

When it's Time to Die

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Vayelech*, is the end of the road for Moses, physically and spiritually.

-Physically:

-Endpoint of journey to Promised Land; not allowed to go into it.

-About to die (on that very day).

-Spiritually: Passes mantle of leadership to Joshua (as instructed by God).

The portion begins with:

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל

And Moses went, and he spoke these words to all of Israel. [Deut 31:1]

Vayelech Moshe: And Moses went. *Where did he go?*

Are we talking about physically going to another place or only about the emotional and psychological departure of a lame duck leader?

Where did Moses go?

-Ohr HaChaim [18th-century Morocco]: We need to know where Moses went... The wording of the Torah is vague and does not provide a clue as to where Moses actually went...

-Ramban [13th-century Catalonia]: Moses left encampment of the Levites, where the previous assembly had taken place, and went to the Israelites, to show them respect and to take his final leave of them, because on that very day he was to die on Mount Nebo. It is good manners to ask one's host for permission to absent oneself.

-But Israel refers to all Jews, not just Israelites.

-Ibn Ezra [12th-century Spain] and Chizkuni [13th-century France]: He went to each tribe, to inform them that he was going to die, so that they would not be frightened, and that they should take heart and support their new leader Joshua.

-Sforno [16th-century Italy]: Another of many uses of the word *Vayelech* (וַיֵּלֶךְ) meaning that the person described acted on their own initiative.

-Zohar: Forty days before a man dies his soul (נשמה) leaves him... "Moses went" means that his soul had gone from him just like in any other righteous person (צדיק) whose end is at hand. [Zohar volume 1 page 217]

-Kli Yakar [16th-century, Chief Rabbi of Prague]. "And Moses went" means that he went from tent to tent to everyone among the Israelites, and he "spoke these words" to their hearts -- that is, words of repentance ... to help them in their own journey to repentance.

-Kli Yakar: Or perhaps "Moses went" to seek peace.

The Sages [Vayikra Rabba 9:9] interpreted the verse "Seek peace and pursue it" [Ps. 34:15] to mean that peacemaking is unlike other commandments. For all the other commandments ... one is obligated to perform them [only] when one encounters them, but one is not obligated to chase after them. Yet with regard to peacemaking, you must pursue it. We are not allowed simply to wait and hope that peace will occur. We are obligated to pursue it. "And Moses went and spoke these words". Spoke which words? The words spoken are words of teshuvah directed both toward God and toward one's fellow. For both of these are referred to by Hosea when he said:

Take with you words and return to God. Say to Him: "Forgive all guilt and accept what is good". [Hosea 14:3]

-Hassidic masters: Moses went into the minds and hearts of the people: The highest places and the deepest places. Proof:

-Torah, before our verse:

That very day the Lord spoke to Moses: Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo... You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend. [Deut. 21:48-50]

-Torah, after our verse:

So Moses ... died ... in the land of Moab, and [God] buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-Peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day. [Deut. 34:5-6]

So: Valley or mountain? Both, metaphorically speaking.

Was Moses incapable of continuing?

Torah continues:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם בֶּן־מֵאָה וָעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲנִכִּי הַיּוֹם לֹא־אוּכַל עוֹד לֵצְאֹת וּלְבוֹא

[Moses] said to them: Today I am 120 years old, I can no longer go out and come in. [Deut. 31:2]

“I can no longer go out and come in.” *Go out where and come in where?*

Rabbenu Bahya [14th-century Spain]:

It means “I am no longer able to go out to war and to come back.” Moses refers to the times he had led the Jewish armies against Sichon and Og.

The Talmud excludes any physical explanation:

What is the meaning of “I can no longer go out and come in”? It is not a [physical problem] because it is written later:

And Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was not dim, and his natural force was not abated. [Deut. 34:7]

And it is written further:

And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo. [Deut. 34:1]

And it is taught in a baraita: There were twelve steps there [to ascend the mountain], and Moses stepped over all of them in a single step. [So he was quite vigorous.] [Sotah 13b]

The Sifrei says: “I can no longer go out” means “I am not permitted [to do things on my own initiative]”, [Sifrei Devarim 72:1] because leadership is being taken from me and given to Joshua.

The Talmud goes even further: Moses’ mind was feeling its limitations:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: [It means he could no longer] go out and come in with words of Torah. This teaches that the gates of wisdom were closed off to him... Authority was taken from him and given to [Joshua]. [Sotah 13b]

A poignant elaboration is given in Midrash Tanhuma:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “Why all this anguish that you are experiencing?”

[Moses] said, “Master of the world, I am afraid of the pangs of the angel of death.”

[God] said to him, “I am not delivering you into his hands.”

He said in front of [God], "Master of the universe, my mother Jochebed ... will be distressed by my death."

[God] said to him, "So has it come up in [My] mind. But it is the way of the world. Every generation has its expositors, every generation has its administrators, every generation has its leaders. Up to now it has been your lot to serve in front of Me, but now your lot is over and the time of your disciple Joshua for him to serve [Me] has arrived."

[Moses] said to him, "My Master, if I am dying because of Joshua, let me go and become his disciple!"

[God] said to him, "If you want to do that, go ahead and do it."

Moses arose and went early to Joshua's door. Now Joshua was seated expounding [Torah] ... and did not see [Moses]... and Moses was standing...

[The Israelites] said to Joshua, "What has come over you that Moses our master stands, while you sit?"

When [Joshua] raised his eyes and saw [Moses], he immediately rent his clothes. Then sobbing and weeping, he said, "O my master, my master! My father, my father and lord!"

The Israelites said to Moses, "Moses our master, teach us Torah."

He said to them, "I am not allowed."

They said to him, "We are not leaving you."

A heavenly voice (bat kol) came forth and said to them: "Learn from Joshua."

[So] they... sat and learned from Joshua. Joshua sat at the head with Moses to his right and [Aaron's sons] Elazar and Ithamar to his left.

So [Joshua] sat and expounded in the presence of Moses...

But Moses did not understand what Joshua was expounding.

After the Israelites arose [from the session], they said to Moses, "[Explain] to us the Torah [we have just heard from Joshua]."

He said to them, "I do not know what to answer you."

So Moses our master was stumbling and falling.

It was at that time that he said, "Master of the universe, up to now I requested life, but now here is my soul given over to You."

He had resigned himself to death... [Midrash Tanchuma, Vaetchanan 6:1]

The Talmud records another legend about how Moses could not understand even laws expounded in his name:

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and tying crowns on the letters [of the Torah].

... [God] said to him: There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name. He is destined to derive from each and every thorn [of these crowns] piles and piles of laws. It is for his sake that the crowns must be added to the letters of the Torah.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, show him to me. God said to him: Return behind you. Moses went and sat at the end of the eighth row in

Rabbi Akiva's study hall and did not understand what they were saying. Moses' strength waned ... [Rabbi Akiva's] students said: My teacher, from where do you derive this? Rabbi Akiva said to them: It is a law transmitted to Moses from Sinai. When Moses heard this, his mind was put at ease. [Menachot 29b]

Why was Moses uncomfortable at first, then "his mind was put at ease" when he heard that?

-Because he realized he must have known it all along, but had forgotten it? If so, what is the point of the story? That we all get old? This is suggested in our verse.

-Because he was happy to see that what *he* started would continue and evolve, even beyond his own ability to understand? (Perhaps Moses thought at first that Akiva was making things up, which made him uneasy, then realized Akiva was deriving it from what Moses himself taught, at which point he relaxed?)

Traditionally, all halacha was given to Moses on Mount Sinai as the "Oral Law". Can we say: Perhaps not all, but some of it could be *inferred* from what was given, with logic that may have been too complicated for Moses to understand?

If Euclid or Pythagoras could attend a lecture on modern mathematics, they, too, would be completely lost, yet modern mathematics is based on their work.

When is it time to die?

Moses God asked to die when he felt he could no longer be useful.

-An overreaction? He knew he was going to die very soon anyway.

The Torah says:

God said to Moses: The time is drawing near for you to die... You are soon to lie with your fathers. [Deut. 31:14-16]

-He was asking for some more time, then changed his mind, but still...

-Judaism does not encourage this attitude.

The Bible says:

כִּי-עֹפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל-עֹפָר תֵּשׁוּב:

For dust you are and to dust you will return. [Genesis 3:19]

and:

לְכֹל זְמַן וְזֶמֶן לְכָל-הַפֶּיַץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם: עֵת לֵלֶדֶת וְעֵת לָמוּת, עֵת לְטַעַם וְעֵת לְעֻקּוֹר נִטּוּעַ

For everything there is a season and a time for every experience under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted. [Eccl. 3:1-2]

When is that time? When you believe you can no longer contribute? When your betters come on the scene? When you reach mandatory retirement (statutory senility)? Unclear, because you don't control it. The Mishna says:

Repent one day before your death. [Avot 2:10]

May imply you know when that it, but really means do it now *because* you don't know.

Praying for your own death?

No suicide or euthanasia is allowed in Judaism. But is one allowed to pray for death?

You can pray for the death of someone who is incurably sick, in pain and dying. This is based on how Rabbeinu Nissim (14th century Spain) understood the Talmud [Nedarim 40a; Ketuvot 104a], and ratified by the Aruch HaShulchan [YD 335:3] and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein [Igrot Moshe CM 2:74]. This may imply, a fortiori, that one is allowed to pray for his own death.

-This permission is implied in the Torah account we just studied.

-It is also implied in the rest of the Bible, as in the case of the prophet Jonah:

Please, God, take my life, for I would rather die than live. [Jonah 4:2].

-It is also implied in the Talmud, as in the story of Honi the Circle-drawer, a first-century Mishnaic scholar:

Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. [Taanit 23a]

-It is also implied in the Midrash:

[There was] an old woman who became very advanced in years. She came before Rabbi Yosi Ben Halafta and said to him, "Rabbi, I have [lived until] I have become too old. At this point, [my] life has deteriorated. I have no taste for food or drink. I wish to be free from the world."

He said to her, "To what do you attribute your longevity?"

She said to him, "My custom is that, even if I have some vital matter to attend to, I set it aside, rise up early and go to the synagogue each day."

He said to her, "Restrain yourself and do not attend the synagogue for three consecutive days."

She went and she did so, and on the third day she took ill and died. [Yalkut Shimoni to Proverbs 8:34-35]

In these cases there was no physical or mental impairment. The person was too upset or too tired to go on living.

Conclusion

None. There are too many issues involved in end-of-life matters, and there are no one-size-fits-all answers. Judaism always stresses the sanctity of life and never allows it to be shortened intentionally.