Moshe the Mother
Ilana Kurshan

In this week’s parashah we bear witness to the pathos of Moshe’s plea with God to allow him to enter the land of Israel. Moshe, in speaking to the people of Israel at the end of their wilderness journey, explains that it is on their account that he has been denied entry to the land – “The Lord was enraged with me because of you” (3:26). Moshe thus blames the people he has devoted his entire life to shepherding and sheltering. The midrashim on the opening verses of our parashah attempt to come to terms with Moshe’s relationship with the Israelites at the end of his life, employing a surprising metaphor that lays bare the ambivalence of a leader who has given himself over entirely to his people.

In the opening verses of our parashah, Moshe tells the people that following the defeat of the enemy kings Sihon and Og, he pleaded with God to let him enter the land along with the Israelites: “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” (3:25). The term for “cross over,” e’ebra, is echoed in God’s response to Moshe in the next verse: God becomes enraged (va-yitaber) with Moshe and tells him never to raise the subject again. Both terms also resonate with God’s instructions to Moshe at the end of the book of Numbers to ascend and view the land from afar, from the “heights of Avarim” (27:12), which Biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg translates as “the heights of transitions” (Zornberg, Bewilderments, p. 291). Moshe, who pleads with God to let him cross over, finds his desire frustrated by an angry God Who insists that he will merely be allowed to view the land from a transition point that will mark his own passage from life to death, as per the next verse: “When you have seen it, you shall be gathered to your forebears” (27:13). To employ a parallel play on words in English, we might say that Moshe is preoccupied with his fervent desire to cross over, but God crossly insists that no, Moshe’s life is over.

The root avar, which lies at the root of all these terms in the original Hebrew, connotes not just crossing over and getting angry, but also a surprising additional meaning uncovered by an early midrash on the book of Deuteronomy. In Sifrei Devarim (Piska 29) the second-century sage Rabbi Yehoshua reads vayitaber as referring to “a woman who is in no condition to converse because of the pangs of pregnancy.” This term may refer to God, who is so angry with Moshe that He refuses to engage further; but it is also an apt term to describe Moshe, who has carried the people around for so long that he is at the end of his tether. Rabbi Yehoshua is playing on the phonetic similarity between avar (cross over) and ibur (pregnancy), both of which share the same three-letter Hebrew root. The term ibur is used in rabbinic sources to refer to anything that is enlarged or expanded by means of something that is added on (like the “impregnation of a city” by expanding its boundaries, or the “impregnation of a year” by adding another month in a leap year). Rabbi Yehoshua may be explaining Moshe’s use of this term—vayitaber Adonai bi—as signifying that God impregnated Moshe with the people of Israel, pushing him to expand beyond his ordinary capacity and bear the Israelites through the wilderness until they reached full term.
Rabbi Yehoshua’s invocation of the metaphor of pregnancy to describe Moshe’s leadership is not without biblical precedent. Earlier in the wilderness journey, at a place known as Kivrot Hataavah (the graves of craving), the people complained bitterly to Moshe about the manna, wishing instead that they had meat to eat. Distressed and frustrated by the people’s incessant demands, Moshe cried out to God, “Why have you dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?” (Numbers 11:11). Here, as in our parashah, we encounter a distressed and frustrated Moshe who cannot enjoy God’s favor on account of the burden of bearing the people of Israel. And here, too, Moshe invokes the metaphor of pregnancy in speaking of his relationship with the people: “Did I conceive this people, and did I bring them, that You should say to me: Carry them in your bosom as a nursemaid carries an infant to the land that you promised to their fathers?” (11:12). Moshe refers to the people as an unwanted pregnancy so burdensome that it has made him want to die: “I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If you would deal thus with me, kill me instead!” (11:14-15).

Moshe’s exasperation with bearing the people and laboring on their behalf finds its echo in Deuteronomy, in a verse rendered famous by its use of the term Eicha: “How (eicha) can I bear alone the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering” (1:12), he tells the people at the end of his life. But Moshe has always been an ambivalent mother. Although initially very resistant to taking on his role—as evident by his demurral at the burning bush—Moshe came to care deeply and devotedly for his charges. Following the sin of the golden calf, when God threatened to destroy the people and make Moshe into a new nation—“Let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them and make of you a great nation” (Exodus 23:10)—Moshe refused to let God save his own skin at the expense of the people: “If You will forgive their sin, good; but if not, erase me from the book You have written” (23:32). Moshe may not have wanted to bear the people, but now that he is responsible for them, he realizes that his fate is bound up in theirs.

Like an ambivalent mother, Moshe resents his children for the toll they have taken on him, but he also cannot imagine his life without them. He realizes that to become a mother is to give of yourself to your child. It is to bear that child within you, to carry it around, and then to let that child loose into the world and watch it travel to places you will never be able to access. It involves forsaking your own hopes and ambitions, while seeing them realized through your children.

Perhaps now, at the end of his life, Moshe has come to appreciate the way in which motherhood embraces the multiple meanings of the term avar/ibur invoked repeatedly in our parashah. He has felt the full weight of bearing the people through the forty years of wilderness wandering, like a forty-week pregnancy. The pangs of labor have been intense, and there were moments when he cried out to God that he simply could not bear it anymore. At the same time, he wishes he could cross over with them. His children will go further and live longer into the future than he will, and while he is full of hope for them, he is also deeply saddened that he cannot continue alongside them. Moshe has borne the people as again and again they pushed the limits of his forbearance; now the time has come to join his forebears, if only he can bear to let go.
Danger: Complacency
Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Dvarim 4:25-29

25 When you beget children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God to anger him, 26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. 27 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you. 28 There you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. 29 But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.

- When are we at risk of acting corruptly? How does this corruption manifest itself? Why do you think that when people are in this situation they are more easily drawn to turning away from God?
- What is the penalty for our negative behavior? This is the opening of the Torah reading for the morning of Tisha beAv. Why? What might it tell us about how Tisha beAv should be understood?


After the nation will live in its land for two or three generations, they will view themselves as born inhabitants of the land. They will not remember the time when they did not have a home and a land of their own and will forget their origins and the One that gave them the land and sustains and supports them in it.

To avoid the danger of growing-old, the LORD commanded us “remember the day you left Egypt every day of your life” (Deut. 16:3). With this mitzvah God weaved the redemption from Egypt into our daily consciousness so that we will always think of it anew...

There is nothing more damaging to our relationship with God, both as individuals and as a nation, than “remaining long/turning old in the land that is promised to us.” Meaning, that the youthful enthusiasm that we had initially, which arose from our understanding that we belong to God, turns into self-satisfaction and complacency.

- What is the danger that Hirsch identifies in living securely? How does he suggest that the Torah attempted to combat that danger?
- According to Hirsch this danger applies to our individual and national relationship with God. Where might that danger lurk today? What can be done about it?
Alone or Lonely?
Bex Stern Rosenblatt

This Shabbat is Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Comforting. After Tisha b'Av, after our moment of reliving the existential crisis of losing God, our homeland, and our nation, God takes us back with beautiful words of consolation. We, who had no one to comfort us, now receive exactly what we have asked for - union again with God.

From the beginning, a deep-seated fear of loneliness runs through the Tanakh. We find it first in the story of creation. God has almost completed creation and is getting down to the business of telling the first human the rules to live by in humanity's new home. But God pauses, interrupting Godself, to say, “it is not good that the human should be alone.” God creates a second human and we should never have to be lonely again.

But we are. Our prophets perhaps most of all. And in our loneliness, we look back to what it means to be created in the divine image. We marvel at God’s solitary state, God’s existence as alone but not lonely. After God destroys the Egyptians in the Red Sea, severing our umbilical cord from our incubation as a nation in Egypt, we celebrate God’s independence from anyone and everything. We sing the Song of the Sea: “Who is like you among gods, God? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awe-inspiring in praise, working wonders?” The answer to the question we pose is no one. No one is like God. We are alone, but our God is alone too.

In our haftarah, we pose the same question. We had been so very lonely during the exile that it is as if we were widowed. Now, upon receiving comfort we look at God’s solitude. We say, “To whom can you make God similar?” God responds a few verses later, echoing our words: “To whom can you make me similar?” Again, the answer seems to be no one. God is not similar to other “gods.” God is singular, God is unique.

When we read the Book of Lamentations on Tisha b'Av, we encountered a similar question. The speaker looked at us, at destroyed Jerusalem, and asked:

“How can I bear witness for you? To what can I make you similar, oh Daughter Jerusalem? To what can I compare you so that I might comfort you, Maiden Daughter Zion? For large as the sea is your destruction. Who can heal you?”

The answer there also seemed to be no one. No one was like us. No one had suffered as we had suffered. And so, we would never be able to find comfort; we would never be able to find healing. Shabbat Nachamu reframes that loneliness for us. It is a Shabbat of Comfort. Our position as like no one else is not a slur but a word of praise. Both God and us are unique in our incomparability. What’s more, we are “like” each other. We are created in the image and in the likeness of God. When we recognize this, our existential fear of loneliness can transform into a celebration of our singularity.