

The Life and Death and Life of Moses

Parashat V'zot Habrachta, Deuteronomy, Chapter 33-34 | October 16, 2022

One evening in 1663, the English socialite Samuel Pepys decided to visit a Jewish congregation in London, to get a sense of the religious community that had only recently been allowed back into England. When he arrived, the synagogue seemed to be engaged in celebrating Simchat Torah, when Jews read the final chapters of Deuteronomy and rejoice in the completion of the entire Torah. Pepys, who apparently thought he had witnessed a typical service, wrote in his diary as follows:

Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing. And in the end they had a prayer for the King, which they pronounced his name in Portugall; but the prayer, like the rest, in Hebrew. But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

This is an amusing story, but what Pepys witnessed really did capture the soul of Judaism, because for Jews, the Torah is an exquisite source of happiness, God's greatest gift. Understanding this will allow us to comprehend why Jews celebrate Simchat Torah, even as they read ostensibly sad sentences, on what is one of

the happiest Jewish days of the year.

As we study the final words of the Torah, we may ourselves be overcome with sadness, and even begin to wonder whether it is appropriate to joyously dance following the conclusion of such passages.

Here is how the Torah of Moses comes to a close: after Moses bestows his blessings on the tribes, he is told by God that his time has come. In his last moments, he ascends Mount Nebo and views the Promised Land:

And the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy children: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over there.

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.

And he was buried in a valley of the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor, and no man knoweth of his grave unto this day. (Deuteronomy 34:4-6)

“Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, ‘it might have been.’” We read of Moses passing away all alone. The man who had hoped to lead Israel into the Holy Land dies on the other side of the Jordan. He will not be buried in the Land of Israel. He is not interred with his fathers, nor will he be visited by his children, for no one knows where he lies buried to this day. We are then informed in the final verses of Moses' unparalleled greatness:

And there hath not risen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

In all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land,

And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great fearsomeness which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)

This is Moses—the man who could not enter Canaan, the man whose like we will never see again. Why, then, when we read these words, do we celebrate? The answer must lie in the fact that it is the Torah that is the truest legacy of Moses, and that in celebrating its completion and in beginning it again, we highlight Moses' truest achievements, and we thereby ensure his, and his people's, immortality.

When we look carefully at some of Moses' final words, we find that he succinctly summarizes this for future generations. In a small sentence that precedes Moses' blessing, he describes his legacy as follows:

Moses commanded to us the Torah, an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob. (Deuteronomy 33:4)

These are his words, and in the original Hebrew, they are some of the most well known in Jewish history: "*Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha kehillat Yaakov.*" According to the Talmud, this is the first biblical verse children ought to learn. It is with these words that their education begins; with these words that they are introduced to Torah learning. If so, this seemingly simple set of words must be pondered and parsed, for it apparently capture the essence of Moses himself.

We start by reflecting on the first phrase, "*Moses commanded to us the Torah...*" It is, on the face of it, shocking. Is it not God who commanded the Torah? Are these not His laws? And yet, if this is the first verse that children learn, then they first hear of the Torah as affiliated with *Moses*. Strikingly, even as the Jewish Passover liturgy gives little credit to Moses for the exodus from Egypt, we still describe the Torah as Moses' achievement.

The point is profound. God bestows the credit for teaching Torah on human beings, thereby ensuring

that in Jewish history, it will be the teachers of Torah who will be celebrated and revered. We do not make mention of Moses in the Haggadah. We do not describe his actions in performing the plagues and splitting the sea. We focus on, and revere him for, what he did afterward: teach and transmit the Torah to Israel. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote:

if he teaches the people and elevates them to new spiritual heights, if he is their mentor and teacher—then his contribution is not only recorded but is glorified, as if he were the origin of all that spiritual greatness, as if he deserved the gratitude of the people forever.

Why is teaching so central to Jewish life? The answer can be found in the next phrase of our verse, "*morasha kehillat Yaakov,*" the Torah is an "*an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob.*" As many note, the word used in Hebrew here for inheritance, "*morasha,*" is slightly different from the usual one, "*yerusha.*" The standard term refers to an estate that transfers automatically from one generation to the next; if a parent passes away, the child automatically inherits. But "*morasha*" can be translated rightly as "that which is passed down and received." Torah, as Rabbi Yissocher Frand explained, is called "*morasha*" because it will only be inherited if the next generation works to learn it, to imbibe it, to acquire it—only if a link between past and posterity will be formed. This is why teaching is so critical to Judaism; it creates an eternal connection between generations. Perhaps the most profound and poignant reflection of this aspect of Judaism comes from Rabbi Soloveitchik in a personal moment of reflection. He said:

Whenever I enter the classroom, which is crowded with boys, who could be, as far as age is concerned, my grandchildren. I enter the classroom as an old man, I am old—with a wrinkled face and eyes reflecting fatigue and the sadness of old age. You have to be old in order to experience that sadness. It's a very strange sadness; it's the melancholy of remembering things, things which disappear, they don't exist. When I enter a classroom I sit down, and opposite me are rows of boys, young boys with

beaming eyes, beaming faces, clear eyes, radiating the joy of being young.

Always when I enter, you know, I enter in a very pessimistic mood, I always enter the class in despair. And I ask myself, I mean, every time I enter the classroom—can there be a dialogue between an old teacher and young students? Between a *rebbe* in his Indian summer and boys enjoying the spring of their lives?

Rabbi Soloveitchik then describes what it means metaphysically to deliver what is called a *shiur*, a Torah lecture. His classroom, he says, is visited by the spirit of his grandfather, Rabbi Chaim of Brisk. He says,

I start the *shiur*, I don't know what the conclusion will be. Whenever I start the *shiur*, the door opens, another old man walks in and sits down. He is older than I am. All the *talmidim* [students] call me "the Rav;" he is older than "the Rav." He is the great, the grandfather of the Rav; his name is Reb Chaim Brisker, without whom no *shiur* can be delivered nowadays. Then, the door opens quietly again and another old man comes in, he is older than Reb Chaim, he lived in the 17th century.

Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to describe the medieval rabbinic sages who also enter his lecture hall, among them Maimonides, known as the *Rambam*, and Maimonides' great interlocutor from Provence, Abraham ben David, known as the *Raavad*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik says:

And then, more visitors show up. Some lived, some of the visitors lived in the 11th century, some in the 12th century, some in the 13th century, some lived in antiquity...

Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the discussion that ensues, a real link between his students and all those who have come before:

I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something, the Raavad disagrees; and sometimes he's very nasty. Very sharp, harsh language he uses against the Rambam. A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Raavad ...

He then introduces the central phrase:

...suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence.

That is the essence of what is called "*mesorah*," "transmission." He adds:

This unity of generations, this march of centuries, this conversation of generations, this dialogue between antiquity and present will finally bring the redemption of the Jew.

Let me tell you that at the conclusion of three and sometimes four hours...I emerge young and elated, younger than my pupils. They are tired, exhausted, some of them yawn. I feel happy. I have, I have defeated age; I have defeated oldness. I emerge young, less fatigued, less exhausted than my young pupils. We belong to the same *Mesorah* community, where generations meet. Where hands, no matter how wrinkled and parchment dry one hand is and how soft and wan the other hand is, shake, unite, and in a community where the great dialogue continues.

Thus, the ending of the Torah is a cause for what is called *simchat Torah*, the "joy of Torah." "*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*," "*Moses commanded to us the Torah*." We sing this when children are first taught Torah, and we also celebrate with joy as we read this verse on the holiday when we finish the Torah, because we know that in describing his own legacy this way, Moses is ensuring his immortality. The Torah joins generations, connects heaven and earth.

In the end, the Torah is for us a sign of life from the past.

That is why we can read of Moses' death in the Torah and still feel that he lives. Even if Samuel Pepys could not understand the joy that Jews found in the Torah, another non-Jewish visitor to a very Jewish gathering ultimately reflected that he understood it very well. Several years ago, a group of Catholic cardinals and archbishops visited the study hall, the *beit midrash*, of Yeshiva University, where hundreds of students sit and study Talmud together. One visitor, then-Archbishop of Philadelphia Charles Chaput, was so impressed by what he saw that he delivered a homily about the experience, which he ultimately published under the title "Yeshiva Lessons." He wrote:

What struck me first was the passion the students had for the Torah. They didn't merely study it; they consumed it. Or maybe it would be better to say that God's Word consumed them.

When a man and woman fall in love, a kind of electricity runs not just between them, but also in the air around them...I saw this in the students at Yeshiva...

I saw in the lives of those Jewish students the incredible durability of God's promises and God's Word. Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent. God's Word is the organizing principle of their identity. It's the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past, and with their future. And the more faithful they are to God's Word, the more certain they can be of their survival.

We read of Moses' death, but we celebrate the gift of the Torah that he gave to us, for we know that through it, he lives still. Thanks to him, we, the Jewish people, have the gift of life.

Discussion Questions:

1. What can the Jewish attitude toward reading of the death of Moses teach us about how to view life, death, and mortality in the modern age?
2. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik describes how learning Torah creates a deep interconnectedness between generations. What other Jewish rituals and practices serve a similar function?

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