

“How Moses’s near death experience may very well have saved his life”

Parashat Shemot 5773; January 5, 2013

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

The motif of floating blissfully toward a warm, calm, bright light; of being lifted above and beyond hospital beds, gurneys, and suffering; of entering into a dimension of peace and comfort unlike anything ever known before but then being jolted back to life, heart beating and lungs pumping...be it an operating table, defibrillator paddles, or the voices of loved ones beckoning us to wake up, to breath, to open our eyes is a story that has been told by adults and children, by religious and non-religious people, by believers and skeptics alike. The most recent, and perhaps sensational case, involves a Harvard trained neurosurgeon...a scientist—rational, empirical, logical. When his brain became infected by bacterial meningitis, he descended into a deep coma. It was then that he experienced the transformative images and sensations that are described by so many others who have had near death experiences. The fact that Eben Alexander is a brain surgeon and has documented his own near death experience from the perspective of science and medicine has created quite a stir...he has many, many detractors among his peers. Although he was well aware that publishing his story could have drastic professional consequences, he

nevertheless has shared his story in his recently published bestselling book *Proof of Heaven*. He has discussed it in venues as diverse as *The Dr. Oz Show* to *Nightline*. And he has become convinced that his encounter with something very real beyond this existence was legitimate and life changing.¹

There are countless books and websites that chronicle purported near death experiences.

Overwhelmingly, the scientific community rejects these assertions, claiming that what people

allege to have experienced is the product of complex chemical reactions in the brain, when it is,

for example, deprived of oxygen. I'm not as interested in the legitimacy of near death

experiences as I am in the life altering power that those who claim to have had them report. In

nearly every account I scanned, a person having a near death experience returns to life with a

greater appreciation, a deepened faith, a stronger resolve to live life more meaningfully, more

intentionally, more gratefully. While near death experiences may be debatable, the new lease on

life they seem to evoke is indisputable. And it is just such an occasion that I believe that none

other than Moses himself experiences—and it is his own near death encounter that is the linchpin

in his own resolve and awakening as an Israelite and a freedom fighter.

¹ Kaufman, Leslie. "Readers Join Doctor's Journey to the Afterworld's Gates," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2012

It is no doubt one of the most enigmatic, one of the most mysterious passages in the Torah where this near death experience occurs. We read it this morning, and it is found toward the end of Exodus 4, beginning at verse 24. But first a little background. While laying the groundwork for the showdown with Pharaoh and the Jewish people's ultimate freedom from Egyptian slavery, the first chapters of Exodus also provide us a graphic account of the evolution of Moses, our leader and liberator to be.

Although we might imagine that Moses's early life was easy and pleasant, living in Pharaoh's palace as one of his own children, it seems to me that it was anything but that. Moses is a young man who is deeply perplexed, profoundly conflicted about who he is, where he comes from...and where he belongs. Look, he has been raised by this incredible royal family, who took him in, and made him one of them. But he simultaneously feels the pull of this other people who he senses he is connected to. As he grows up he begins to realize that his adopted family is in fact the persecutor, the taskmaster, the abuser, the slave owners of his birth family. Can you imagine having to face that realization? It must have been incredibly confusing and painful!

When he has the courage to venture beyond the palace walls and come into contact with "his" people, he becomes enraged by their treatment. Seeing a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian,

he can't help but intercede and he kills the Egyptian taskmaster in the process. Yet this only has the effect of isolating him even more. The very people tried to help now threaten to tell the Egyptian authorities about his crime. Now he is homeless...How can he go back to the palace having retaliated against one their officials? How can he further connect with the Israelites who remain highly suspicious of him? Like many confused and dissolutioned kids, he runs away from home! A million and a half kids run away from home every year in the United States...but it's been happening since antiquity.² As my teacher and friend Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger writes: Moses is a "man without an identity. The Israelites with whom he might have thought to reconnect have stabbed him in the back. The Egyptians with whom he shares a common culture have turned against him. He is forsaken and utterly alone."³ In the wake of all that trauma, Moses adopts yet a third identity...this time as a Midianite. He marries Tzipora, the daughter of the local high priest, and settles into the life of a tranquil shepherd. How many of his days and nights, his years pasturing those sheep must have been filled with replaying those episodes of running away from home in his mind...How often must he have doubted himself, or wondered how his life might have turned out differently had circumstances been otherwise. Or maybe, just

² Perdue, Erica. "When Kids Run Away from Home, Or Threaten To," Metroparent.com, July 2012

³ Schlesinger, Hanan. "God Tries to Kill Moshe," Jewish Studies Initiative of North Texas, January 2013

maybe, he put that all behind him. Perhaps the serenity of the desert and the uncomplicated life of a simple shepherd cleared his mind of intrusions from the past. But that too would change. Because no sooner had he put distance between himself and Egypt does God appear to him, urging him to go back and to free the Israelite people. No matter how much Moses demurs, refuses, second guesses, protests, balks at the idea, God doesn't back down. Finally we learn that Moses requests permission from his father-in-law to see [notice the language] *how his people are faring* in Egypt. You see he still hasn't agreed to be their liberator...just to see *ha'odam hayyim*...literally if they are still alive. He still hasn't signed on the dotted line. He's just going to take a look. And that's when it happens!

As Moses and Tzipora are packing their bags and getting their kids, Gershom and Eliezer, ready for the long trek back to Egypt, God begins to whisper the plan of action to Moses. *You're going to appear before Pharaoh—you know the guy whose house you grew up in—and you're going to threaten him. You're going to tell him that he must release all the Israelite slaves. And you are going to assault him with all kinds of plagues. And he is going to resist you, and the final plague will deprive him of his first born son.* At this, Moses is thrown into an absolute fit. I imagine cold sweats, panic attacks, heart trembling fear. If you look on page 336 in the Humash, Moses

experienced God as trying to kill him! *Vayivakeish hamito*...And just at that moment of near death, Zipporah takes a flint knife and circumcises their son Gershom. Dabbing Moses with the blood she proclaims *chatan damim atah li*, you are now protected for me by the blood of circumcision. At that moment the night terror stops. Moses no longer feels that he is being pursued by death. The episode is over, and awakens with resolve and clarity, meets with his brother Aaron to devise a plan and a handful of verses later is face-to-face with Pharaoh himself, demanding his people's freedom. What in the world happened in that crazy night of near death experience and spontaneous circumcision?

Our Sages explain that God was going to kill Moses for being lax regarding the circumcision of his sons. Here he had lived for all this time in Midian, and now he's going back to his birthplace in Egypt and he never made time to have a bris for his sons? But as you can tell, I'm not entirely satisfied by that answer. It seems rather that the circumcision knife was the defibrillator paddle for Moses. When Tzipora circumcises Gershom during Moses's wild panic attack she reminds him that Moses is inextricably linked to the generations before him—To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and to those who came after them, his own sons, and--of critical importance--to the nation that is enslaved in Egypt. Tzipora's act, which seems rash and impulsive, is actually

precisely the kind of unambiguous reminder that Moses needed to jolt him into reality and to convince him to undertake this mission in Egypt. You are the very same people as they are Moses. You are a descendant of our patriarch Abraham, the people linked by the *brit*, by the covenant of circumcision. You may have grown up in Pharaoh's palace, but you are no Egyptian...you are Abrahamic...you are an Israelite. Now go and redeem your fellow Israelites!

And he does, without the slightest hesitation.

Dear friends, there is a lot of scientific data⁴ that purports to explain the causes of so called near death experiences. Although 3% of Americans report to have had one, researchers believe they have a biochemical explanation for everything from the voyage toward the bright light to feeling that the soul has left the body. But one phenomenon of near death experiences that seems to be beyond the purview of science is how these experiences affect the people who had them. In so many cases, the person returns to life, if you will, with a totally different understanding and appreciation for the purpose of their life. Whatever happened to Moses; however it was that he felt that God was trying to kill him, the result is that he is utterly transformed. Prior to the experience he was stricken by uncontrollable insecurity and anxiety. Following that fateful

⁴ Choi, Charles Q. "Peace of Mind: Near-Death Experiences Now Found to Have Scientific Explanations." *Scientific American*, September 12, 2011

night, he is mission-driven and confident. Ideally, it shouldn't take a brush with mortality to remind us of our purpose in life. But sometimes when we are forced to encounter our frailty—like on Yom Kippur, for example—our determination and drive is reenergized. The Kotzker Rebbe once told his disciples, “I have been given the power to resurrect the dead! But I have chosen the harder task—to resurrect the living.” As we enter this new year, may we all experience a resurrection of meaning, of commitment, of passion, and of living with purpose just as our great teacher Moses did thousands of years ago.