



Living In Between

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Homeless in life, Moshe is fated to remain without a home even in death.

That, perhaps, is the most difficult part of God's decree: not that Moshe must die, a fate that all human beings share. Not that he must die outside of the Land: Ya'akov and Yosef also died far from Israel.

What is most difficult about Moshe's death is that, even in death, he cannot go home.

In two different places, God gives Moshe almost the same instruction: in Parashat Ha'azinu "וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תָבֹא" - and there you shall not come" and in Parashat VeZot HaBerakhah "וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר" - and there you shall not cross over." The Yalkut Shimoni¹ wonders: why would God give these two seemingly identical instructions?

ילקוט שמעוני על התורה תתקמ"ט

אמר משה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא אם איני נכנס בזה מלך אכנס בזה הדיוט, אם אין אני נכנס בזה חי אכנס בזה מת, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תָבֹא "וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר" לא מלך ולא הדיוט לא חי ולא

¹ Derived from Sifrei Devarim #357.



Yalkut Shimoni on the Torah #949

Moshe said before the Holy Blessed One, “If I cannot enter it as a ruler, let me enter it as a commoner. If I cannot enter it alive, let me enter it dead.” The Holy Blessed One said to him, “‘And there you shall not come’ and ‘there you shall not pass’—not as a king and not as a commoner, not alive and not dead.”

Unlike Ya’akov, who was taken to the Land by his sons, and Yosef, whose bones Moshe himself took with him out of Egypt, Moshe is buried outside of the Land, his grave’s location unknown.

Why is Moshe denied burial in the Land? A *midrash* in Devarim Rabbah suggests that Moshe is denied burial in the Land because he failed to acknowledge himself to be of the Land:

דברים רבה ב:ח

אמר רבי לוי אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם עצמותיו של יוסף נכנסו לארץ, ואני איני נכנס לארץ. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא מי שהודה בארצו נקבר בארצו ומי שלא הודה בארצו אינו נקבר בארצו, יוסף הודה בארצו, מנין, גברתו אומרת (בראשית לט, יד): ראו הביא לנו איש עברי וגו' ולא כפר, אלא (בראשית מ, טו): גנב גנבתי מארץ העברים... את שלא הודית בארצך אין אתה נקבר בארצך, כיצד בנות יתרו אומרות (שמות ב, יט): איש מצרי הצילנו מיד הרעים, והוא שומע ושותק, לפיכך לא נקבר בארצו.

Devarim Rabbah 2:8

Said R. Levi: [Moshe] said before the Master of the World, “The bones of Yosef entered the Land, but I can’t enter the Land!?” The Holy Blessed One said to him, “One who acknowledges his land is buried in his land, but one who does not acknowledge his land is not buried in his land.” From where do we know that Yosef acknowledges his Land? His mistress (Potiphar’s wife) says, “See, bring us the Hebrew man” (Bereishit 39:14)—and he did not deny it, rather [he said] “I was stolen from the Land of the Hebrews” (40:15)...

[God continues:] “But you who did not acknowledge your land, you will not be buried in your land.” What do the daughters of Yitro say? “An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds” (Shemot 2:19)—and he hears and remains silent. Therefore, he was not buried in his land.

Devarim Rabbah is most likely condemning Moshe’s insufficient commitment to identifying as a Jew, suggesting that he was not buried in the Land as a punishment for his disloyalty. But it is also possible to read the *midrash* differently, not as a condemnation but as a statement of fact about Moshe, one that explains why he cannot be buried in his homeland. The Land in the Torah is a place of belonging, of firm identity. Moshe, however, is a man who never belonged.

Moshe has always existed between worlds. He is the son of two mothers, one an Egyptian princess, the other, a Jewish slave. While Moshe chooses his Jewish identity over his Egyptian one, he carries pieces of his Egyptian mother to the end of his life, most notably in the name she gave him—a name, the Netziv notes, that in Egyptian means “child of” or “born of.”²

Moshe with his Egyptian name was brought up with two languages, and his mastery of either or both of Hebrew or Egyptian is questionable. When God appears to Moshe at the burning bush and commands him to go to Pharaoh, Moshe objects that he cannot go because he is “heavy of speech.” The Rashbam, rejecting the common interpretation that Moshe has a stutter, claims that Moshe means that he is no longer fluent in Egyptian because he has lived away from Egypt for so long.³ According to the Rashbam, then, he is not fully comfortable in Egyptian society.

² R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Russia, 1816-1893), in his comments in Ha’amek Davar to Shemot 2:10.

³ R. Shmuel ben Meir (France, c. 1085-1158), in his comments to Shemot 4:10.



But it is also possible that it is not his ability to speak to Pharaoh in Egyptian that concerns Moshe, but his ability to speak to the Jewish people in Hebrew.⁴ Moshe, after all, spent more of his formative years in Pharaoh's palace than in his Jewish mother's home.

Moshe's objection that he is not a man of speech comes in the context of his extended argument to God that the Jewish people will not believe him. Maybe even at the bush, so many years later, Moshe remembers how Yitro's daughters identified him when they saw him: as an Egyptian man. Perhaps Moshe is afraid that when he returns to Egypt the Jewish people, hearing his accent and remembering his background, will consider him too foreign, too Egyptian, to trust him as a prophet. He is afraid that, being of two worlds, he no longer belongs in either.

Later, according to the Midrash Tanhuma, God will utter the first of the Ten Commandments in a way that affirms that Moshe's Egyptian upbringing does not make him any less part of the Jewish people. The first word that God spoke in the Aseret ha-Dib'rot is "א" —not the more common Hebrew *ani*, but the rarer form *anokhi*. This unusual word choice is explained by the Midrash Tanhuma because *anokhi* is actually also "א" in Egyptian, not just in Hebrew:⁵

מדרש תנחומא (בובר) יתרו טז

אמר ר' נחמיה מהו אנכי לשון מצרי הוא, למה הדבר דומה, למלך שנשבה בנו, ועשה ימים רבים עם השבאים, למד סיחתן של אותן השבאים, כשעשה נקמה באויביו והביאו ובא להסיח עמו בלשונם, ולא היה יודע, מה עשה, התחיל לספר עמו בלשון השבאים, כך עשה הקב"ה עם ישראל, כל אותן השנים שהיו ישראל במצרים, למדו סיחתן של מצרים, כשגאלן הקב"ה בא ליתן להם את התורה, לא היו יודעים

⁴ Sigmund Freud makes this point in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939): "It may recall, slightly distorted, the fact that Moses spoke another language and could not communicate with his Semitic neo-Egyptians without an interpreter, at all events at the beginning of their relations—a fresh confirmation, then, of the thesis that Moses was an Egyptian." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, p. 4683.

⁵ The Egyptian language the midrashic authors would have been familiar with is Coptic, in which the word for "א" is *anokh*. See Rivka Ulmer, "Some Remarks on the Egyptian Language (Coptic) in Rabbinic Texts," in Lieve M. Teugels and Rivka Ulmer (eds.), *Interpretation, Religion and Culture in Midrash and Beyond* (2008), p. 82.



לשמוע, אמר הקב"ה הריני מסיח עמהם בלשון מצרי, אנוך, אדם שהוא מבקש לומר לחבירו במצרים אני, הוא אומר אנוך, כך פתח הקב"ה בלשונם ואמר אנכי.

Midrash Tanhuma (Buber) Yitro 16

R. Nehemiah said: What is *anokhi* [as opposed to *ani*]? It is Egyptian. To what is the matter similar? To a king whose son was captured and spent much time with his captors and learned their language. When he conquered his enemies [and brought back his son] he attempted to speak with him in his language, but [the son] didn't understand. What did he do? He began to speak to him in the language of the captors. So the Holy Blessed One did with Israel. All of the years that Israel were in Egypt, they learned the language of Egypt. When God redeemed them and came to give them the Torah, they couldn't understand it. God said, I will speak to them in Egyptian, *anokh*. As one who wants to say "I" to his friend in Egyptian says, *anokh*. So too God began His speech with saying, *Anokhi*.

While the son in the *midrash's* analogy represents the Jewish people, it can also be applied to Moshe himself. Moshe is a Jewish child raised abroad and then returned to the Jewish people. In speaking the first word of the Aseret ha-Dib'rot in Egyptian, Moshe's native language, God is signalling to Moshe that his in-betweenness does not exclude him from God's service. It is exactly the ways in which Moshe belongs to two worlds, to two mothers, to two languages that allow him to serve God and the Jewish people. Moshe, as a man in-between, is uniquely positioned to redeem a people, to help them traverse the no-man's land between Egypt and Canaan, and ultimately cross the boundaries between heaven and earth.

When God refuses to allow Moshe to be buried in the Land, God is not punishing Moshe for not identifying himself as a Jew. Instead, God is affirming the way that Moshe is—and must be—a man between worlds. God does not want Moshe to become, in death, a man of firm identity.



Instead, God wants Moshe to remain in the space of the in-between: not as a punishment, but because that is exactly where Moshe belongs.

Rabbeinu Behaye, commenting on Moshe's burial outside the Land, suggest that Moshe is buried outside of Israel as "a consolation for all the many hundreds of generations of Jews throughout the Diaspora who died and were buried in exile."⁶ While Rabbeinu Behaye means this literally, we might also read his words as a form of commentary on the in-betweenness of diaspora identity. To be a Jew who is born in and dies in the Diaspora is to be, like Moshe, a person of the in-between. It is to read our Jewish texts with a foreign accent, to occasionally mix in words from our Diaspora language as we speak words of Torah. It is, sometimes, to feel like we have two mothers and, on the worst days, to feel like we are not enough of any one thing to properly belong to either.

But Moshe's life teaches us that to be a person of the in-between also offers possibility. Sometimes the foreign word is that we need to unlock new Torah. Sometimes the halting voice and accent are necessary to move a stuck people forward.

When God tells Moshe that he will be buried outside the Land, he reminds not just Moshe, but the generations of Jews who come after him: sometimes the in-between is exactly where Judaism needs you to be.

⁶ R. Behaye ben Asher (Spain, 1255-1340), in his comments to Devarim 3:27.

