

PARASHAS VA'ESCHANAN

Sight and Insight

The long-awaited moment is finally drawing near. The forty long years in the desert are coming to an end. The Jewish people are massed on the far side of the Jordan River, preparing to cross into the Promised Land. Exuberant joy sweeps through the Jewish encampment, but it is tempered by an element of poignant tragedy. Moses, their great leader, will not accompany them on this final leg of their journey from slavery to exalted statehood.

In this week's Torah portion, we watch as Moses pleads with Hashem for a reprieve from this difficult decree, but Hashem grants only one small concession. Before his passing, Moses is allowed to climb the summit of Mount Nevo and gaze upon the entire length and breadth of the land - north, south, east and west.

A number of questions immediately come to mind. Wouldn't showing Moses a tantalizing view of the land he could not enter only add to his sense of loss? Furthermore, even from his vantage point on the high mountaintop, how was he able to see the entire expanse of the land all the way to its most distant borders? And if it was miraculous, why did he have to go up to the mountaintop at all? Why didn't Hashem simply show him the same miraculous vision right at sea level?

Let us stop and consider for a moment. What exactly did Moses see when he stood on the mountaintop? What sort of panoramic view could even partially compensate for his failure to enter the Holy Land? The answer lies in the difference between sight and insight. Moses undoubtedly was not concerned with the graceful contours of the land or the pretty flowers that adorned the valleys. He did not climb the mountain to feast his eyes on the superficial beauty of the land. Rather, he wanted to train his penetrating gaze on the sacred land, to probe beneath the surface and connect with its holy spiritual core, to experience its essence through observation, insight and ultimately knowledge.

Earlier, when Moses was a fugitive in the land of Midian, the Torah tells us that he saw a bush engulfed in flames and said, "Why isn't the bush being consumed?" Our Sages tell us that Hashem rewarded Moses for turning to look at the bush. What was so praiseworthy about turning to look at a burning bush that was not being consumed? Wouldn't it have piqued the curiosity of any passerby?

Clearly, Moses was not being rewarded for simply looking at the bush. It was his faculty of looking beyond appearances and probing for the essence that earned him everlasting reward. Whereas an ordinary man might have seen a piece of vegetation in a state of combustion, Moses saw the deeper symbolism, the image of the Jewish people writhing in the flames of Egyptian slavery but divinely protected from destruction.

When Moses trained this penetrating gaze on the Holy Land, he saw beyond its body. He saw its heart and its soul. At this level, the land has a symmetrical unity and form, and seeing part of it is like seeing the whole. Just as a person can see an entire tree even without looking at every individual leaf and twig, so did Moses on his mountaintop see the entire length and breadth of the essence of the land.

When the insight of his mind connected with the image absorbed by his eyes, he saw the spiritually radiant land blossom into the transcendent Abode of the Divine Presence, and he experienced a spiritual elevation far greater than lesser people would someday experience when standing near the Holy of Holies.

In our own times, contemporary culture and the media bombard us with so many eye-catching images that we have become inured to the myriad wondrous sights around us. It sometimes seems our sight has become so overloaded that we have lost sight of insight. But we all have it within our power to look with a more penetrating gaze, with more than our retinas and optic nerves. If we seek out the internal beauty in every creature, every tree, every blade of grass, if we recognize the handiwork of Hashem in every speck of the universe, we will discover a far deeper level to existence, a world where sight is rewarded by insight.