

"A SIMPLE FAREWELL"

The theme that dominates these days is that of farewell.

Shemini Atzeret comes at the tail end of the Sukkot holiday, which itself is the conclusion of the whole High Holiday season, including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Rabbis explain Shemini Atzeret, this one-day celebration at the end of the holiday season, as a special day set aside by God. He may be compared, they say, to a king who invited his children for a feast for a number of days. When the time came for him to take leave of them, he said to them, *בְּיָמֵי בְּקִשְׁתִּי מִכֶּם עָנְכֶם עִמִּי*, "My children, please stay with me for a while, even for only one more day; it is difficult to take leave of you."

And the biblical figure who dominates this holiday, when we read the last portion of the Torah, is that of Moses delivering his last discourse and then dying.

There is something pathetic about Moses in this role. He is a man who looms larger than life itself. Yet his death is so very human! He wants so desperately to live, that he is even reduced to begging: *וְאֵלֹהִים הָיָה בְּעֵינֵי הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵי הָאָדָם וְאָמַר אֵלֶיךָ*, "And I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying...let me, please, cross over and see that good land..."

The Rabbis fill in the gaps in this biblical account of the dialogue between God and Moses, and they add that Moses said: "if I cannot come in as the leader, let me come in at the end of the procession as an ordinary Jew. And if I cannot come in alive, let me at least come in dead, to be buried in the promised land."

But the divine response was, No! *וְשָׁמַר לֹא תַעֲבֹר*, you shall not cross over there. Moreover, the Tradition adds that Moses wrote the last words of the Torah by himself, with his quill dipped into an ink made of his own tears: *וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה* "And Moses died there" -- there, on the plains of Moab, not in his Promised Land.

When the Rabbis approach this story of the death of Moses, they make a number of interesting remarks, one of them which has always astonished me.

*דָּבָר יָדוּעַ שֶׁלֹא יָדוּעַ, תּוֹרָה תְּחִלָּתָהּ גְּמִילִים חֲסִידִים וְסוֹפָהּ גְּמִילִים חֲסִידִים. תְּחִלָּתָהּ דְּבָרִים יִצְחָקִים אֲלֵכֶיךָ לְאָדָם וְלֵאמֹר כְּתוּב עוֹר וְיִלְבָּשֶׁם. סוֹפָהּ דְּבָרִים וִיקְבֵּר אִתּוֹ בְּגִיא.*

Rabbi Samlai taught: the Torah begins with an act of loving-kindness, and concludes with an act of lovingkindness. In the beginning, as it is written, "and the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them." And the end, as it is written, "and He buried him in the valley."

Now, I can understand why the Rabbis saw the beginning of the Torah as one characterized by divine charitableness. Providing clothing for primitive man was a way of giving him warmth, protection against the



elements -- and, even more, a sense of dignity which raised man above the natural order and elevated him above the animal. Clothing is a response to a sense of shame, and that is one of the things that makes mankind human.

But how, and why, should the verse, "and He buried him in the valley," be regarded as *וְיָסַד אֱלֹהִים*, an act of divine loving-kindness?

I can imagine if some medieval church had written this story. It would have offered a script in which Moses bodily ascends to Heaven, in the company of a chorus of singing angels, leaving only a halo to mark the spot of his ascension. Had Mohammedans reworked this story, they would have had Moses charging the Gates of Heaven, his sword held aloft, whilst astride a white Arabian steed. A Greek tragedian would have brought Moses' life to a grand, tragic, smashing climax -- perhaps a duel with Satan who finally pierces the heart of Moses which gushes forth blood endlessly, across the ages. A modern scenario for Moses would have had him awarded him a Nobel Prize; or, as our country recently did for George Washington, posthumously granted him the rank of a six-star general; or invited him to address the assembled United Nations from the same rostrum that was dignified by the appearance of Yasir Arafat...

Instead, the Bible offers us nothing but an utterly simple farewell. No act of bravery, no dramatic climax -- Moses just lies down and dies.

The Midrash describes the scene in a manner that is pathetic in its simplicity. God says to Moses, "Moses, lie down." And Moses lay down. "Moses, fold your hands across your chest." And Moses folded his hands across his chest. "Moses, close your eyes." And Moses closed his eyes. Whereupon, God softly kissed Moses, and thus withdrew his soul from his body. And so, Moses is dead. No witnesses, no audience, no long list of obituaries in *The New York Times*, no fancy mausoleum, no unveiling in the company of family and friends. Instead, *וְיָסַד אֱלֹהִים*, no one knows his burial place until this very day. For thirty days the people mourned him. At the end of this period, *וְיָסַד אֱלֹהִים*, "And the days of the mourning for Moses came to an end." Finis, it is all over.

And this, according to the Rabbis, is an act of *וְיָסַד אֱלֹהִים*, of lovingkindness!

My own intuitive feeling has always been that this was an unkind cut, a cruel blow. This powerful, Titanic figure, this Moses who flaunted the might of Egypt and forced the Pharaoh and his Empire to his knees, who gathered up this pitiful group of slaves and molded a nation out of them, who dealt a mortal blow to the hold of paganism on the ancient world and turned civilization around, ushering in a new age -- this historic giant was reduced to begging for a few more days of life! I find it heartbreaking that Moses must plead for these extra favors. I can almost imagine what went on in Moses' heart, if not his lips: "God, I gave my sweat and my blood for this people, I suffered through every kind of agony because of them and received nothing in turn but ingratitude -- shall I be deprived of this one bit of pleasure?



This obstreperous and obstinate people, who never forgave me for elevating them to greatness, who awarded my forty years of service with rebelliousness and accusations against me -- accusing me of adultery, of stealing their donkeys -- may I not even have the privilege of seeing their fecility? And God, was it I who wanted this mission? Did I not respond to you, *אשר צוה ה' אלי*, send them through someone else, but leave me alone? Was it not You who insisted that I be their shepherd? Will you now deny me this one bit of *nachas*, this one last act of satisfaction? Kill me, if You will, O Lord, but at least bury me there!" And the answer comes: No! *אשר אבד משה* -- You shall not cross over -- and the Lord buried him in the valley. Not even on the mountaintop, but down deep, in the valley!

And this, the Rabbis tell us, is *אברהם אבינו*, is the charitable and loving way in which the Bible ends! How can we account for this interpretation?

I suggest three ways in which to understand this rabbinic tradition.

First, the *אברהם אבינו* the Rabbis refer to was not an act of lovingkindness for Moses, but for all the rest of mankind, for all of posterity, for you and for me. They are teaching us that life's work is never done, that no career is ever perfect, that no achievement is ever complete. There are always faults, always gaps, always lacunae, always flaws in the painting and chips in the statues that we build and conceive of. This is not only a sobering thought, but also a consolation to all the rest of us that even a Moses was not perfect, even a Moses did not reach his Promised Land, even a Moses was not fully successful.

Had Moses completely succeeded and attained the full realization of his vision by crossing into the Promised Land, life would have become unbearable for the rest of us. Knowing that perfection is humanly possible, and full success is humanly attainable, it would have made nervous wrecks of us, even those who are not obsessively compulsive. It is, therefore, a *אברהם אבינו* to us when we recognize, through the biography of Moses, that failure and imperfection are essentials of the human condition. With the knowledge that no life and no endeavor can be perfect, even that of a Moses, we can allay our anxieties about our own imperfections, our own lack of full achievement and absolute success. Hence, *אברהם אבינו*, this story at the end of the Torah is indeed an act of charity to all of mankind.

The second answer would be that the utterly simple farewell of Moses was an act of *אברהם אבינו* primarily for Joshua, the successor of Moses.

As is, it was extremely difficult for any man to follow a Moses. I do not envy a Joshua! Anything but a simple farewell would have made it literally impossible for a Joshua to function as a leader and for the loyalties of the people to be transferred from Moses to Joshua. A triumphant march into Eretz Israel, capping his prophetic career with a brilliant victory, or even a dramatic death for Moses, would have rendered the transition from Moses to Joshua virtually impossible.

So it was an act of *אברהם אבינו* for Joshua -- and also for the Children of Israel -- that Moses' death was undramatic and uneventful.



Even more, it was in this sense an act of kindness for Moses too, for his goal was not to enhance his own reputation and add to his own prestige, not caring what went on after him -- "apres moi le deluge" -- but his goal was the eternity of Israel and the perpetuation of Torah. By having his last wish denied, by understating his death, Providence assured that his mission would continue, his life's work would be perpetuated. *וְיָשׁוּב מִן הַמָּוֶת!*

Third, and finally, the simple farewell was an act of lovingkindness to Moses by virtue of its very simplicity. Why? Because Moses needed no heroic act to signify heroic ends, for all his life was an exercise in heroic holiness. His quiet, uneventful death highlighted and emphasized by contrast the dramatic quality and the heroic texture of his whole life. Courage and valor were his every-day companions. Hardihood of spirit, fortitude of character, firmness of backbone were his daily experience and daily equipment. He needed no closing act, no grand finale, no heroics or histrionics, for no death could be as great as his life, as impressive as his teachings.

When a man is remembered for one act, no matter what it be, he has lived for but a moment. But if he is remembered for his whole life, he has achieved immortality.

No wonder that the Torah says of Moses that *וְעַיִן מֹשֶׁה לֹא נִכְחַת וְכֹחַ מֹשֶׁה לֹא נִשְׁחַלַּח*, his eye was not dimmed and his vigor was not abated. Moses was too busy living to begin to die. The Agaddah tells us that he ascended the fifteen steps to the peak of Mount Nebo, where he died, *בְּכֶסֶד אֶחָד*, in one quick step or leap. His end came quickly and simply. It was not really death, but simply the cessation of life.

To appreciate why this was a *וְיָשׁוּב מִן הַמָּוֶת*, an act of loving-kindness, consider what would have happened had he experienced a dramatic death, whether of victory or of defeat. This man Moses, who spent his life reproaching his people, urging them to repentance, disturbing their peace, goading them, restlessly prodding them on from level to level, denying them peace of mind -- all his life would have been vitiated by a dramatic farewell, which would have been the only thing the Israelites would have remembered! The Israelites would have been all too prone to forget his whole life, all his teaching, all his message, all the annoying irritations that constituted Moses' mission, in favor of mythologizing and dramatizing and reenacting his death.

It was therefore a favor to Moses to force him to a simple farewell, and thus perpetuate the nobility of his whole life and his whole prophetic career.

Indeed, no parent wants to be remembered only for the way he died, no matter how noble; he wants the whole of his life and what he lived for to be perpetuated. No teacher wants to be remembered only by his last lecture, no rabbi by his last sermon.

To summarize, then, this simple farewell was *וְיָשׁוּב מִן הַמָּוֶת* for three reasons. First, it was an act of kindness to all men and women thereafter, in order to reassure us that no life or career is perfect, that we must do the best we can and be grateful for it.

Second, it was an act of *וְיָשׁוּב מִן הַמָּוֶת* to Joshua -- and even to Israel and Moses himself -- to make it possible for someone else to



begin with a fair chance for success, and not impose upon the successor the excessive burden of a glorious climax of a predecessor.

Finally, it was an act of *אֲדֹנָי הָאֱלֹהִים* to Moses, so that the dramatic conclusion not obscure and outshine the far more significant achievements of his whole life, not to let the people forget his historic service.

So, the theme of farewell is suffused with charity and gentleness and goodness.

God, as it were, closes the holiday somewhat sadly -- *וְעַתָּה אֲנִי מֵסֵר אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד יְהוָה*, "it is difficult for Me to say farewell to you" -- and yet hopefully and warmly: *וְעַתָּה אֲנִי מֵסֵר אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד יְהוָה*, stay on for a while, brace yourself for the long Winter to come, and wait for the next *אֲדֹנָי הָאֱלֹהִים*, the next festivals, to begin.

And the Books of Moses, like the life and mission of Moses, come to an end.

Somewhat sadly and longingly, but also lovingly and hopefully -- and even joyously, with *וְעַתָּה אֲנִי מֵסֵר אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד יְהוָה* on this *וְעַתָּה אֲנִי מֵסֵר אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד יְהוָה* -- we close the book of Moses, and open up the next one, the book of Moses' successor Joshua, and we listen intently and hear and respond, with our hearts full of devotion and sensitivity and the purest of sentiment, to the words *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, "Be strong and take courage."

And may God bless you all.

---