

Parshat Vayelech – Oct. 1, 2022

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Introductions

- a. AZK
 - b. This talk is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Miriam bat Yosef v'chana, who passed away seventeen years ago on Shabbat Shuvah
 - c. Today is Shabbat Shuvah
 - i. The Shabbat that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
 - ii. Named for the first word of the haftorah recited
 - iii. Customary for a talk to be given to reflect on some aspect of teshuvah – return / repentance
- II. As it does in many years, coincides with Parashat Va-ye-lekh
- a. The shortest of all the parshiyot (only thirty verses, the entirety of chapter 31 of Deuteronomy)
 - b. Context of the parashah
 - i. Start of the epilogue (chapters 31-34) both to Deut. And the entire Torah
 1. Describe the steps taken by Moses, upon concluding his major addresses,
 2. To prepare Israel for the future and to conclude with his death and the people's mourning
 3. Several actions are interwoven
 - a. Moses announces his immanent departure
 - b. Appoints Joshua as his successor

- c. Writes a copy of the teaching, places it in the care of the priests and elders
 - d. Gives instructions for regular public reading,
 - e. Urges the people to observe it
 - f. Teaches a prophetic poem orally
 - g. Delivers a final blessing
 - h. And only then, ascend Mount Nebo and dies
- ii. We are now marking the conclusion of Moses's final discourse
- iii. He has
 - 1. Gathered the people
 - 2. Explained
 - 3. Exhorted
- iv. Moses's remarks are similar to often addressed by its leaders to Israel's army before battle
- v. And the 'treaty between God and Israel is now concluded
- vi. Especially timely now, b/c Moses is about to die and the people, dependent on him for a whole generation-plus, might lose confidence as they prepare to battle for the promised land.
- vii. And on this his last day – known to him – and his 120th birthday our tradition teaches that God calls those closest to him on auspicious days and times.

c. the parashah opens with the words,

i. Moses went and spoke these things to all Israel. (2) He said to them: I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active. [Or: I can no longer come and go.] Moreover, the LORD has said to me, “You shall not go across yonder Jordan.” (3) The LORD your God Himself will cross over before you; and He Himself will wipe out those nations from your path and you shall dispossess them. —Joshua is the one who shall cross before you, as the LORD has spoken.

III. The text itself raises certain questions that the m’forshim considered.

For example,

a. “Now I am 120 years old, I can no longer go out and come in’

i. (rashi - what does it mean: ‘I cannot’),

1. wasn’t it said of Moshe that he appearance was not dulled and his freshness did not fade?

2. It means that ‘I am not permitted,

3. For authority was removed from me...’

4. (b/c of striking the rock in Bamdbar

ii. He died not bb’/c of failing health, but

iii. Rather when his allotted time was completed)

IV. But it is the very opening of the portion that is potentially the most problematic

a. ‘va ya-lech Moshe v ‘yi-da-behr’

b. Which is commonly translated in an English idiom,

i. ‘Moses went and said...’

ii. Similar to ‘Moses up and went’

- iii. Works in English
 - iv. But not in Hebrew
 - v. And the 'vuv' is the tell
 - vi. (Qumran and Septuagint have alternate text, 'Moses finished speaking
- c. The proper reading of the sentence that opens our understanding of Moses's final, final chapter is
- i. Moses went ...
 - ii. And Moses said
 - iii. And then the words that follow...
- d. Thus we have the question from this last day of his life, where did Moses go?; Commentators of 'where did Moses go?
- e. dibrat Sholomo – from art green)
- i. At first glance, the word went seems extraneous
 - ii. The Zohar teaches that Moses never became sullied with death (never became ill?)
 - iii. He cleaved to the Shechinah and thus entered eternal life.
 - iv. Thus, the meaning of Moses went, like a person who goes from one room to another, without ever tasting death.
- f. (Hirsch)
- i. The promises of blessings and curses and the epilogue that follows complete the words that Moses had been commanded to address the nation in the name of God. He could therefore consider his mission completed, so he could apply himself to his remaining tasks:

ii. Accordingly, Moses did not summon the entire nation himself as he customarily did when he had a message to communicate in the name of God, but simply 'went' before the (the nation) to bid farewell to it in the simple manner typical of Moses, the most humble amongst men.

g. (Rambam)

- i. After Moses sealed the new covenant ('atem nitzvim hayom', etc.) with all the members of the nations (29:9-11)
- ii. They left him and returned to their homes in the Israelite camp
- iii. Then Moses went from his own dwelling near the tent of Meeting and walked through the camps of all twelve tribes to bid farewell to his beloved people
- iv. And to console them over his impending death
- v. So that their sadness over his departure would not cloud their joy in having sealed the covenant

V. Indeed, all of Moses's actions in the entire book of Deuteronomy, which is drawing to a close are a response to a question addressed in David Brooks's book of a few years back, 'The Second Mountain',

- a. 'What do you do when you have achieved it all, when you have risen to whatever career heights fate (or providence has in store for you? What do you do when age lengthens its shadow, the sun begins to sink, and the body is no longer as resilient, or the mind as sharp as it once was?
- b. What will keep you young in spirit even if the body does not always keep pace?

- c. Brooks spoke to people over seventy, and he found that early in their lives they had identified the mountain they were going to climb. They had specific aspirations about family and career. They had a vision of the self they wanted to become. By age seventy, some had achieved it and were very happy. Others had achieved it only to find it not entirely satisfying. And yet others had been knocked off the mountain by misfortune.
 - d. At a certain age, though, many had identified a second mountain they wanted to climb. The mountain was not about achieving but about giving. It was less about external accomplishments (success, fame) and more about internal accomplishments. It was spiritual, moral; it was about devoting yourself to a cause or giving back to the community.
 - e. It is often, Brooks writes, a yearning for righteousness, an inner voice that says 'I want to do something good with my life' This second peak, associated with later life, may well prove more significant to our sense of self-worth than the ego-driven ascent of the first mountain.
- VI. This then draws us back to Moses and his 'second mountain'
- a. What do you do if you have already achieved what no human being has ever done – or will ever do?
 - i. Moses had spoken with God face-to-face
 - ii. Become His faithful servant

- iii. Led his people from slavery to freedom; put up with their complaints, endured their rebellions
 - iv. Prayed for – and achieved – their forgiveness
 - v. The agent through whom God performed His miracles and fulfilled his promise.
- b. This all begs the question, ‘What else was there left to do after such a life?’
- c. And it’s not that Moses didn’t have his share of disappointments.
 - i. His closest friends and allies, his siblings, had already died
 - ii. He knew the decree was sealed – he would not cross the Jordan and lead the people on the last stage of their journey; He would not set foot in the promised land.
 - iii. Unlike Aaron, his children would not become his successor
- d. Surely disappointments to go along with his achievements.
- e. So, as Moses faced his life’s end, what was there to do?
- f. The book of Deut. contains and constitutes the answer, starting with its opening verses,
 - i. In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites... on the east bank of the Jordan, in the land of Moab and began expounding the law...
 - ii. No longer he miracle worker, he truly becomes Moshe Rabeinu, our teacher, the man who sought to teach Torah to the next generation
 - iii. And his approach is remarkable.
 - 1. No longer -as before – does he just articulate the law.

2. He explains the theology behind the law
3. He speaks of the love of God for Israel, and how Israel should show its love for God.
4. He speaks with equal power of the past and the future.
5. He speaks passionately to those younger to him about the perils and joys of what awaits them

- VII. Even to this portion, Moses is the supreme example of generativity.
- a. And perhaps his disappointments enabled him
 - b. Knowing he would not enter the Promised land, and that his sons would not succeed him meant that he had to turn to be the teacher of the next generation.
 - c. He had to pass on his insight.
- VIII. All of this suggests a powerful and potentially life-changing message for all of us.
- a. Whatever our life has been thus far, there is another chapter to be written, focused on
 - i. being a blessing to others,
 - ii. sharing whatever gifts we have with those who have less,
 - iii. handing our values across generation,
 - iv. using our experiences to help others come through tough times of their own,

- v. doing something that has far less to do with personal ambition and much more to do with wanting to leave some legacy of kindness that made life better for at least someone else.

- IX. We don't know 'where Moses went'..
 - a. But we do know who he was, what he was and the model he sets for all of us
 - b. While this portion – like this entire season – appears to be about death, it is anything but
 - c. Rather Moses, reminds us that we possess what Brooks calls the capacity for 'motivational shift'
 - d. That we can find our ways back to lives of
 - i. Generativity
 - ii. Fulfilled love
 - iii. And transcendence
- X. And thus, on this Shabbat Shuvah, may we learn from the lessons of Moses and all our models of those who came before us. on our own paths to teshuvah, there is always a second mountain to climb, and possibly our greatest legacy going forward.