

The (reluctant) death of Moses

In the last Torah portion of the year, *V'zot ha-berachah*, traditionally read on Simchat Torah, we hear about the death of Moses:

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab... And [God] buried him in a valley...; but no man knows his grave till this day. And Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was not dim, nor had his natural force abated... And there has not arisen since in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. [Deut. 34:5-7, 10]

The Midrash on Deuteronomy gives a detailed account of the death of Moses. It reads like a thriller, which is unusual for ancient commentary. It tells about how Moses absolutely, positively does not want to die, and uses every argument he can think of to get a reprieve. He fights off the Angel of Death, even beats him up. He recites all his merits one by one. He asks to at least be allowed in the Promised Land, saying: Just as I witnessed Israel's troubles, I want to witness their good fortune. He tells God, "I served you faithfully all these years, and this is how You repay me?" He accuses God of not following His own Torah by not paying the laborer's wages on time. He asks God to turn him into a bird instead of dying. The angels refuse to take away Moses' soul. So God orders Moses' soul to leave his body, but the soul refuses! So God gives Moses the kiss of death, then cries...

This account is so poignant that it deserves to be read in full. Here are some excerpts.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5-10

[The Torah says:

And this is the blessing that Moses, the man of God, bestowed upon the children of Israel before his death. [Deut. 33:1]]

What is meant by "before his death"? The Rabbis say: What did Moses do? He seized the Angel of Death and cast him down in front of him and [then] blessed the tribes, each according to its [appropriate] blessing.

Rabbi Meir said: The Angel of Death came to Moses and said to him: "God has sent me to you, for you are to depart this life today."

Moses replied to him, "Go away, for I wish to praise the Holy One, Blessed be He."...

The Angel of Death said to Moses: "Moses, why are you so arrogant? There are others in creation who can praise God. Heaven and earth praise [God] all the time."...

Moses replied to him, "I shall silence [heaven and earth] and praise [God]."

The Angel of Death then came to [Moses] a second time. What did Moses do? He pronounced over him the Ineffable Name [of God] and [the Angel of Death] fled. When he came to him a third time, Moses said, "Since [this decree] is from God, I must accept the righteousness of His judgment."

Rabbi Yitzhaq said: The soul of Moses struggled to leave. Moses was conversing with his soul, saying: "My soul, perhaps you think that the Angel of Death is seeking to gain dominion over you?"

[His soul] replied: "God will [surely] not permit it."

[Moses then said to his soul]: "Perhaps you have seen Israel weeping and you wept with them?"

Whereupon she replied:

[You have delivered] my eyes from tears. [Ps. 116:8].

Said Moses to her: "Do you think then that they have sought to thrust you into Gehinnom?"

Whereupon she replied:

[You have delivered] my feet from stumbling. [Ps. 116:8].

Said Moses to her: "And where are you destined to go?"

She replied:

I shall walk before the Lord in the lands of the living. [Ps. 116:9].

When Moses heard this he gave her permission [to leave], saying to her:

Return, O my soul, to your rest, [for God has been kind to you]. [Ps. 116:7]

When Moses was about to depart this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him:

Behold, your days are drawing near [to die.] [Deut. 31:14]

[Moses] replied before [God]: "Master of the Universe, after all my toil [for You and for Israel], You say to me, "Behold, your days are drawing near [to die.]!"

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord. [Ps. 118:17]"

Thereupon God said: "You cannot prevail [in this matter], for this is [the destiny of] all men." [Eccl. 12:13].

Moses then said: "Master of the Universe, I ask of You one favor before I die, that I may enter [the Land of Israel] and that all the gates of heaven and in the depths be opened so people will see that there is none beside You."

Whereupon God replied: "You said [regarding Me]:

There is none else. [Deut. 4:39]

I, too, say,

And there has not arisen a prophet like Moses in Israel..." [Deut. 34:10]

[God said to Moses:]

Behold, your days are drawing near [to die.] [Deut. 31:14]

Rabbi Evu said: Moses said: "Master of the Universe, with the word [behold! (*hinne!*)] that I have used to praise You among the 600,000 Israelites who hallowed Your name, you decreed the death penalty upon me! [Deut. 10:14] [Don't you reward] measure for measure? [Why then do you repay me] a bad measure for a good measure, a short measure for a full measure, a grudging measure for an ample measure?"

The Holy One, blessed be He, answered: "Moses, My use of the expression "behold" is also a good measure, as it is said [in Exodus, Proverbs and Malachi]:

Behold, I send an angel before you. [Ex. 23:20]

Behold, the righteous shall be requited in the earth. [Prov. 11:31]

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet. [Mal. 3:23].

And just as you have exalted Me before 600,000, so will I elevate you in the Time to Come among 550,000 altogether righteous men."...

[Moses thought: "When I prayed for God to have mercy on Israel, God granted my request.] Since I have not sinned from my youth, does it not stand to reason that when I pray on my own behalf God should answer my prayer?" And when God saw that Moses made light of the matter and that he was not engaging in prayer, He seized the opportunity to swear by His great Name that Moses should not enter the Land of Israel...

When Moses saw that the decree against him had been sealed, he resolved to fast, drew a small circle, and stood inside it. He said, "I will not move from here until You nullify that decree." What else did Moses do then? He... wrapped himself with sackcloth, rolled himself in the dust and stood in prayer and supplications before the Holy One, blessed be He, until the heavens and the order of nature were shaken. They said: "Perhaps it is the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, to renew His world." Whereupon a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming: "It is not yet the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, to renew His world..."

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do at that time? He proclaimed in every gate of each of the [seven] heavens, and in every Court, that they should not receive Moses' prayer, nor bring it before Him, because the decree against him had been sealed. God hastily summoned the Angel in charge of Proclamations, whose name was Achreziel, and commanded the ministering angels: "Descend quickly, bolt all the gates of every heaven, because the voice of [Moses'] prayer threatens to force its way to heaven."

And the angels sought to ascend to heaven because of the sound of Moses' prayer, for his prayer was like a sword which tears and cuts its way through everything, and spares nothing, seeing that his prayer was of the nature of the Ineffable Name which he had learned from Zagzag-el the Master Scribe of the children of heaven...

It is to that hour that [the prophet Ezekiel] alludes when he says:

And I heard behind me the voice of a great rushing: Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place. [Ezek. 3:12]

And “rushing” surely means trembling, and “great” surely refers to Moses... What is the meaning of, “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place”? When the wheels of the [Divine] Chariot and the fiery Seraphim saw that God commanded that Moses’ prayer should not be accepted and that He did not favor [Moses], did not grant him more life, did not bring him into the Land of Israel, they exclaimed: “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place,” for [from His position and station] there is no favoritism for persons great or small...

Moses said to God: “Master of the Universe, the hard work and the effort I have devoted to making Israel believe in Your name are manifest and known to You, as is the trouble I have taken to teach them Torah and commandments. I thought that, just as I witnessed their troubles, so too will I witness their good fortune. But now that the time of good fortune for Israel has arrived, You say to me:

You will not cross this Jordan. [Deut. 31:2]

You thus make Your Torah into a fraud, because in it You wrote [in regard to a paid worker:]

You will pay him on the same day [that he worked]. The sun shall not set upon him [without his being paid], for he is poor, and his life depends on it...[Deut. 24:15]

Is this the reward I get for forty years of work, during which I toiled so that [Israel] should become a holy and faithful nation?”

Samael, the wicked angel, the chief of all the accusing angels, was awaiting the death of Moses every hour, saying, “When will the time arrive for Moses to die, so that I may descend and take away his soul from him?” ...There is no one among the accusing angels as wicked as Samael and there is none so righteous among the prophets as Moses... So Samael the wicked was waiting for Moses' soul saying, “When will [the angel] Michael [Protector of Israel] be weeping and I be filling my mouth with laughter?”...

Meanwhile, only one hour [of life] remained for Moses.

Moses said to the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the Universe, if You will not allow me to enter the Land of Israel, leave me in this world [outside the Land] so that I may live [there] and not die.”

The Holy One, blessed be He, then said to Moses: “If I do not put you to death in this world, how can I bring you back to life in the World to Come? And what is more, you [would] make of My Torah a fraud, for in My Torah, written by your hand, it says:

And no one can rescue from My hand.” [Deut. 32:39]

Moses said to God: “Master of the Universe, if You will not bring me into the Land of Israel, let me become like the beasts of the field that eat grass and drink water, and live and enjoy the world. Likewise let my soul be like one of them.”

Whereupon God replied:

Enough! [Speak no more to me of this matter!] [Deut. 3:26]

Moses then prayed: "Master of the Universe, let me at least become in this world like a bird that flies about in every direction, and gathers its food daily, and returns to its nest towards evening. Let my soul likewise become like one of them." Whereupon God answered: "Enough!" What is the meaning of "Enough!"? God said to him: "You have spoken sufficiently."

When Moses saw that no creature could save him from the path of death, he exclaimed:

The Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and righteous is He. [Deut. 32:4].

What did Moses do? He took a scroll and wrote down upon it the Ineffable Name. The Book of the Song [of Haazinu] had not been completely written down when the moment of Moses' death arrived.

At that hour the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Gabriel: "Gabriel, go out and bring Moses' soul."

He, however, replied: "Master of the Universe, how can I witness the death of one who is equal to 600,000, and how can I behave harshly to one who possesses such qualities?"

Then [God] said to Michael: "Go out and bring Moses' soul."

He, however, replied: "Master of the Universe, I was his teacher, and he was my student. I cannot therefore witness his death."

[God] then said to Samael the wicked: "Go out and bring Moses' soul."

Immediately [Samael] clothed himself with anger, girded on his sword, wrapped himself with cruelty, and went out to meet Moses. When Samael saw Moses sitting and writing down the Ineffable Name, and how the radiance of his appearance was like the sun and he was like an angel of the Lord of hosts, he became afraid of Moses and declared: "It is certain that angels cannot take away Moses' soul."

Now before Samael showed himself to Moses, Moses knew of his coming, and when Samael caught sight of Moses, trembling and fear took hold of him, as of a woman in travail, and he did not have the effrontery to speak to Moses, until Moses said to him:

"There is no peace for the wicked, said God. [Isa. 57:21].

What are you doing here?"

He replied: "I have come to take away your soul."

Moses asked him: "Who sent you?"

He replied: "He who created all the creatures."

Moses then said to him: "You shall not take away my soul."

Whereupon he replied: "The souls of all who come into this world are delivered into my hands."

Whereupon Moses said: "I have more power than all who come into this world."

[Samael] then asked: "And what [demonstrates] your power?" Moses replied: "I, the son of Amram, emerged from my mother's womb circumcised. I did not need to be circumcised.

On the very day I was born, I found myself able to speak, walk and converse with my father and mother, and I had not yet even sucked [my mother's] milk.

When I was three months old I prophesied and declared that I was destined to receive the Law from the midst of flames of fire.

Once when I was walking in the street I entered the palace of the king and removed the crown from his head.

When I was eighty years old I wrought signs and wonders in Egypt and took out 600,000 before the eyes of all Egypt.

I divided the sea into twelve parts, I made the bitter waters sweet; I ascended heaven [to receive the Torah], I engaged in battle with the angels, I received the Torah of Fire, and I dwelt under [God's] Throne of Fire.

I took shelter under the pillar of fire, and spoke with God face to face.

I prevailed over the Heavenly Assembly, and revealed [the angels'] secrets to the sons of man.

I received the Law from the right hand of God, and taught it to Israel.

I made war on Sihon and Og, the two giants of the heathens to whose ankles the waters of the flood did not reach because of their [great] stature. I caused sun and moon to stand still on high, and I smote [the two giants] with the staff in my hand and killed them.

Is there any other man who can do the same? Go away from here, wicked one, and [do not dare compare me with other men]. Go, flee from before me. I will not surrender my soul to you."

Immediately Samael went back and reported to the Almighty.

Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Samael, "Go out [again] and bring Moses' soul."

Immediately [Samael] drew his sword from its sheath and stood over Moses.

Immediately Moses raged against [Samael], took the staff on which the Ineffable Name was engraved, and struck Samael with all his might until [Samael] fled from before him. [Moses] ran after him with the Ineffable Name, took a ray of majesty from between his eyes and blinded him.

At this point Moses' final moment arrived. A heavenly voice was heard, declaring: "The time of your death has come."

Moses said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, remember the day when You revealed Yourself to me in the bush and said to me:

Come now, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt. [Ex. 3:10] ?

Remember the time when I stood on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights? I implore You, do not deliver me to the hand of the Angel of Death."

Thereupon a heavenly voice was heard saying to him: "Fear not, I Myself will attend to you and to your burial."

At that hour, Moses arose and sanctified himself like the Seraphim, and God came down from the highest heavens to take away the soul of Moses. With Him were three ministering angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Zagzag-el. Michael laid out Moses' bed, Gabriel spread out a fine linen cloth at Moses' head, and Zagzag-el one at his feet. Michael stood at one side and Gabriel at the other side.

God said: "Moses, fold your eyelids over your eyes." And he did so.
He then said: "Place your hands on your chest." And he did so.
He then said: "Put your feet next to each other." And he did so.
Then the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned [Moses'] soul from the midst of [Moses'] body, saying to her: "My daughter, I have fixed the period of your stay in the body of Moses at 120 years. Now your end has come. Depart without delay."
Whereupon she replied: "Master of the Universe, I know that You are the God of all spirits and all souls, the souls of the dead and the living are in Your keeping, and You have created and formed me and placed me within the body of Moses for 120 years. And now, is there a body in the world purer than the body of Moses in which there has never been an offensive smell, nor worm nor maggot, nor any kind of vermin? Therefore I love him and I do not desire to leave him."

Whereupon God exclaimed: "Soul, go out, do not delay, and I will raise you to the highest heavens and will place you under the Throne of Glory next to the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and other troops of angels."

The soul replied: "Master of the Universe, two angels, Uzah and Azael, came down from near Your Divine Presence, coveted the daughters of the earth, and corrupted their way upon the earth until You suspended them between earth and heaven. But...from the day You revealed Yourself to [Moses] at the Bush, he has had no marital relations with his wife [and is therefore greater than the angels]... I beg You: Let me remain in the body of Moses."

Thereupon God kissed Moses and took away his soul with a kiss of the mouth. And subsequently, the Holy One, blessed be He, wept, as it were...

And the Holy Spirit said:

And there has not arisen since, in Israel, a prophet like Moses. [Deut. 34:10]

The heavens wept and said:

The devout one has disappeared from the earth. [Micah 7:2]

The earth wept and said:

And the upright among men is no more. [Micah 7:2]

And when Joshua was looking for his master and did not find him, he also wept and said:

Help, O Lord; for the devout one is no more, for truthful people have vanished from mankind. [Ps. 12:2]

And the ministering angels said:

He executed the righteousness of the Lord. [Deut. 33:21]

And Israel said:

And His ordinances with Israel. [Deut. 33:21]

All were saying:

He enters into peace. They rest in their beds who walk in their
uprightness [Isa. 62:2]

The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing. [Prov. 10:7]

And his soul [is destined] for life in the World to Come.

[Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5-10]

Chag sameach!