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Finding Solace Through Introspection

Yitz Landes ('05) | BronfmanTorah | V'Etchanan 2017

Yitz Landes ('05) is a Ph.D. student in Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity at Princeton University. He lives in Princeton with his wife Daphi and their son Shai.

With the annual period of mourning now behind us, having culminated this week with the 9th of Av, we begin to prepare for the month of *Elul*. *Elul* is not a time of mourning but one of personal introspection that leads up to the High Holidays. From collective mourning to individual introspection and repentance – that is the shift that the Jewish calendar calls on us to make during these weeks. And in learning how to make this shift, we read from *Devarim*, the last and most personal book of the Torah, following Moses as he himself goes through a process of introspection and reflects on the years he spent leading the People of Israel.

Having arrived at the border of the Land of Canaan, Moses, at the start of our *parsha*, asks God once more for permission to enter:

"And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, 'My Master, LORD, You Yourself have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand,

for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth who could do like Your deeds and like Your might? Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country and the Lebanon” (Deut. 3.23-26; [Alter Translation](#)).

Tragically, Moses’ request is denied. Instead of letting Moses enter the Land, God only lets him look from afar by going up to Mount Nebo, an act which is described at the end of the book of *Devarim*.

Thus, on the first *Shabbat* after the 9th of *Av* we read of Moses’ attempt at *tshuva* (repentance), and, at the end of the holiday season, on *Simchat Torah*, we read of its failure. What are we to make of this paradigm? As we begin our own processes of repentance, how are we to find inspiration and encouragement from Moses’ failed attempt?

Yehudah Amichai describes this moment in [Open Closed Open](#):

Moses standing on Mount Nebo was the first to say in his heart, “In the West is my heart, and I am at the end of the East,” but he also said, “In the East is my heart, and I am at the end of the West.” Thus began the long voyage, the great Jewish journey. Mount Nebo was the watershed where his longings divided. He yearned for the land of Canaan he would never see, but he turned east, toward the desert of those forty years, and wrote the Torah as a travel book, a memoir, every chapter with something very personal that was his alone—like Pharaoh’s daughter, like his sister Miriam, his brother Aaron, his black wife, the Ten Commandments.

Amichai sees something profoundly Jewish in Moses’ failed attempt at repentance. As his heart is stuck in both the East and the West, in the future and in the past, Moses begins “the great Jewish journey.” He longs for something that he has never experienced and that he will never experience. Without even entering the

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Land, Moses has already been Exiled. And how does Moses respond to the failure of his repentance? Amichai sees the Torah as the answer – perhaps unsurprisingly, the writer imagines that Moses found solace in writing.

True repentance will forever escape us. Moses, in this *parsha* and in the coming weeks, shows us that the practice of *tshuva* has value nonetheless. In the face of the never-ending process of repentance, Moses' model teaches us that the very act of introspection, when coupled with longing, is still of utmost importance.

Continue the *conversation*. Send Yitz your thoughts: yitz.landes@gmail.com.

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