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Dying a Good Death

Perhaps one of the greatest of human tragedies is when a person who has lived a fine and upright life turns to evil in the twilight of his days. The Talmud tells the story of a greatly respected High Priest, who ministered to the Jewish People for decades. Tragically, in the final years of his life, he came to deny the truth of God and Torah.

In light of this, the Talmud advises that "everyone should repent the day before he dies." Obviously, since no one knows when his day of death will be, the Talmud is recommending to set aside time every day to ponder one's actions. In fact, Jews recite a prayer three times a day asking God for help in repairing our misdeeds.

Many religious figures have stressed the importance of "dying a good death." A beautiful

example is found in this week's Torah portion, Pinchas.

In the Parsha, Moses is told by God to prepare to die. Moses' life had been characterized, perhaps more than anything else, by his great dedication to the Jewish People. Time and time again, he went through great travail and turmoil to help them.

Faced with the news that his demise is imminent, Moses -surprisingly - does not ask for a longer life. Instead, his immediate response is to ask God to ensure that the Jewish People are blessed with a proper leader. He prays that the nation should not be like a "flock without a shepherd." Moses' dedication to the people is so great, that he is concerned only with their welfare -even when faced with the specter of his own death.

The commentaries point out the unusual way in which Moses addresses God. Moses refers to the "God of the Spirits," an appellation that is rarely used in Jewish tradition. Rashi explains that the "spirits" referred to here are the souls of the individual Israelites. Moses was alluding to the aspect of God that is sensitive to the needs of each individual. This is the Name of God that Moses invoked when praying that the new leader of Israel should take care of each and every Jew.

Both in life and death, Moses showed himself to be totally at one with his people.

This genuine concern for each individual has become the hallmark of Jewish leadership throughout the centuries. The Talmud in particular, stresses that a leader must understand how everyone has his or her own particular view of reality. The leader must be able to rise

above all pettiness - and become the umbrella which both encompasses and protects everyone.

Moses was a master of this. In fact, the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) drives home this point by declaring that "every Jew has a little piece of Moses in him."

The Shlah, a great mystic and Biblical commentator, explains that only the Messiah will equal Moses in his compassion for (and understanding of) each and every Jew. May we merit such leadership, soon in our days.



Why Is Selfless Leadership So Important?

What is it that holds people together? What is the key to nurturing and building successful connections between people? Marriage is a connection between two people - what is the secret to its success? Raising children and nurturing a family - what is the key to achieving satisfaction with this holy endeavour? And the same question applies to the building of any human organisation where people come together for a purpose, whether it is a school, a shul, a business or the very enterprise of holding together the Jewish People as a nation.

The answers to these questions lie in this week's Torah portion. Moses, nearing the end of his life, approaches God to appoint his successor.

This seemingly insignificant episode is revealing. The simple act of coming forward and proactively securing the future wellbeing of the Jewish people speaks volumes about Moshe's capacity to transcend self-interest and ego. The very idea of succession is a signifier that the enterprise - in this case, the Jewish people - is greater than one individual; that the leader is in fact there to serve the greater cause and not their own interests.

Incredibly, Moshe was not just *concerned* about solving the succession question - he was insistent on it being addressed as a matter of *urgency*. The verse says, "And Moshe spoke to God, saying..." (Numbers 27:15). Quoting the Midrash, Rashi explains that extra word, "saying" tells us that Moses demanded an answer from God on the succession.

Also significant is the fact that Moshe's request that God appoint a successor is made immediately after hearing of his imminent death. "And you will also be gathered to your people like your brother Aaron was gathered," God tells him. (Numbers 27:13). It is telling that upon hearing confirmation that he would not merit to lead the people into the Land of Israel, and that he would pass away in the desert, Moshe's immediate concern is for the future welfare of the people: "And let not the congregation of God be like sheep that do not have a shepherd," he implores. (Numbers 27:17). Rashi comments that this attentiveness to the needs of the community before one's own needs is a core characteristic of the righteous.

Moshe's transcendence of narrow self-interest and his wholehearted commitment to the welfare of the people he serves is given further expression through another seemingly small

incident. God instructs Moshe to appoint Joshua, saying, "And you shall rest your hand upon him." (Numbers 27:18). Placing his hand on Joshua is a sign of his support and of the transfer of the leadership mantle. When Moshe carries out this instruction, however, the verse says, "And he placed his hands upon him" (Numbers 27:23). Quoting from the same Midrash, Rashi draws attention to the use of the plural - "hands". He explains that Moshe went beyond the call of duty - beyond the literal letter of God's request - placing both of his hands on Joshua's head, and performing what must have been this emotional task with unbridled enthusiasm.

This generosity of spirit - this bold declaration that the cause is greater than the individual - is especially noteworthy given the fact that, as the Midrash points out, Moshe had felt that his son, Gershom, would be an appropriate successor. Yet he was able to let go of his own hopes and dreams for his son to do what was right for the Jewish people.

There is another illustration of this selfless commitment to the good of the collective in next week's parsha. God instructs Moshe to do battle with Midian in response to their aggression, and informs him that he will pass away straight after the battle. Moshe knew that by delaying the battle, he would prolong his life. Yet he carried out the instruction with speed and efficiency. He did not procrastinate, knowing full well that once this last important duty was completed he would have to prepare to pass from this world. Moshe was committed to the cause to his last breath.

The very final verse of the Torah, describing Moshe's defining achievements, refers to "All

that which Moshe did in the eyes of all Israel." (Deuteronomy 34:12). Rashi says the verse is referencing the moment he smashed the tablets, after coming down from the mountain and seeing the people dancing around the Golden Calf. Why is this the crowning moment of Moshe's life? Rav Elya Meir Bloch offers an explanation. Moshe's life mission was to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt and bring them to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Smashing the tablets was a declaration that the people were unworthy of receiving the Torah in their current state and that, by implication, his mission had failed. Rav Elya Meir explains that this demonstrated Moshe's selflessness - he was prepared to publicly acknowledge his personal failure to carry out the task he was put on earth to perform, the cause he had invested his entire life in, simply because it was the right thing to do.

The thread running through all of these examples of Moshe's selfless devotion to the collective is "*lesheim shamayim*" - everything he did was for the "sake of heaven", for the greater good. For Moshe, building Am Yisrael, moulding the Jewish nation and leading it to fulfill its destiny, was never about serving his own personal interests. And this is the secret to building any successful enterprise. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot says, "Any community dedicated to heaven will endure, and one which is not dedicated to heaven will not endure." (4:14).

"Dedicated to Heaven" means the capacity to transcend self for the sake of a greater cause. This is the secret to all of our relationships and to our connections with other people and the establishment of any grouping and organisation. In the case of marriage it is about husband and wife putting the marriage and each other's

welfare above their own personal welfare. In the case of family it's about children, siblings, parents all working together for the greater good of the family and about being able to put aside their own personal narrow self-interest for the sake of the greater good and for the sake of Hashem. And the same applies to building a shul, school, a business organisation, and indeed for that matter building the great enterprise of the Jewish people. It's about putting the welfare of the others, and of the greater cause, above our own personal interests; it's about putting aside our own narrow self-interest and working together for the greater good of the whole.

And, paradoxically, by serving the greater good, we are, in fact, serving our own best interests too. By putting others first and investing ourselves fully in our marriage, in our families, in our organisations, in our shuls and schools, in the betterment of the Jewish people and humanity, we can derive the greatest joy from these associations and connections with other people. By transcending self and working for a greater purpose, we too become great. And that is when we discover the abundant blessings of life and connection to others.



Consistent Passion

Pinchas courageously takes a stand against the rampant wave of idolatry and sexual immorality caused by Moabite and Midianite women

enticing Jewish men. He is rewarded for his courage, and the Israelites are subsequently commanded to wage a war on the Midianites. Subsequent noteworthy events include Zelophechad's daughters receiving their rightful inheritance, and Joshua being appointed as Moses' successor, the new leader of the Jewish nation. Yet following these remarkable events, we are almost let down with the description of the somewhat mundane sacrifices, in particular the *korban tamid* (continual daily offering), 'The one lamb you shall make in the morning and the second lamb shall you make in the afternoon' (*Num. 28:4*), which has already been mentioned previously in *Parashat Tetzaveh* (*Ex. 29:38-42*). In light of the aforementioned dramatic events of *Parashat Pinchas*, why are we revisiting the very ordinary subject of the continual daily offering?

An intriguing midrash discusses the question of which of the Torah's verses is the most fundamental:

Ben Zoma says we find a more fundamental verse, being, 'Hear O Israel...' (*Deut. 6:4*). Ben Nannas says we find a more fundamental verse, being, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (*Lev. 19:18*). Shimon ben Pazi says we find a more fundamental verse, being, 'The one lamb you shall make in the morning...' (*Num. 28:4*). Rav Ploni stood on his feet and said, 'The *halacha* is like ben Pazi' (Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv, Introduction to *Ein Yaakov*).

If you ask a Jewish child what the most important verse in the Torah is, he or she is likely to agree with ben Zoma and state: '*Shema Yisrael*' (Hear O Israel). We are commanded to

recite twice daily this short verse that describes the absolute unity of God and represents His eternal relationship with the Jewish people. If not this verse, it would also be easy to agree with ben Nannas, who says, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Indeed, Rabbi Akiva calls this a ‘great principle’ (Tractate *Nedarim* 9:4), and when asked to recite the entire Torah on one foot, Hillel paraphrases this verse describing man’s integral relationship with his fellow (Tractate *Shabbat* 31a). It is unlikely that anyone would suggest the opinion of Shimon ben Pazi, citing the verse from our *parasha*. Yet the halachic conclusion of this cryptic midrash concurs with ben Pazi’s opinion. What is so special about this verse?

My *rosh yeshiva*, Rabbi Yehuda Amital z”l, explains that the non-spectacular nature of this verse is exactly what renders it significant. It does not describe any miraculous historical events, nor moments of spiritual ecstasy. But by continuing to bring the same offering, twice every single day, the Jew expresses commitment with conviction. Shimon ben Pazi is suggesting that dedication, consistency and continuity are the most fundamental elements in Torah life.

Merely two verses later, the Torah makes mention of Mount Sinai, saying, ‘It is the continual elevation offering that was done at Mount Sinai for a satisfying aroma, a fire offering to God’ (*Num.* 28:6). What is the connection between the verse highlighted by Shimon ben Pazi and the story of Mount Sinai?

While the daily offering is indicative of the value of consistent routine, the inherent danger of consistency is the apathy that can lie beneath the surface of routine – the capacity of a person to become so used to a task that it becomes

mundane and complacency sets in.

In contrast, Mount Sinai and the events of the Revelation represent the height of inspiration, excitement and spirituality. Mount Sinai, the epitome of passion, is juxtaposed with the daily offering – the epitome of routine. It is precisely this juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory religious experiences that highlights the balance we are required to strike. While in order to integrate Torah and Judaism within our daily lives, we must be persistent in our pursuit of consistency and routine, at the same time, in order to stave off the real risks of complacency, we must seek the moments of passion and inspiration.

King David expresses this idea in an apparent paradox: ‘One thing I ask of God, that I seek: That I may *dwell* in the House of God all the days of my life, to see the pleasantness of God and to *visit* in His Sanctuary’ (*Psalms* 27:4). The concepts of ‘the House of God’ and ‘His Sanctuary’ are synonymous yet *dwelling* and *visiting* are two entirely different experiences. So, what does King David’s request mean?

Later on in the book of Numbers, the Jewish people, who were redeemed from Egypt with ten wondrous plagues, were witness to the miraculous splitting of the sea, were fed and guided through a barren desert by God Himself and received the Torah at Mount Sinai, begin to complain. Despite constantly experiencing, or *dwelling* with, God’s divine intervention, they have come to take it for granted. This explains the double nature of King David’s request to *dwell* in the House of God while also *visiting* in His Sanctuary. King David is requesting that his experience of *dwelling* in the House of God be imbued with the sense of excitement and

anticipation experienced when visiting somewhere for the first time. He is seeking to protect his daily routine from the risk of complacency by infusing it with passion and inspiration.

The Torah is encouraging us to seek a life of consistent dedication and routine, balanced with a sense of passion and allowing space for the moments of greater excitement and inspiration.



Credibility and Respect

In this week's Torah portion, Moses speaks about the laws of inheritance vis-a-vis the future apportionment of the Land of Israel. Five sisters - orphaned from their father, Tzlafchad - challenge one aspect of Moses' ruling.

When you put the story of Tzlafchad's daughters in the context of its times, it belies belief. Although equality of the sexes seems completely natural today, we must remember that the feminist movement only began roughly 100 years ago. For thousands of years before that, women had no say, no role and certainly no position in any society on earth.

Bearing that in mind, let's think about what happens with Tzlafchad's daughters.

For five young girls of no particular lineage to be granted an audience with the national leader would be unthinkable. For them to question his

judgment would be impossible. For him then to agree with them would just not happen.

Apart from the respect for women that is light years ahead of its times, I want to point out something else. Even after such an episode occurred, for it to be then written in the history books of the nation would be absolutely unimaginable. How can Moses possibly maintain his credibility as "the lawgiver" if five young girls know the law better than he does?!

One of the many aspects of Torah that always impresses me is its honesty. The Author of this book has nothing to hide and nothing to prove. The laws are unreservedly challenging. The stories do not always paint even the greatest of characters in a positive light. There is no fear of upsetting or offending anyone. Someone so seemingly disinterested in convincing his audience that he is God, is someone with supreme confidence that he really is God.

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