

## Parashat Vayelech: Savta, Rumi, and Coming Home

Dear Friends,

A special Shabbat awaits us, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana, in which the moon is “covered” (kesse), and Yom Kippur, the 10th (asor) of Tishre. Hence, this period of time is called in Hebrew, “bein kesse l’asor”, and this Shabbat is called “Shabbat Shuva” because it is during the 10 days of T’shuva.

In this week’s parasha, Vayelech, Moshe is exactly 120 years old. It is both his birthday and the day of his parting. He has a few more hours of urgent preparations before his death, in which to pass the mantle of leadership over to Yehoshua, to climb the mountain behind him, lay on the rock there, and be taken with God’ final kiss.

It is a very short parasha - only one chapter. But it is enough. Sometimes less is more.

A motif which Moshe returns to over and over again in the parasha is the promise to the People and to Yehoshua that God will always go before them.

**“The LORD your God Himself will cross over before you; and He Himself will wipe out those nations from your path...Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them; for the LORD your God Himself marches with you: He will not fail you or forsake you.”** (D’varim 31:3,6)

But then, after many long chapters in which we read only Moshe’s parting speeches, God interrupts Moshe’s beautiful words about God’s presence, and says: **“You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them.”** (D’varim 31:16)

Poor Moshe! Forty years of wilderness miracles and education are going down the drain.

My grandmother, z”l, also tried very hard to help me make God’s acquaintance. She insisted that He existed. She failed at it miserably. I “proved” to her with my great argumentative skills that He didn’t.

Surprisingly, the one who helped me find Him, finally, somewhere in my 20s, was the Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, who lived in Turkey in the 13th century.

Our meeting took place at a very unlikely time and place: it was the third year of my bacheloriolate studies in Islam, Arabic, and Middle Eastern history. In the background, the first Gulf war. Wherever we went, we ran for cover when the sirens went off, quickly putting on our gas masks, that were otherwise strapped on our shoulders. Quite a dramatic backdrop for this formative engagement.

I will never forget that day. It changed my life forever. From that day God walks before me and I follow.

Yet, as formative as this experience may have been, I still lose Him sometimes. I simply can't see Him. I don't feel Him and I can't remember what it felt like to know Him and be at one with Him. This is a terrible sensation.

That too is echoed harshly in our Parasha: **“Then... I [too] will abandon them, and I will conceal my presence from them... [furthermore], I will hide My own concealment on that day...”** (31:17-18)

In the original Hebrew, there is a repetition of the word “hid” - הסתר אסתיר. This repetition is cruel. Rabbi Nachman explains it thus: Not only will you no longer see Me, but you won't even know that there is something you are not seeing. Just imagine, what you are seeing is all there is, and that there is nothing beyond it. You will walk like blind people in the world.

Does this sound familiar?

The Israeli singer-songwriter Meir Ariel expressed this duplication very precisely in his song “Neshel Nachash” (based on the words of Reish Lakish in the Jerusalem Talmud): “[If] you will leave Him for one day, He will leave you for two.”

The fierce arguments between my grandmother and myself in her modest Jerusalem kitchen always centered on this topic of seeing and not seeing, and of God's concealment. “Savta,” I would challenge her cruelly, “How can you believe in this nonsense! What God?? Really? You are an intelligent woman! Look!!! There is no God, Savta! It's an invention of primitive people, those poor souls who lived before our blessed age of science! You'll see, Savta, a day will come when science will explain everything and answer all of our questions...”

How naive I was! How arrogant.

Today I realize that the cruelty of my words was not directed at her. She just looked at me lovingly (we loved each other very much), smiled, and said: “One day you will see.” No, the cruelty was directed at myself. I could not see then that there are other layers to existence. I could not comprehend that we can only see the very tip of the iceberg we call reality, and always will. So much is concealed.

It took me many years to understand that I must not rely on what is visible. Because even when our eyes tell us (accurately) that there is nothing there, nothing beyond the surface of reality, our heart and our body knows that there is.

Alas, we all follow and trust our eyes, and because God cannot be seen, we stray.

God cannot be known intellectually, scientifically, or with our senses. Arguing His existence is useless; a terrible waste of time. While an intellectual conversation may open our vision somewhat, it can only take us so far. At some point one must abandon that intellectual path and move to another - one that delves deeply into the essence of everything.

Because the Divine - i.e., the deep essence underlying all things - can be experienced, not seen, not intellectualized and not proven.

Moshe understands this at the very end of our Parasha. He realizes that words won't do the job. He has just a few more hours to live. In a final, desperate attempt, the grandfather, Moshe, tries to instill in his grandchildren an inner compass which will show them the way once he is gone.

He shifts from talking to singing. This song or poem comes from the heart and enters the heart. The last verse of Parashat Vayelech is the preamble to the powerful song which we will read in the next parasha: **“Then Moses recited the words of this poem to completion, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel:”** (31:30)

**To completion** - not the completion of the song, because Divine song never ends.

**To completion** - until Bnei Yisrael were complete and whole enough to see the infinite layers of existence. To understand that what is immediately visible is only superficial, and that it is always just the tip of the iceberg which is reality.

I still lose God at moments in which I am captivated by what I see and jailed by my own intellect. When my heart resists the words of the Torah I often return to Rumi's poetry (without the gas mask on my shoulder) and those words help me find my way back home.

They remind me that indeed, God's presence walks before us, above us, under us, behind us, inside us...

In truth,  
everyone is a shadow of the Beloved  
Our seeking is His seeking,  
Our words are His words.  
At times we flow toward the Beloved  
like a dancing stream.  
At times we are still water  
held in His pitcher.  
At times we boil in a pot  
turning to vapor  
– that is the job of the Beloved....  
We search for Him here and there  
while looking right at Him.

Sitting by His side we ask,  
"O Beloved, where is the Beloved?"  
Enough with such questions!  
Let silence take you to the core of life.  
All your talk is worthless  
When compared to one whisper  
of the Beloved.

- Rumi

Shabbat Shalom, Shana Tova and Gmar Chatima Tova.

Elisha