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Learning to love

RABBI ZVI HOLLAND

Va'Etchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

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In this parsha, we find Moses reporting that God has refused his final request for entry into the Land of Israel and told him to make do with looking at the land from afar.

We must wonder about this strange bargain. How would looking from the top of a mountain address Moses' great yearning to be in the Promised Land? Furthermore, Moses, as the greatest prophet of all time, should have understood that there was no way God was going to allow him to enter the land. If so, why did he bother to ask?

A perusal of the text finds a very interesting exchange between God and Moses.

Moses reports: "And I besought the Lord at that time, saying: 'O Lord God, You have begun to show your servant your greatness, and your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on Earth, that can do according to your works, and according to your mighty acts? Let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill, and the Lebanon.'" (Deuteronomy 3:23-25)

Moses explains his yearning for the land with a desire to understand God's greatness. What did Moses expect to learn about God from "that good hill and the Lebanon"? What in fact did Moses want to get out of entering the land?

God responded: "Go up onto the top of Pisgah, and lift up your eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold with your eyes; for you will not go over this Jordan." (Deuteronomy 3:27)

This presents another challenge; whatever it was that Moses wanted, how was God offering it to him through a trip up the mountain? Why not just a flat "No"?

The depth of this lies in Moses' goal. Rashi explains "that good hill" as Jerusalem and "Lebanon" as the Holy Temple. The Land of Israel for Moses was an opportunity to get even closer to God. To be in Jerusalem at the Temple, God's permanent resting place on Earth, was his goal. Moses' yearning for Israel was a function of his boundless love for God, and he desired to get even closer to God.

Why did he ask even though he knew the answer was going to be "no"? Because that is what love is all about. Wanting and yearning and seeking even when it is almost a waste to try. It means that he had no other purpose or goal than to become as close to God as he could to know His ways, to be in His land, in His presence. It didn't matter what the answer would be; Moses had to ask.

That is why God sent him up the mountain to look at the land. Even though it was a very far cry from entering the land and serving God at the Temple in Jerusalem, when one is in love, one takes whatever one can get. Even if Moses' trip up the mountain to look at the land only gave him a tiny bit more closeness to God, that was enough for him and that is why God sent him there.



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We need to love God, the Jewish people, His land and His mitzvot in this way.

We need to pray for the Jewish people to be reunited in the Land of Israel with the coming of the Messiah.

Sure, it may be far-fetched to get some of the things we hope and pray for in the here and now, but that should never mean we don't try.

If we don't, then it means that we don't really care.

Rabbi Zvi Holland is dean of the Phoenix Community Kollel.

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