

PARADIGMS OF PARTING: DEATHS OF THE BIBLICAL HEROES
Rabbi Richard Hirsh

1. And Jacob called his sons and said, “Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come...” When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people. (Genesis 49:1, 33)

➤ Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said that it is written: **“And Jacob called his sons and said, Gather around and I will tell you what will occur to you in the end of days”** (Genesis 49:1). Jacob wanted to reveal to his sons when the complete redemption would arrive at the end of days, but the Divine Presence abandoned him, rendering him unable to prophesy. He said: Perhaps the Divine Presence has abandoned me because, Heaven forbid, one of my descendants is unfit, as was the case with my grandfather Abraham, from whom Ishmael emerged, and like my father Isaac, from whom Esau emerged. His sons said to him: *Hear Israel, [our father,] the Lord is our God, the Lord is One*. They said: Just as there is only one God in your heart, so too, there is only one in our hearts. (Talmud Pesachim 56A)

2. When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!” So they sent this message to Joseph, “Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. (Genesis 50:15-17)

➤ What did they see that frightened them? As they were returning from the burial of their father, they saw their brother go to the pit into which they had hurled him, in order to bless it. He blessed the pit with the benediction “Blessed be the place where He performed a miracle for me,” just as any man is required to pronounce a blessing at the place where a miracle had been performed in his behalf. When they beheld this they cried out: Now that our father is dead, Joseph will hate us and will fully requite us for all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a message unto Joseph, saying: Thy father did command ... **“So shall you say unto Joseph: Forgive.”** We have searched the entire Scripture and are unable to find any place where Jacob uttered this remark. This statement is introduced to teach us the importance of peace. The Holy One, blessed be He, wrote these words in the Torah for the sake of peace alone.

(Midrash Tanchuma VaYechi 17)

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3. At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor. Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead." Moses did as the LORD had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days. (Numbers 20:23-29)

When Aaron's time came to depart from this world, the Holy One said to Moses, "Go tell Aaron of his impending death." So Moses rose early in the morning and went to Aaron. As soon as he called out, "Aaron, my brother," Aaron came down and asked, "What made you come here so early today?" Moses replied, "During the night I meditated on a matter in Scripture which I found distressing, and so I rose early and came to you." "What was the matter?" Aaron asked. "I do not remember, but I know it was in the book of Genesis. Bring it and we'll read it." They took the book of Genesis, read each and every section in it, and said about each one of them, "The Holy One wrought well, created well." But when they came to the creation of Adam, Moses asked, "What is one to say of Adam, who brought death to the world, so that I, who prevailed over the ministering angels, and you, who held back death⁷—are not even you and I to have a like end? After all, how many more years have we to live?" "Not many," Aaron answered. Moses continued talking, until finally he mentioned to him the precise day when death was to come. At that moment, Aaron's bones felt the imminence of his own demise. So he asked, "Is it because of me that you found the matter in Scripture so distressing?" Moses answered, "Yes."

At once Israel noticed that Aaron's height had diminished, even as Aaron said, "My heart doth writhe within me; and the terrors of death are fallen upon me" (Ps. 55:5). Moses asked, "Is dying acceptable to you?" Aaron: "Yes." Moses: "Then let us go up to the mount on the mount." At that, the three—Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar—went up in the sight of all Israel.

Had Israel known that Aaron was going up to die, they would not have allowed it but would have besought mercy in his behalf. However, they thought that the Divine Word had summoned him.

When the three reached the top of the mount, a cave opened up for them. In it they found a burning lamp and

a couch, both wrought by Heaven. Then Aaron proceeded to remove his garments one by one, and Eleazar donned them, until finally a celestial cloud enveloped Aaron's body.

Moses said to Aaron, "Just think, Aaron, my brother, when Miriam died, you and I attended her. Now that you are about to die, I and Eleazar are attending you. But I—when I die, who will attend me?" The Holy One said to Moses, "As you live! I will attend you."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "My brother, go up [and lie] on this couch," and he went up. "Stretch out your arms," and he stretched them out. "Shut your eyes," and he shut them. "Close your mouth," and he closed it. At once the Presence came down, and as it kissed him, his soul departed. Then, as Moses and Eleazar kissed him on his cheeks, the cloud of glory rose up and covered him. The Holy One commanded them, "Go hence." The moment they left, the cave was sealed.

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4. Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land. And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will assign it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there." So Moses the servant of the LORD died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the LORD. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days. (Deuteronomy 34:1-8)

But a divine voice came forth and said, "The time has come for you to depart from the world." Moses pleaded with the Holy One, "Master of the universe, for my sake, remember the day when You revealed Yourself to me at the bush; for my sake, remember the time when I stood on Mount Sinai forty days and forty nights. I beg You, do not hand me over to the angel of death."

Again a divine voice came forth and said, "Fear not, I Myself will attend you and your burial."

Moses pleaded, "Then wait until I bless Israel. On account of the warnings and reprimands I heaped upon them, they never found any ease with me." Then he began to bless each tribe separately, but when he saw that time was running short, he included all the tribes in a single blessing.³

Then he said to Israel, "Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me."

They replied, "Our master, our lord, you are forgiven." In their turn they said to him, "Moses our teacher, we troubled you even more, we made your burden so heavy. Please forgive us." Moses replied, "You are forgiven."

Again a divine voice came forth: "The moment has come for you to depart from this world." Moses replied, "Blessed be His Name! May He live and endure forever and ever!" Then he said to Israel, "I implore you, when you enter the Land, remember me and my bones, and say, 'Alas for the son of Amram, who had run before us like a horse, yet his bones fell in the wilderness.'"

Again a divine voice came forth and said, "Within

half a moment you are to depart from the world."

Moses lifted both his arms, placed them over his heart, and called out to Israel, "Behold the end of flesh and blood." Moses arose and washed his hands and feet, and thus became as pure as a seraphim.

Then, from the highest heaven of heavens, the Holy One came down to take the soul of Moses, and with Him the three ministering angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Zagzagel. Michael laid out his bier, Gabriel spread a fine linen cloth at his head, while Zagzagel spread it at his feet. Michael stood at one side and Gabriel at the other. Then the Holy One said to Moses, "Moses, close your eyes," and he closed his eyes. "Put your arms over your breast," and he put his arms over his breast. "Bring your legs together," and he brought his legs together. Then the Holy One summoned Moses' soul, saying, "My daughter, I had fixed the time of your sojourn in the body of Moses at a hundred and twenty years. Now your time has to come to depart. Depart. Delay not."

She replied, "Master of the universe, I know that You are God of all spirits and Lord of all souls. You created me and placed me in the body of Moses one hundred and twenty years ago. Is there a body in the world more pure than the body of Moses? I love him, and I do not wish to depart from him."

The Holy One exclaimed, "Depart, and I will take you up to the highest heaven of heavens, and will set you under the throne of glory, next to the cherubim and seraphim."

In that instant, the Holy One kissed Moses, and took his soul with that kiss.

Devarim Rabbah 7:10

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5. When David's life was drawing to a close, he instructed his son Solomon as follows: "I am going the way of all the earth; be strong and show yourself a man. Keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in His ways and following His laws, His commandments, His rules, and His admonitions as recorded in the Teaching of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn.

But, you know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of Israel's forces, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether: he killed them, shedding blood of war in peacetime, staining the girdle of his loins and the sandals on his feet with blood of war. So act in accordance with your wisdom, and see that his white hair does not go down to Sheol in peace. But deal graciously with the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, for they befriended me when I fled from your brother Absalom; let them be among those that eat at your table.

You must also deal with Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite from Bahurim. He insulted me outrageously when I was on my way to Mahanaim; but he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the LORD: 'I will not put you to the sword.' So do not let him go unpunished; for you are a wise man and you will know how to deal with him and send his gray hair down to Sheol in blood."

So David slept with his fathers, and he was buried in the City of David. (I Kings 2:1-11)

- David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, Lord, make me to know my end; in how long will I die? God said to him: It is decreed before Me that I do not reveal the end of the life of flesh and blood. He asked further: And the measure of my days; on what day of the year will I die? He said to him: It is decreed before Me not to reveal the measure of a person's days. Again he requested: Let me know how short-lived I am; on what day of the week will I die? He said to him: You will die on Shabbat. David requested of God: Let me die on the first day of the week so that the honor of Shabbat will not be tarnished by the pain of death. He said to him: On that day the time of the kingdom of your son Solomon has already arrived, and one kingdom does not overlap with another and subtract from the time allotted to another even a hairbreadth. He said to him: I will cede a day of my life and die on Shabbat eve. God said to him: a single day in which you sit and engage in Torah is preferable to Me than the thousand burnt-offerings that your son Solomon will offer before Me on the altar.

What did David do? Every Shabbat he would sit and learn all day long to protect himself from the Angel of Death. On that day on which the Angel of Death was supposed to put his soul to rest, the day on which David was supposed to die, the Angel of Death stood before him and was unable to overcome him because his mouth did not pause from study. The Angel of Death said: What shall I do to him? David had a garden behind his house; the Angel of Death came, climbed, and shook the trees. David went out to see. As he climbed the stair, the stair broke beneath him. He was startled and was silent, interrupted his studies for a moment, and died. (Talmud Shabbat 30:A-B)