

Why Moses Might've Stayed in the Desert: A New Theory

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Going home is much on my mind these days. I'm going to be the Scholar-in-Residence at the congregation where I was born and raised that set me on the path to become a rabbi. Temple David in Monroeville, PA has never been a large congregation, but it spawned at least eight rabbis that I know of. It's an impressive record and I'm honored to be going back. But that's not the only reason why going home is so much on my mind.

In 2008, my daughter Hannah and I visited my grandfather's village in the Ukraine (<http://www.maqom.com/passages/080608.pdf>). I'd never seen it, even though I'd been to the Ukraine a few times already. Under the Soviets, the village was off limits. Now I'm glad we went. Who knows when it will be safe to go there again? And if we hadn't gone, it might've been too late.

What is this primordial urge to go home? Even if home was not altogether happy, or even happy at all? What is it in the psyche of humans (and animals) that draws us homeward no matter how far away we go? What is it that caused astronauts orbiting the moon to look back at earth and photograph it, instead of mapping the stars? What makes a horse go home, even if it has no rider to guide it? It's a serious question and I hope somebody on this list is smart enough to answer it.

But thinking about this, I began to think of Moses wandering in the desert. We are, after all, heading toward Sinai, in terms of the Jewish calendar. We leave Egypt on Passover, cross the Red Sea and we're heading to Sinai now. We get the Ten Commandments on Shavuot. What if part of the reason Moses stays in the desert is an unwillingness to be far from home?

Moses was raised a prince of Egypt. What could life possibly be for him in the wilderness? He'd fled there as a young man, true. But he'd returned to that life he knew, along a miraculous river with strong winds to dependably blow a boat's sails upstream, no turns for miles and miles, which could then float that boat all the way home. A river of life in every sense of the word.

I know we're supposed to think about Moses as an absolutely dutiful shepherd. But what if, near the very end of his life, he could not bear to be so far from the river he'd first known, a river that had literally saved his life as an infant?

Discussion Questions

1. Is it possible that, while Moses was leading the Jewish people forward, his eyes were glancing backward? In his heart, might he have wanted to go home? Or at least be near home?
2. What is it about home that draws us back? No matter how far we may go, why does our mind go back to home, to our childhood?
3. What gives a person the strength to leave home and leave it for good? How did my grandparents (and perhaps yours) ever find that strength to close one door and leave it closed forever?
4. Is it hard to think of Moses as a person with the normal longings of a person closer to the end of his life than to the beginning? Does it make Moses more approachable/understandable in your mind?
5. What are your experiences with going home? What led you there? What kept you away?

As always, I look forward to your answers and insights!