

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat V'zot Habracha, Deuteronomy, Chapters 33-34 | October 25, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The *Rebbe*, Elie Wiesel, and the Beginning That Follows the Ending

One year ago, when this series—titled “*Parashah* and Politics”—began, I had assumed that the weekly Torah reading would allow us to reflect on more abstract political themes, without a constant focus on current events. That, of course, has not been the case, for the terrible news that broke on the very day that Jews in Israel began the first *parashah* of the Torah marked the beginning of a Jewish year that has been unlike any other in recent memory. And yet: looking back over the past many months allows us to appreciate more fully the meaning of our moment, and why we will again celebrate the completion of the Torah this year with profound joy.

Let us begin, naturally, with the first verse of our final *parashah*:

This is the blessing, with which Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death.
(Deuteronomy 33:1)

This single sentence simultaneously captures the life of a leader who sought to bless his people through his every action, as well as the tragedy of his dream denied. There will be no entry into the Holy Land for Moses, a fact reiterated in some of the very last verses of the Torah:

And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim, and Manasseh, all the land of Judah, as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And the Lord said to him, This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants: I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall 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 buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows the place of his burial to this day. (Deuteronomy 34:1–6)

It seems exceedingly sad. And yet, strikingly, this is the one *parashah* in the Torah which is entirely affiliated with joy. For it is the one weekly reading that is not read on the Sabbath, but on the day known as “The Joy of the Torah,” the only Jewish celebration with the word “joy” in its name.

The truth, however, is that the source of our celebration is often misunderstood. The day known as “Simchat Torah” is often described as one on which we mark our completion of the Torah. But my great-grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik, insisted that we are in fact rejoicing in the fact that after completing the Torah, we are able to begin it again. After all, Simchat Torah is also the day on which we begin Genesis once more. It is worth noting that as this celebration evolved, the Jewish people ceased to read the traditional *haftarah* (supplemental reading from the prophets) for this day—a continuation of the previous day’s selection from the Book of Kings—and instead selected the first chapter of Joshua, thereby following the conclusion of the Pentateuch with the beginning of the Prophets. The day, in other words, is all about beginnings.

Jews see in this ending and beginning profound symbolic significance. To read of Moses’ death and then to begin his Torah again is to realize that Moses truly lives—because he has given us as a people a source of eternal life, and therefore the people that Moses helped bring into being is an eternal testament to his own legacy. We also rejoice in the knowledge that, like the ever-renewing reading of the Torah, the story of the Jewish people has no end.

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Soon after October 7, reeling from the news of a war launched by Israel’s enemies on Simchat Torah, I attempted to express, in an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, what the lesson of this holiday might offer us amid that terrible moment:

We celebrate on Simchat Torah the completion of the Torah and the opportunity to begin it again, seeing in the continuing cycle a symbol of our people’s eternity. The Jew, Tolstoy reflected, “has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire and has illuminated with it the entire world. . . . He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither sword nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, . . . he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, and who transmitted it to the rest of the world—such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as is eternity itself.”

Anti-Semites, from those murdering children on the streets of Israel to those celebrating Hamas on the streets of New York, are driven by jealousy and hatred of a people that doesn’t die. They are convinced they will finally succeed in destroying the Jews.

They will fail, thanks to the fortitude of the Jewish state and the providential nature of Jewish history. One year after I wrote these words, we witness millions of Israelis, and many Jews around the world, who have emerged from these months with a renewed faith and a reinvigorated Jewish identity, intuiting somehow the miraculous nature of the Jewish people that Simchat Torah represents. The name traditionally given to this last *parashah*—consisting of its opening words—is “*V’zot Habracha*,” “And this is the blessing.” This is much more than a name. These words hint that the Torah itself embodies the blessing that is the Jewish story, a story of a people whose most sacred text gives it an end without an end—an end immediately followed by a beginning.



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And so many Jews have expressed over the past year how blessed they feel to play a role in this story that is unlike any other.

Thus, one year after a Simchat Torah we will never forget, we can look at the renewed resilience of the Jewish people and understand that this resilience lies at the heart of the holiday on which we will read *V'zot Habracha*. If there is a story that best expresses this, it is to be found in Elie Wiesel's memoir, wherein he describes two meetings with the Lubavitcher *rebbe* when he came to America from France. In the first, Wiesel began by speaking of his hasidic background, one very different from the *rebbe's*:

My first visit to his court lasted almost an entire night. I had informed him at the outset that I was a Hasid of Wizhnitz, not Lubavitch, and that I had no intention of switching allegiance. "The important thing is to be a Hasid," he replied. "It matters little whose."

The *rebbe*, Wiesel writes, then turned to the subject of faith: "The Rebbe had read some of my works in French and asked me to explain why I was angry at God." The two spoke for a bit, and then Wiesel asked the *rebbe* how he could believe in God after the Holocaust, after Auschwitz:

Then he replied, in a soft, barely audible voice, "How can you not believe in God after Auschwitz?" Whom else could one believe in? Didn't Auschwitz represent the defeat of humanity? Apart from God, what was there in a world darkened by Auschwitz? The Rebbe stared at me, awaiting my response. . . . "Rebbe, if what you say is meant as an answer to my question, I reject it. But if it is a question . . . I accept it." I tried to smile, but failed.

This was the first meeting. But sometime later, on the day that the Jewish people finish the Torah and begin it again, he and Wiesel had another encounter:

One year, during Simchat Torah, I visited Lubavitch, as was my custom. The Rebbe, seated in his place at the head of a T-shaped table, presided over the celebration with fervor. . . . I stood at the entrance, in my raincoat and Basque beret, plagued by a terrible migraine. . . .

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Suddenly the Rebbe saw me and beckoned me to approach. I pretended not to notice. The Rebbe motioned to me again. I didn't budge. Then he called me by name. When I still didn't move, powerful arms grabbed me and carried me over the heads of the crowd to the central table, depositing me like a package in front of the Rebbe. I wanted to die then and there if only I could do so without disturbing the celebration.



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It is an amusing episode, but what followed was both funny and profound:

The Rebbe was smiling. . . .

“Welcome,” he said. “It’s nice of a Hasid of Wizhnitz to come and greet us in Lubavitch. But is this how they celebrate Simchat Torah in Wizhnitz?”

“Rebbe,” I said faintly, “we are not in Wizhnitz but in Lubavitch.”

“Then do as we do in Lubavitch,” he said.

“And what do you do in Lubavitch?”

“In Lubavitch we drink and say *lehayim*, to life.

“In Wizhnitz too.”

“Very well. Then say *lehayim*.”

He handed me a glass filled to the brim with vodka.

“Rebbe,” I said, “in Wizhnitz a Hasid does not drink alone.”

“Nor in Lubavitch,” the Rebbe replied. He emptied his glass in one gulp. I followed suit.

“Is one enough in Wizhnitz?” the Rebbe asked.

“In Wizhnitz,” I said bravely, “one is but a drop in the sea.”

“In Lubavitch as well.”

He handed me a second glass and refilled his own. He said *lehayim*, I replied *lehayim*, and we emptied our glasses. After all, I had to uphold the honor of Wizhnitz. But as I was unaccustomed to drink, I felt my head begin to spin. . . .

“In Lubavitch we do not stop midway,” the Rebbe said. “We continue. And in Wizhnitz?”



“In Wizhnitz too,” I said, “we go all the way.”

As the drinking contest came to a head, the following extraordinary moment occurred:

The Rebbe . . . handed me a third glass and refilled his own. My hand trembled; his did not. “You deserve a blessing,” he said, his face beaming with happiness. “Name it!”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I was, in fact, in a stupor.

“Would you like me to bless you so you can begin again?”

Wiesel tells us that he immediately understood the meaning of the question:

Drunk as I was, I appreciated his wisdom. To begin again could mean many things: begin again to drink, to pray, to believe, to live. And then it was Simchat Torah, which is also my birthday.

“Yes, Rebbe,” I said, “Give me your blessing.”

He blessed me and downed his vodka. I swallowed mine—and passed out. I awoke outside, stretched out on the grass, where I had been carried, again, by the same arms, above the heads of the crowd.

I have always thought that this remarkable story was unknown to most; and I told it to my congregation on the Shabbat following the *Sh’loshim*, the marking of the 30-day mourning period, after October 7. When I completed my remarks, someone came over to me and recounted to me that Elisha Wiesel, Elie Wiesel’s son, had told the story the night before at a public *Sh’loshim* event.

The tale reminds us that when we read of Moses’ end, we recognize that his story, and ours, truly does not end at all, and we see in the beginning of Moses’ Torah on the day known as “The Joy of the Torah” a sign of our miraculous story. Looking back at my *Wall Street Journal* article from one year ago, I noticed one prediction that applies to this week. Thinking of future celebrations of the now-upcoming holiday, I wrote:

Countless Jews will now mark every year the completion of the Law of Moses and remember the Simchat Torah of 2023. The celebration will be rendered more profound in the knowledge that the story of the Jewish people continues, that its enemies have failed again, that the cycle of the Torah will begin once more . . .

This is indeed the case. May our celebration this year be rendered profound indeed.



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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on October 7 and the Joy of Torah, "Simchat Torah and the Jewish Love of Life," *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2023. [Click here to read.](#)

