old scar. When I was a little girl, I would often touch it when I held his hand. I felt reassured by the thought that in a room of look alike daddies, I would always know mine by this spot on his palm. So I loved the spot, which objectively was a blemish and not at all a thing of beauty, because it was connected with the essence of my father's daddy-hood.

That's how it is when we look at what we love—we see beauty in the vision. Or to put it another way, we see our love in it (or him, or her), and

our love is reflected back to us, as the ancients believed we saw the light from our eyes reflected back. You might say, then, that our love creates the vision we see, the vision of the beloved.

And here is Moses atop a desert mountain, looking for the promised land, looking for his heart's desire. He asks God, *Let me cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.* Other people might describe that harsh desertscape differently. We know that of the twelve Israelite spies sent to scout out the promised land, two came back with glowing descriptions while the other ten spoke of it forbiddingly. But Moses sees with loving eyes. Indeed, even before God places him atop the mountain, Moses already knows that what he will see is good—the good land...that good hill country.

You might say that Moses' desire for this land makes it beautiful—that his love for the promised land makes it into a promised land, and not simply a patch of green, a jagged bit of brown, a cluster of craggy hills. Because Moses loves the land, there exists a promised land for Joshua and Israel to enter. So unlike a barren, unrequited love that ends in nothing, Moses's love for the land bears fruit. It has not only a history but a future.

Something else is suggested by the idea of vision as light rays emanating from our eyes. Whether what we gaze upon is close at hand or far away, there is a kind of touching that happens when we look. The light beams reach out from us and hit the beloved object, caress it, if you will, and then return to us, like a kiss, but with light rather than lips.

When we admire a landscape, when we are awed by its beauty, we are always looking from outside that landscape. Try to enter into it, to be part of it, and the vision disappears. This is part of the poignance of beauty. From the mountain we admire the valley, with its deep fields and meandering river. From the valley, we admire the mountain, its lofty green, its craggy heights. Something in the nature of beauty and vision, then, always carries a trace of the unattained and unrequited, paradoxically brought near and yet kept far through the act of seeing.

Moses stands atop the mountain. He sees the promised land. In seeing it, he makes it into the promised land. Always kept afar, Moses is yet not cruelly

separated from that which he loves. On the contrary. As he fills his sight with it, and takes it inside him, he possesses it.

Has God really dealt so cruelly with his faithful servant, as to deny him the one thing that he most desires? Moses beseeches God to allow him to cross into the promised land and to see it. But God's denial indicates that precisely in order to truly see the promised land, to see it as promised, as beloved, one must remain in some sense outside. Then the gaze of the lover takes in the loved one, takes in their separate existence in order to bring the loved one inside, to finally be one with the desired one.

To Joshua, then, will remain the mundane tasks of conquest and settlement. But as for Moses, transfixed in the vision of the promised land, Moses knows the beloved.



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