

Va'etchanan is the first parashah after Tisha B'av, the time when we begin to move from mourning to comfort, and we set our sights on the High Holidays, the season of renewal. The haftarah, in Isaiah, is the first of seven prophecies of consolation. So I was struck this year by the fact that, as we turn from mourning, this parashah opens with the explicit anticipation of another loss: the people losing Moshe as their leader, and Moshe's loss of his miraculous intercessory power.

The parasha opens with Moshe pleading with Hashem to be allowed to enter the promised land, "Va'etchanan" means, "and I begged for grace."

It opens, Deut. 3:23-28:

I pleaded with Hashem at that time, saying,

"O Hashem GOD, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon."

But Hashem was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. Hashem said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!

Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan.

Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see."

There is a brief midrash in Devarim Rabbah 2 that I find very telling. It compares Moshe to a beloved of a king, who for years gets whatever he demands – servants and appointments. After some time, this person is seen begging for admission at the palace gates. People ask, can this be the same person who had all of these privileges, now begging for entry? And the answer is simply, "his time has passed."

So, too, Moshe at one time could command miracles, the midrash says, noting phrases in which it seems that Moshe is commanding God, “Arise, O Hashem,” and “Return, O Hashem.” “Pardon this people.” But now in Devarim, 3:23, Moshe is begging for grace, and being denied his request. So too, his time has passed.

The time in our year cycle when we begin to move out destruction towards redemption, towards the renewal of our relationship with Hashem, coincides with the moment in Torah when we read about our leader losing his miraculous intercessory powers. And I think this might not be coincidental.

Perhaps as a people, in order to move through grief and towards renewal we need, more than a miraculous leader who can intercede whenever necessary, to know that we collectively are responsible for our relationship with the Divine and with each other. Perhaps the comfort that the prophet promises is not the childish comfort of knowing that someone will take care of us and clean up our messes, but the comfort of knowing that we are in relationship through the long haul, and that we have the strength and resources to take responsibility for our own communal well-being. And perhaps we cannot do that as long as we are expecting Moshe – or any other miraculous leader – to produce miracles for us.

So then, too now. Perhaps the comfort we need in difficult times is not the comfort of hoping that some great leader will come to rescue us, but the comfort of knowing our own responsibility and ability to respond to the demands of the moment. There is no one better than us to rebuilt broken relationships. There is no one better than us to strive for a higher vision. As the poet June Jordan says, “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”