

# The Disappointment of Moses

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Va-et'chanan* (Deut. 3:23 – 7:11)

By Bert W. Schweitz

*“Va-et'chanan<sup>1</sup> el-Adonai ba'eit hahi leimor....”*  
*“I pleaded with Adonai at that time, saying....”*

**I pleaded with Adonai at that time, saying, “O Eternal God, you whose powerful deeds no God on heaven or on earth can equal, 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.” But Adonai was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. Adonai said to me, “Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across the Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see.”<sup>2</sup>**

*Parashat Va-et'chanan* is of particular significance to me since it was the focus of my *two* Bar Mitzvah ceremonies<sup>3</sup> — the first in 1948, and the second 52 years later. But it was only during the latter ceremony that I addressed the tremendous disappointment that Moses must have felt when God would not permit him to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

*Parashat Va-Et'channan* begins with Moses and his followers camped at the Jordan River, near the end of their long and difficult journey through the wilderness. Only a short distance remains to be traveled for Moses to realize his dream of entering the Promised Land. It is a dream that will remain unfulfilled. God tells Moses to climb a nearby hill and to look out on the Promised Land because he will never be allowed to enter it. Will this great disappointment cause Moses to live out his remaining days as an angry and bitter man? Hopefully, he will find comfort and satisfaction with the knowledge that his hard work and sacrifices will enable future generations of Jewish people to live in the Promised Land.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rashi, *et'chanan* is a term for prayerful imploring or pleading, as when one seeks an undeserved favor. Thus Moses, in his humility, made no claim on God's mercy.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 3:24-28.

<sup>3</sup> My participation in my first Bar Mitzvah ceremony at the Oheb Zedeck Temple in Cleveland, Ohio, was limited to chanting the Haftarah and the accompanying prayers, and delivering a memorized oration thanking everyone for helping me to reach this auspicious occasion. The rabbi chanted the parashah. There were no English translations or explanations of the material. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony left me unfulfilled and disappointed, and marked the end of my Jewish and Hebrew education for more than 50 years. In 2000, after extensive preparation with Rabbi Shelton Donnell of Temple Beth Shalom, during which I gained additional knowledge and understanding of Jewish biblical history, I celebrated my second Bar Mitzvah by chanting my Torah and Haftarah portions and the accompanying prayers, and delivering a speech about Moses' disappointment. I finally attained closure of my Bar Mitzvah ceremony on that long-ago Shabbat morning of 1948.

“If you will it, it is not a dream.” These words were spoken by Theodore Hertzl, the father of Zionism. Hertzl, born in 1860, became an accomplished author, playwright, and journalist. As a journalist and newspaper correspondent, he traveled extensively throughout Europe at a time when there was a great deal of anti-Jewish sentiment. After reporting the disastrous effects of anti-Semitism on the outcome of the Alfred Dreyfus trial in France, Hertzl began developing the concept of a Jewish State. The formation of a Jewish Homeland became his dream and eventually his obsession. His efforts greatly contributed to the formation of the State of Israel, which occurred more than forty years after his death.

Some of us will not realize our dreams, but will find gratification in knowing that we have helped others. A dedicated teacher may never fulfill his ambition of obtaining a doctorate degree in education, but during his career, he may help hundreds of students gain the knowledge that assisted in their development into useful and productive citizens. The medical researcher may never discover cures for heart disease and cancer, but the data he collected will help others in his field to achieve these goals.

The dreams of Moses and Theodore Hertzl evolved under extraordinary circumstances. Passages from Torah give us some insight as to why God did not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. In the case of Theodore Hertzl, it is not unreasonable for the creation of a Jewish homeland to require more than one lifetime of work.

Many of us will fulfill our dreams through hard work, careful planning, and the judicious use of time. We can help each other. When God spoke to Moses on the summit of Mount Pisgah, Moses was one hundred twenty years old.<sup>4</sup> He could look back on the past, contemplate the present, and look forward to a time when future generations of Jewish people would be able to enter the Promised Land.

*Pirkei Avot*<sup>5</sup> tells us to run to perform even a minor *mitzvah* because one *mitzvah* leads to another *mitzvah*, and the reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*. My father-in-law, a Sephardic Jew, taught me a related Greek proverb: “*Kane to kalo kai riksto sto yalo.*” Literally, this means, “Do a good deed, and throw it to the waves. The ocean waves will bring it back to you.” But we all know how the ocean currents and tides work; there can be a considerable delay between the “throwing in” and the “bringing back.” So broadly interpreted, the proverb means not to expect an immediate reward for doing a good deed.

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<sup>4</sup> Tradition says that Moses died on his 120<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>5</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4:2.

This was precisely Moses' experience. He spent more than 40 years doing good deeds but was denied the personal reward of his fondest dream, entering the Promised Land. Instead the reward for Moses' good deeds was experienced by the Israelites and future generations of Jews who received the reward that was denied to Moses.

We talk about a Messianic Age. Perhaps the true beginning of the Messianic age will be determined by how charitably we treat one another. People function best in a positive environment of emotional support. Let us become confidence builders and confidence enhancers for each other. Every time we give each other encouragement and the hope for success, and every act of kindness, tolerance, and good will that we extend to each other, will be returned to us, will help all of us to realize our dreams, and will bring us all one step closer to our Promised Land.

*Kein y'hi ratzon.* May this be God's will.