

Parshat Devarim: Moshe as Mother
Rabba Neesa Berezin-Bahr, Class of '25

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with God. Scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each, I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints; other times there was only one.

During the low periods of my life I could see only one set of footprints, so I said, "You promised me, God, that you would walk with me always. Why, when I have needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

God replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

"Footprints in the Sand" Author unknown

In this week's parsha we read, "And in the wilderness, where you saw how Hashem your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you traveled, until you came to this place" (Devarim 1:31).

God has been carrying the Jewish people spiritually and emotionally, providing for them physically, and performing miraculous acts for them throughout their journey in the desert. Rashi connects the following parable to this verse:

God is likened to a father walking with his son through the wilderness. When bandits approach from the front, he places his child behind him. When a wolf attacks from the back, he protects his child by placing him in front. And when the attack comes from both directions, he carries him in his arms and protects him (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael on Shemot 14:20).

Not only has God carried the nation, but Moshe has, as well. From the moment he stepped into the role as their leader, Moshe, too, has been like a parent to the people. He supports and nurtures them and bears the brunt of their numerous complaints and rebellions. Like any parent, Moshe has his breaking points. As Moshe begins his monologue of rebuke (according to the *Sifrei*) to Bnei Yisrael in this week's parsha, he reflects on their journey and recalls his exasperated cry of "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself!" (Devarim 1:9) and three verses later, "Eicha, how can I bear alone the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering?!" (1:12).

God has been carrying the people even at their lowest points. Moshe, at first glance, seems to want to cast off the burden of the people. However, he accepts aid to carry the burden, he does not abandon his people. Throughout the 40 years in the desert, Moshe can be likened to a mother after 40 weeks of pregnancy. When he finds himself in the “transition stage” of labor, when the creation of the nation is imminent, like the birth of a baby, it feels like too much to bear. Eicha! He relives the visceral feeling of the weight of the people, when he claimed that he could no longer carry them, and yet he continues to do so up until they enter the Promised Land.

Moshe himself makes this maternal connection explicitly. In Bamidbar he exclaims: “Did I conceive this entire people, did I give birth to them, that You say to me carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling child, to the land that You swore to their ancestors[?!]” (Bamidbar 11:12). And two verses later, “I cannot carry this whole nation by myself for it is too heavy for me” (11:14). A response here might be: Yes, Moshe, in a sense you did carry, birth, and nurse these people. Pregnancy, labor, birth, and nursing can be both beautiful and challenging, with profound physical and emotional effects on the mother. It takes tremendous strength and requires much support from others. Throughout the journey in the wilderness, Moshe has displayed maternal strength, compassion, sacrifice, and love for his children, Bnei Yisrael, together with attendant feelings of frustration and failure. (Indeed, the establishment of the 70 elders that follows is perhaps Moshe’s acknowledgment that “it takes a village to raise a child.”) All of these intense, complex, and competing emotions attest to Moshe’s “motherhood.”

Eicha, Moshe’s cry, a deep, poetic expression of despair—and one that echoes the scroll we will soon read on Tisha B’Av—connects Moshe, Yeshayahu, and Yirmiyahu. This Shabbat, Shabbat Chazon, we read Chazon Yeshayahu, the vision of Isaiah, as the Haftara: “Eicha, Oh how the faithful city has become a harlot!” And on motzei Shabbat we will read Megillat Eicha attributed to Jeremiah, “Eicha, Oh how the city sits in solitude!” (Eicha Rabba 1:1).

We are in the period of bein hametzarim, the three weeks of national mourning, and while it is necessary to sit with that grief, the imagery offered to us in our parsha, of being held by God and Moshe, may provide some comfort and hope. As we approach Tisha B’Av, let us feel held. God is with us, even carrying us when we only see one set of footprints. And we can rely on our rabbinic leaders to learn from Moshe how to bear the nation with spiritual strength and compassionate care. May the birth pangs be productive and lead us toward Mashiach. And may redemption come speedily in our days!

Rabba Neesa Berezin-Bahr lives in Israel with her husband, Asaf, where she runs spiritual and communal programming for kehilot in South Tel Aviv/Jaffa. Neesa has organized women’s megillah readings in NYC and Tel Aviv since 2013. She interned with Chuppot and hopes to continue working on changing the face of kedushin and gerut in Israel. She tutors conversion students and bnei/bnot mitzvah. Prior to learning at Maharat, Neesa worked at Drisha where she was the Director of Student Engagement. Neesa was a 2020-2021 Masa Teaching Fellow, and she worked for OU’s JLIC and Dorshei Torah v’Tzion. Neesa enjoys thinking about ways Torah can speak to everyday matters and issues that she is passionate about.