

**The Mountaintop:
We are all Moses on the Mountain, We are all Joshua Crossing Over**

*D'var Torah (A Word of Torah) for Fabrangen Havurah
Parashat Vaetchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11*

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At the Havurah Institute this summer, Bracha Laster, John Laster, and I took a class on D'var Torah with Rabbi Brandon Bernstein.

I can summarize his class in one word. That word is... “word.”

Rabbi Bernstein encouraged us to focus our D'var Torah on one word, one dvar, or one idea.

That's a bit tricky when the Torah portion includes everything from the Ten Commandments to the Schma, but I will try.

In the spirit of *dvar ehad*, one word, the word I want to focus on today is “mountaintop,” and what we can see from the mountaintop, even when we know we might not cross over.

I am going to ask all of us to be there with Moses, when G-d tells him:

Go up to the top of the hill and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward and see with your eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan.

When G-d says “See with your eyes,” I hear “Take in the sight, take your time to fully experience the sight, take delight in the sight... because you will see the land across the river... but you will not live it, no matter how much you plead to go there.”

Before we imagine being there on the mountaintop, I would like to quote from Martin Luther King's last speech, from April 3, 1968, The *I've Been to the Mountaintop* speech, where King links the struggles of the Memphis sanitation workers to his own visit to the land of Israel, and to the biblical story we read today about this episode during Moses' last days.

Martin Luther King said:

“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do G-d's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the

mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

Of course, as we know from the parsha today, when Moses dies, someone else must lead the people to the promised land. G-d tells Moses:

.... command Joshua and strengthen him and encourage him, for he will cross over before this people, and he will make them inherit the land which you will see.

About 50 years after MLK was assassinated, at the memorial for Rosa Parks, Presidential candidate Obama said:

"I thank the Moses generation. But we have got to remember now that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to ... the promised land. ...It was left to the Joshuas to finish the journey Moses had begun. And today we're called to be the Joshuas of our time, to be the generation that finds our way across this river."

I would like to assert that all of us as human beings, are both Joshua and Moses.

We are all Moses on the Mountain, and We are all Joshua Crossing Over.

When we are born, we inherit a world made possible because of the last generations' Moseses. They had the vision and they fought the battles that brought us to the edge of the river. But it remains to us to cross over the river.

Our Moseses, like MLK and Rosa Parks and Ella Baker, envisioned a society of racial justice and they brought us part way there.

The Joshuas of our time helped end legalized segregation and helped create a society where we could have an African American president.

The people of Stonewall envisioned a day when gays and lesbians would be treated with dignity and they lead the first battle in the fight to get there.

Our brothers and sisters, our daughters and sons, our Joshuas, made gay marriage a reality.

The early pioneers in Palestine envisioned a day when that land would be a safe haven and a land of peace and justice for the Jewish people.

Our Joshuas, fleeing Europe, giving up comforts here in America, fought political and armed battles, and struggled against the desert and struggled with and sometimes against each other to

create kibbutzim and the knesset and a place where Jews could live with a self determination that had been impossible in the diaspora.

At the same time, when we as the Joshua generation cross over the River into the promised land, we find that life ain't perfect yet. Legalizing gay marriage did not end homophobia and anti-gay violence. Electing Barack Obama did not end institutional racism. Founding the State of Israel did not bring peace and justice to us or to our neighbors.

So we are called to escape from another Egypt, survive another dessert, and find another mountain to climb. In this sense we are all called to be Moses. To climb up the mountain, take in the view, to look ahead at a land that is promised by the Eternal, or by our eternal yearning for freedom and for justice.

So now, I want to take a moment for each of us to imagine climbing a mountain so high that the peak is above the clouds. Imagine being at the very top of that mountain. And as you look down, imagine that the clouds below you are blown away, and you can see across a wide river to a land beyond the troubles of our current times.

I would like you to imagine that you can see a specific community -- it could be your neighborhood, or it could be as wide as a nation or even the planet.

Now imagine a specific change in that community. Something big. Something so big it might take decades or more to accomplish. It could be the social justice issue you have spent a lifetime working on, if this issue were to come to its most wildly complete fulfillment. Or it could be one ridiculously idealistic hope you have for the world you want your grandchildren's grandchildren to live in.

Close your eyes to imagine the view of this community from the mountaintop, as if you had the power to be able to see as far and as clearly as an eagle.

What does this community look like? What does it sound like? Take a moment to experience your vision, the gestalt of it, the feeling of it, the north, south, east and west of it.

As we move forward into the coming weeks and months and years, let us learn from each other's visions. From our Joshua moments and our Moses moments, and from what we have learned from the Moseses and Joshuas in our life, let us form a vision a collective vision of a promised land, forged from what we each see from our mountaintops. And let us rededicate ourselves to building that world, whether or not we, in our lifetimes, will cross over the river.

Discussion Questions from Rabbi Bernstein and the Fabrangen Community Discussion

What are the implications of being Moses and Joshua? When we're the Moses, how do we deal with the fact we might NOT see our dream come to fruition? How can we reach MLK's contentment that seeing the Promised Land is enough?

And when we're Joshua's, how do we honor those who came before us? How do we recognize our success as building on the past?

Not everyone has the visionary or leadership skills of Moses or Joshua. Some excel in principled Followership. Some are “worker bees” who get stuff done but don’t like to be in the front. Some even play the role of critics within our movement, a role that can actually lead to positive changes under some conditions. What role do you feel comfortable in? Do you feel called to nurture your inner Moses or Joshua, or called to contribute in different ways when you think of improving our collective future?

Both Moses and Joshua needed encouragement, time, and inspiration to become the leaders they were. How can we nurture more effective and principled leaders today?

Footnotes:

Parsha

<http://www.chabad.org/parshah/torahreading.asp?aid=2495794&jewish=Vaetchanan-Torah-Reading.htm&p=complete#showrashi=true>

MLK I've Been to the Mountaintop

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

Obama Joshua Generation Speech <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0703/04/le.02.html>
