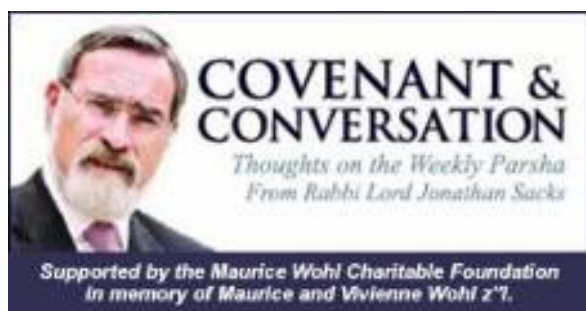


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Moses' Death, Moses' Life

And so Moses dies, alone on a mountain with God as he had been all those years ago when, as a shepherd in Midian, he caught sight of a bush in flames and heard the call that changed his life and the moral horizons of the world.

It is a scene affecting in its simplicity. There are no crowds. There is no weeping. The sense of closeness yet distance is almost overwhelming. He sees the land from afar but has known for some time that he will never reach it. Neither his wife nor his children are there to say goodbye. They disappeared from the narrative long before. His sister Miriam and his brother Aaron, with whom he shared the burdens of leadership for so long, have predeceased him. His disciple Joshua has become his successor. Moses has become the lonely man of faith, except that with God no man, or woman, is

lonely even if they are alone.

It is a profoundly sad moment, yet the obituary the Torah gives him - whether Joshua wrote it, or whether he wrote it himself at God's behest with tears in his eyes[1] - is unsurpassed:

Never again did there arise a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land, and for all the mighty acts and awesome sights that Moses displayed in the sight of all Israel. (Deut. 34:10-12)

Moses rarely figures in the lists people make from time to time of the most influential people in history. He is harder to identify with than Abraham in his devotion, David in his charisma, or Isaiah in his symphonies of hope. The contrast between Abraham's and Moses' death could not be more pointed. Of Abraham, the Torah says, "Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:8). Abraham's death was serene. Though he had been through many trials, he had lived to see the first fulfillment of the promises God had given him. He had a child, and he had acquired at least the first plot of land in Israel. In the long journey of his descendants he had taken the first step. There is a sense of closure.

By contrast, Moses' old age is anything but serene. In the last month of his life he challenged the people with undiminished vigor and unvarnished candor. At the very moment that they were getting ready to cross the Jordan and enter the land, Moses warned them of the challenges ahead. The greatest trial, he said,

would not be poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness in the desert but the comfort of home. Reading these words, one is reminded of Dylan Thomas' poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night." There is as much passion in his words in his hundred and twentieth year as at any earlier stage of his life. This is not a man ready to retire. Until the very end he continued to challenge both the people and God.

What do we learn from the death of Moses?

[1] For each of us, even for the greatest, there is a Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter, a destination we will not reach. That is what Rabbi Tarfon meant when he said: It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.[2] What we began, others will continue. What matters is that we undertook the journey. We did not stand still.

[2] "No man knows his burial place" (Deut. 34:6). What a contrast between Moses and the heroes of other civilizations whose burial places become monuments, shrines, places of pilgrimage. It was precisely to avoid this that the Torah insists explicitly that no one knows where Moses is buried. We believe that the greatest mistake is to worship human beings as if they were gods. We admire human beings; we do not worship them. That difference is anything but small.

[3] God alone is perfect. That is what Moses wanted people never to forget. Even the greatest human is not perfect. Moses sinned. We still do not know what his sin was - there are many opinions. But that is why God told him he would not enter the Promised Land. No human is infallible. Perfection belongs to God alone. Only when we honor this essential difference

between heaven and earth can God be God and humans, human.

Nor does the Torah hide Moses' sin. "Because you did not sanctify me ..." (Num. 20:12). The Torah does not hide anyone's sin. It is fearlessly honest about the greatest of the great. Bad things happen when we try to hide people's sins. That is why there have been so many recent scandals in the world of religious Jews, some sexual, some financial, some of other kinds. When religious people hide the truth they do so from the highest of motives. They seek to prevent a *chillul Hashem*. The result, inevitably, is a greater *chillul Hashem*. Such sanctimoniousness, denying the shortcomings of even the greatest, leads to consequences that are ugly and evil and turn decent people away from religion. The Torah does not hide people's sins. Neither may we.

[4] There is more than one way of living a good life. Even Moses, the greatest of men, could not lead alone. He needed the peacemaking skills of Aaron, the courage of Miriam and the support of the seventy elders. We should never ask: Why am I not as great as X? We each have something, a skill, a passion, a sensitivity, that makes, or could make, us great. The greatest mistake is trying to be someone else instead of being yourself. Do what you are best at, then surround yourself with people who are strong where you are weak.

[5] Never lose the idealism of youth. The Torah says of Moses that at the age of 120, "his eye was undimmed and his natural energy unabated" (Deut. 34:7). I used to think these were two complementary phrases until I realized that the first is the explanation of the second. Moses' "eye was undimmed" means, he never lost the

passion for justice that he had as a young man. It is there, as vigorous in Deuteronomy as it was in Exodus. We are as young as our ideals. Give way to cynicism and you rapidly age.

[6] At the burning bush, Moses said to God: "I am not a man of words. I am heavy of speech and tongue." By the time we reach Devarim, the book named "Words," Moses has become the most eloquent of prophets. Some are puzzled by this. They should not be. God chose one who was not a man of words, so that when he spoke, people realized that *it was not he who was speaking but God who was speaking through him*. What he spoke were not his words but God's words. That is why He chose a couple who could not have children - Abraham and Sarah - to become parents of the first Jewish child. That is why he chose a people not conspicuous for their piety to become God's witnesses to the world. *The highest form of greatness is so to open ourselves to God that his blessings flow through us to the world*. That is how the priests blessed the people. It was not their blessing. They were the channel of God's blessing. The highest achievement to which we can aspire is so to open ourselves to others and to God in love that something greater than ourselves flows through us.

[7] Moses defended the people. Did he like them? Did he admire them? Was he liked by them? The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to the answers to those questions. Yet he defended them with all the passion and power at his disposal. Even when they had sinned. Even when they were ungrateful to God. Even when they made a Golden Calf. He risked his life to do so. He said to God: "And now, forgive them, and if not, blot me out of the book you have written" (Ex. 32:32). According to the Talmud

God taught Moses this lesson at the very outset of his career. When Moses said about the people, "They will not believe in me," God said, "They are the believers children of believers, and in the end it will be you who does not believe." [3] The leaders worthy of admiration are those who defend the people: even the non-orthodox, even the secular, even those whose orthodoxy is a different shade from theirs. The people worthy of respect are those who give respect. Those who hate will be hated, those who look down on others will be looked down on, and those who condemn will be condemned. That is a basic principle of Judaism: *middah kenegged middah*. The people who are great are those who help others to become great. Moses taught the Jewish people how to become great.

The greatest tribute the Torah gives Moses is to call him *eved Hashem*, the servant of God. That is why the Rambam writes that we can all be as great as Moses. [4] Because we can all serve. We are as great as the causes we serve, and when we serve with true humility, a Force greater than ourselves flows through us, bringing the Divine presence into the world.

1. Baba Batra 15a.
2. Avot 2:16.
3. Shabbat 97a.
4. Hilkhote Teshuvah 5:2.



Yom Kippur: Being Honest with Ourselves

One of the most well-known aspects of Yom Kippur is the moving Kol Nidrei service recited at the beginning of the holy day. Kol Nidrei isn't a prayer; it is an annulment of vows. This annulment could have been enacted at any point in time. Why do we annul our vows at the beginning of Yom Kippur?

Yom Kippur is the day when one is supposed to undergo an intense process of self-analysis. He admits his mistakes, and undertakes to rectify them in the future. In order to do this effectively, a person must strive to be brutally honest with himself, and avoid the standard self-deceit that often cause people to stray from what they know to be the truth. In Kol Nidrei a person stresses his concern with avoiding dishonesty through careless vows. In doing so, he implicitly acknowledges the importance of honesty and the detrimental nature of self-deceit. Accordingly, it is very appropriate to begin the day of repentance by reminding oneself of the importance of being honest with God and with oneself.

Being dishonest with oneself is the cause of terrible life decisions. A striking example of this phenomena is that of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. He made a decision to leave Abraham to live in the evil city of Sodom. Why did he

decide to go there? The Torah states that it was based on financial factors - he saw that the land of Sodom was a fitting place for his crops. However, Rashi brings the Sages who say that the real reason why he went was because Sodom was an immoral place, and he wanted to satisfy his desire for immorality there.

If the Sages say that his real reason was immorality, why did the Torah say that he came for financial reasons? The answer is that, on the surface, Lot went for the sake of his livelihood, however, the deeper, and decisive reason was immorality. The Torah gives us the external reason therefore it is revealed in the Torah. The Sages reveal the hidden reason, which is accordingly hidden in the oral Torah. My Rebbe, Rav Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, points out that even Lot himself believed that he was going to Sodom for the money. He even tricked himself as to the ultimate cause in this disastrous move. This is a prime example of how the *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) can deceive a person as to his motivations, thereby causing him to sin.

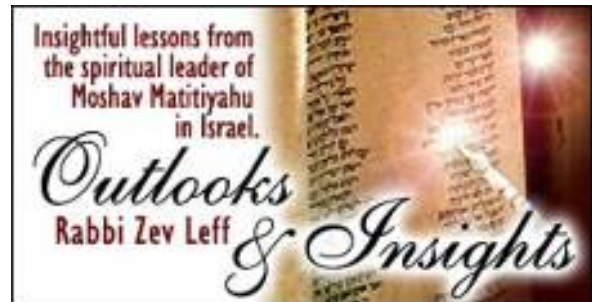
Another example of this is that of King Shaul. The Prophet, Shmuel informs Shaul that God wants him to wipe out the whole nation of Amalek. After defeating them in battle, Shaul inexplicably leaves the Amalekite King Agag and some animals alive. This seems to be an obvious deviation from the word of God, and yet when Shaul meets Shmuel he proudly tells him that he has fulfilled the word of God. He did not even realize that he had clearly transgressed the word of God and committed a terrible sin. He tricked himself into believing that he had in fact done what God asked of him.

These incidents demonstrate the power of the

negative inclination to cause us to lie to ourselves. Indeed, it seems that all the major sins recorded in the Torah came about as a result of people deceiving themselves as to the true reason for their motivations. This is the case with regard the very first sin, that of Adam. Some commentaries write that he reasoned that he would attain a higher level of free will by eating from the fruit. However, deep down, his motivation was to gain some independence from God.

Self-deceit can cause us to think that we don't need to do teshuva in certain areas. There was a man who lived in the time of the Rambam. He told the Rambam that he was certain that he never committed these sins, and therefore saying the confession (vidui) constituted a lie. The Rambam answered him that there are many levels of transgression of each sin and that on a certain level he in fact committed all the sins in the confession. Moreover, the Rambam told him that his very claim that he had not transgressed anything in the confession was a sin in and of itself. It seems ironic that this man had worried that he was lying by saying the confession, whereas, in truth he was deceiving himself by believing that he did not need to say it!

It is quite conceivable that a person lives his life oblivious of his shortcomings. He may blame all his problems on other people or circumstances, anything but his own flaws. The experience of Yom Kippur forces him to face the truth. May we all merit to genuinely return to God.



Four Free Days

The Midrash (Yalkut Emor 651) comments on the verse, *"You should take for you on the first day,"* that Sukkot is the first day for the accounting of sins. Many explanations are offered to explain this difficult Midrash.

The Shlah HaKadosh explains that in the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, people are so busy preparing for Sukkot that they have no time to sin. Others say that the influence of Yom Kippur and its power to expiate sins extends into these four days. Rabbi Yehonasan Eibshitz writes in Ya'aros Dvash that the *gematria* of "the Satan" is 364, from which the Sages learn that the Satan, the evil urge, has power 364 days of the year, and not on Yom Kippur. The letter "*heh*" signifies that on five of the remaining days the Satan has reduced control. These are the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot (counting a portion of the first day of Sukkot as the fifth day).

The effect of Yom Kippur is so overwhelming and inspiring that a Jew is catapulted to a level far beyond his real attainment. We are judged according to our level, and therefore someone on a higher level is judged more harshly for the same sin than someone on a lower level. Thus if God were to judge us immediately after Yom Kippur according to our level at that time, the result would be an unduly harsh judgment.

Just as before Rosh Hashana we are given a minimum of four days of *Selichot* in order to prepare ourselves to enter Rosh Hashana as a blemishless sacrifice, so we are given four days after Yom Kippur to settle back to our real level. The accounting of our sins during these four days is then retroactively calculated according to the level we reach on the first day of Sukkot. These four days are like a decompression chamber given to a deep sea diver.

Another aspect of these euphoric four days is the fact that we are so charged emotionally and so busy preparing the materials for Sukkot, that even when we sin, those sins are rarely premeditated or calculated. Similarly, the preparations are also executed in a frenzied mood of elation that leaves little time or place for calculation and meditation. To a certain degree, this elation is positive. It corresponds to the days after that first Yom Kippur in the desert in which the materials for the Mishkan were donated and the people gave with unbridled emotion, without any calculation of necessity. Finally Moshe had to call a halt to this unbridled giving and announce, "Enough."

MOSES' DEATH

This powerful emotion is the raw material to be shaped with reflection into a Mishkan. The Torah relates in this week's parsha that God bid Moses to ascend Mount Nevo to expire "*in the midst of the day.*" The entire people had said they would try to prevent Moses' death. The obvious question is: What could they have done to prevent Moses from dying?

The answer is: nothing. But the people were so emotionally charged with love for Moses – despite the month-long rebuke to which they had been subjected – that rational calculation

did not exist. By commanding Moses to go up at midday to show their helplessness to prevent his passing, God, at the same time, publicized this commendable desire of the Jewish people. Later, the unbounded love for Moses was refined and shaped into the loyalty which the people transferred to Joshua.

The four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot correspond to the four letters of God's Ineffable Name. Our feelings during these four days are raw material to be shaped in calm reflection, and transformed into our calculated service of God on the first days of Sukkot.

May we utilize the special opportunity of these four days to prepare for Sukkot and the mitzvah of *lulav*, symbolic of our victory on Yom Kippur, and by channeling the intense emotion with which we emerge from Yom Kippur so that it extends its influence into the entire year.



Guaranteeing a Good Year

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

The Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is called is Shabbat Shuva (the Shabbat of Return).

The Amidah of the High Holiday prayers contains the prayer, "You *chose* us from all the nations, You *loved* us and You *desired* us." Although this prayer is phrased in the past tense,

it also implies that God continually chooses, loves, and desires the Jewish people.

The commentator Dover Shalom explains that the three expressions used in this prayer correspond to three levels of love. The lowest level is when we are loved because we are better than the other available options. Although we may be flawed, we are superior in comparison to the alternatives. The middle level is when we are loved because we are inherently good. The highest level is when we are loved unconditionally, for no reason at all. If there was a reason, it would be the *reason* that was loved, not us!

The phrase "You chose us from all the nations" corresponds to the lowest level of love, when we are loved only in comparison to the alternative options. The Talmud (Avodah Zara 2b, on Deut. 33:2) teaches that God initially offered the Torah to the nations of the world, all of whom refused to accept it. Only the Jewish people eagerly responded, "We will do and we will hear!" (Exodus 24:7). Based on this positive response, God gave the Torah to us.

[The Jews could therefore more accurately be called the Choosing People, not the Chosen People. We chose God first, and He reciprocated. From the Jewish perspective, God will choose anyone who chooses Him.]

The phrase "You loved us" corresponds to the second level of love, when we are loved due to our intrinsic goodness. Not only are we preferable over other options; we are actually inherently lovable! Finally, the phrase "You desired us" corresponds to the highest level of love: inexplicable, absolute love that does not depend on reason.

The love between God and the Jewish people is compared to the love between a husband and a wife. The Mishnah (Kiddushin 1:1) teaches that there are three ways for a marriage to legally take effect: through a monetary transaction, a contract, or consummation. God married the Jewish people in all three ways. The Egyptian riches that washed ashore after the Jewish people crossed the Sea represent a monetary transaction (see Sefer HaMakneh on Kiddushin, Pische Zeira). The Jewish people received our marriage contract at Mount Sinai, when God gave us the Torah; and our marriage was consummated during the time that the Jewish people lived within the privacy of the Divine Clouds of Glory.

THREE LEVELS OF LOVE

We can understand these three conditions for marriage as representing the three levels of love. God does not fulfill just one or two of these conditions; He sends us an outpouring of love, showing that He wants to connect with us in every possible way. The mitzvah of tefillin, in which a strap is wrapped three times around the middle finger, also expresses this idea. With each loop, we recite a verse beginning with the words, "I am betrothed to you" (Hoshea 2:21-22). The three loops that are formed look like three rings, representing marriage and the three levels of love. Every day, on an ongoing basis, God chooses us, loves us and desires us.

The preface to the Otzer Tefillot states that the main thrust of the High Holiday prayers is for God to reveal Himself to all nations and peoples, thereby eliminating the desecration of His name and increasing its sanctification. Perhaps our Sages chose to word the prayers this way so that we could attempt to reciprocate

God's love and devotion to us. On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, when our very lives are hanging in the balance, the greatest demonstration of love is our ability to rise above our personal concerns and devote ourselves solely to the revelation of God's glory. When God sees that we are mature enough to disregard our own needs and put His will above all else, He will do anything for us. This is the best way to secure for ourselves a sweet new year.

Nevertheless, our intentions must be sincere. The Talmud (Baba Kama 92a) teaches that a person who prays on behalf of another when he himself needs the same thing will be answered first. This does not mean to say that two poor people can make a plan to pray for each other so that they'll both get answered fast! In such a scenario, neither person is actually praying for the other; each is praying for himself, while using the other person as a device. The same is true with our intentions in the High Holiday prayers. We must not fool ourselves into thinking we are praying for the manifestation of God's glory, when really we just want to guarantee a good year for ourselves. Our ability to transcend our personal concerns is precisely what allows God to fulfill them.

As we approach the Day of Judgment, may we learn how to take ourselves out of the center and focus on God, and through this ultimate demonstration of love, may we be inscribed in the Book of Good Life.

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