

LIVING AND DYING IN ANCIENT TIMES

DEATH, BURIAL, AND MOURNING
IN BIBLICAL TRADITION



Simcha Paull Raphael

Foreword by Shaul Magid

Living and Dying
in Ancient Times



Jewish Life, Death, and Transition Series

Living and Dying in Ancient Times

*Death, Burial, and Mourning
in Biblical Tradition*

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*“The old shall be renewed,
and the new shall be made holy.”*

— Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook

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*This book is dedicated to
Dr. Jean Ouellette
Professor, Études Juives
Université de Montréal –
my first professor of Biblical Studies at
Sir George Williams University
Montreal, Canada
who opened my mind to the world of
Biblical scholarship and study*

MOSES' DEATH AND THE STAGES OF DYING

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES the motif of Moses' death. In particular, I examine ways in which Moses responds to the reality of his impending death, as documented in Torah and a series of accompanying *midrashim*.

Textually, there are more variant Midrashic traditions on Moses' death than on any other deathbed narrative in Jewish tradition. As a consequence, the various Biblical and Midrashic texts provide a rich model to explore the complex process people go through in grappling with the approach of death. In a sense, Moses' death—said to be caused by a “kiss from God”—is the ideal model for people to strive for. Through a *mélange* of creative Midrashic traditions on Moses' death, we are guided and invited to think about our own personal and cultural attitudes towards the experience and process of dying.

Moses' Death in Torah

Early in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is informed that he will die without realizing his life-long dream of entering the Promised Land. We find a rather curt dialogue between Moses and

God: “Please let me cross the Jordan River,” Moses pleads, “Let me see the wonderful Promised Land, the beautiful hills, and the mountains of Lebanon across the Jordan.” (Deut. 3:25)

This is not at all an unreasonable request from a man who dedicated his life herding an unruly mass of 600,000 souls from the dregs of Egyptian slavery toward a land flowing with milk and honey. But his aspirations to cross the River Jordan were not to be fulfilled, because: “The Lord was angry at me, and would not listen. The Lord angrily told me, ‘That is enough! Do not speak to Me any more about My decision.’” (Deut. 3:26) Essentially, God tells Moses: “This issue is non-negotiable! I am not going to speak with you about your death any more. It’s a done deal!” Once decreed by God, there was to be no further protest or rebuttal from Moses.

However, in an act of compassion and mercy, God does permit Moses a temporary glimpse of the Land—“You can climb to top of Mount Pisgah, and look West, North, South, and East. Take a good look” ... but Moses gets just a glance of the Promised Land and nothing more: “because you will not cross the Jordan River.” It will be his successor Joshua, and not Moses, who will bring the people into the Land. (Deut. 3:27-28)

Further on in Deuteronomy, we see how Moses shares this news with the entire Israelite nation, stating quite simply: “I must die on this side of the

Jordan River, but you will be the ones to cross over and occupy the Promised Land.” (Deut. 4:22) From this text, we are left with the impression that Moses accepts his fate with composure and equanimity. It appears to be the end of the matter; there is no further discussion on the topic. Moses is going to die—that’s it! Even as we move towards the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses reviews his life, and with a sense of silent acceptance he says nothing more about his approaching death. It seems like a done deal.

And in the closing verses of Deuteronomy 32, God once more reminds Moses of his fate:

Climb Mount Avarim, to Mount Nebo, in the land of Moab, facing Jericho; and see the land of Canaan, I am giving the Israelites as an inheritance; you will die on the mountain that you are climbing, and be gathered to your people ... you shall see the land from afar; but you shall not go there to the land ...(Deut. 32: 49-50; 52)

A reading of these Torah texts reveals absolutely no protestations whatsoever from Moses, nor any emotional or existential angst about his impending end of life. It is obvious that Moses had effectively been silenced much earlier.

As the story of Moses—Moshe ben Amram v’Yocheved—winds down to its final conclusion,

with the factual nostalgia of a newspaper obituary, at the end of Deuteronomy we are told:

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-Peor; but no man knows his grave till this day. And Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. (Deut. 34:5-7)

While the Torah does report on the grief of the Israelite people—“For thirty days the Israelites mourned Moses on the plains of Moab” (Deut. 34:8)—there is nothing whatsoever in Deuteronomy that reveals any sense of Moses’ own reaction to the inevitability of his death, east of the Jordan. Uncharacteristically, in these various passages from the last book of the Torah, Moses comes across as an obedient servant, surrendering to God’s decree with barely a word of complaint.

Moses’ Death in Midrash — The Five Stages of Dying

But something seems amiss in the verses from Torah. Experience working with the dying suggests that, in sometimes uncanny ways, an individual’s

response to their impending death often mirrors the style of how they lived their life. In Moses' passive, milquetoast reaction to his death decree, we do not see any traces of the courageous leader who challenged the Egyptian slavery system of Pharaoh and his taskmasters, nor the tempestuous lawgiver who, in his hasty rage broke the first set of tablets, and then had the perseverance to return another forty days to Mt. Sinai for a second set of tablets. Given the fiery passion with which Moses lived his life, it seems something is missing in these Torah narratives.

To get a more complete picture of Moses' end-of-life drama, we turn to Midrash and find there an exceptionally elaborate legendary delineation of Moses' death, portraying a radically different point-of-view than the one in Deuteronomy.

In Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah (XI,10); Midrash Tanhuma (Va'ethanan 6); Sifre on Deuteronomy (Piska 305); and Midrash Petirat Moshe (among other texts) can be found extensive textual material describing Moses' cajoling, manipulative and argumentative disputations with God. From the heated conversations between Moses and God that appear in Midrash, not surprisingly, we discover that Moses did not "go gentle into that good night"; instead, he chose to "rage, rage against the dying of the light"—in the words of the poet Dylan Thomas. Midrash depicts a fascinating range of Moses' reactions to his death,

accompanied by passionate self-advocacy for a stay of execution. He believed he was rightfully entitled to enter the Promised Land, and, at least according to Midrash, did all he could to change God's decree, although to no avail.

Midrashim presented below, culled from Deuteronomy Rabbah and Tanhuma, illuminate Moses' process of psychological transformation in response to the imminence of his death. Based upon the work of Rabbi Allan Kensky,⁶¹ we see that Moses goes through, what amounts to, the five stages of dying—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—as articulated by the Swiss-born psychiatrist, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.⁶² Each stage has its own characteristic emotional reactions, leading towards a slow and yet inevitable acceptance of death.

Denial

When first told that he shall not enter the Promised Land, Moses completely sidesteps the import of the decree, rather overtly denying its inevitability. According to Deuteronomy Rabbah, after the Heavenly Tribunal decreed his death-sentence, Moses just ignored it, assuming it really did not apply to him. His reasoning was that since God had previously forgiven the people of Israel whenever requested to do so, God would simply

do the same on his behalf:

Israel have many times committed great sins, and whenever I prayed for them, God immediately answered my prayer, as it is said, Let Me alone, that I may destroy them (Deut. 9:14); yet what is written there? And the Lord repented of the evil (Ex. 32:14) ... Seeing then that 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? (Deut. R. XI, 10)

Even knowing that the decree against him had been sealed, Moses' denial of his death persisted, and we see him continuing to assume that his actions would vanquish death's inevitability:

... he took a resolve to fast, and drew a small circle and stood therein, and exclaimed: "I will not move from here until You annul that decree." What else did Moses do then? He donned sackcloth and wrapped himself with sackcloth and rolled himself in the dust and stood in prayer and supplications before God, until the heavens and the order of nature were shaken. (Deut. R. XI, 10)

This attitude of ignoring the echoes of the inescapable call of death is frequently observed

among people dealing with cancer and other forms of illness. As Kübler-Ross observed: “the need for denial exists in every patient at time, at the very beginning of a serious illness.”⁶³ The truth is, as both Sigmund Freud⁶⁴ and Ernst Becker⁶⁵ observed, as mortal human beings we have a hard time seeing our own demise. People often need time to accept the inevitability of their own death, and Moses is no exception.

All too often it is easy to respond with judgment or derision when people are frantically seeking every kind of traditional and alternative treatment to what appears to be a terminal diagnosis. But it is important to understand that the need to deny the inevitability of death and fight for one’s life is part of the very nature of being human. What is most helpful for those in this situation is to offer loving support and compassion to those—who just like Moses—avoid staring their own death in the face while assiduously denying and defying death’s call.

Anger

We know from the experiences of being with people who are dying that their psycho-emotional responses keep changing. With Moses, in passages from Midrash Tanhuma, suddenly we see the headstrong, cantankerous Moses re-emerge.

He is argumentative with God, belligerent, even somewhat sarcastic. In the tone of his dialogue with God, we see Moses' anger about his imminent death:

“For naught have my feet stepped on the clouds. For naught have I run before you like a horse, as now I will become as a worm” ... God said to him: “I have already decreed death on the first human.” Said Moses: “Then let the first human die, for you commanded him one small *mitzvah* and he transgressed it, but don't let me die!” ... God said to him: “But Abraham who sanctified in my name in the world died.” Said he: “Abraham begat Ishmael, whose descendants provoke you” ... God said to him: “Isaac who spread his neck on the altar died.” Said Moses to God: “Isaac who begat Esau who destroyed the Temple and burnt your sanctuary.” God said: “Look at Jacob who begat twelve tribes of whom none were unfit.” Said he to God: “Jacob did not go up to heaven; neither did he step on the clouds, nor was he like the ministering angels. You did not speak to him face to face and he didn't receive the Torah from you.” (Tanhuma, V'Ethchanan 6).

Here Moses is comparing himself with others who have come before him, reminding God of

how loyal a servant he has been. Adam, he says, was asked to do one *mitzvah*—not eat from the Tree of Knowledge—and he disobeyed! Abraham brought Ishmael into the world “whose descendants provoke you” (understood in the context of the time to mean Muslims); Isaac brought Esau into the world, whose descendants destroyed the Temple; none of Jacob’s descendants were righteous. But I Moses—he claims—spoke to you God face to face and received your Torah. Angrily reciting his resume of accomplishments to God, here is vociferously advocating for himself and rationalizing why he should not die.

But all Moses’ emotionality notwithstanding, God held steadfast in His decree. The text informs us that God bolted the gates of heaven to ensure Moses’ prayers would not be accepted, and that he not be granted continued life, nor enter the Holy Land. (Ibid)

So in spite of Moses’ angry protestations, nothing changed! Similarly, in the context of caring for the dying, we often see people facing death getting angry at doctors and other medical personnel, at family, at the small little upsets of life. The anger is a frustrated response to the powerlessness in the face of illness and dying. While uncomfortable for family and care-givers, anger is one of the many predictable stages in the process of wrestling with a decree of death.

Bargaining

Seeing that neither denial nor anger were effective, Moses became more desperate, and began bargaining with God:

“Master of the Universe,” said Moses, “if You will not bring me into the Land of Israel, leave me in this world so that I may live and not die.” (Deut. R. XI, 10) [God’s refusal was swift. Again Moses pleaded:] “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 as one of them.” (Ibid.) [God was unrelenting, but so was Moses:] “Master of the Universe, if not, let me become in this world like the 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.” (Ibid.)

All the machinations of Moses’ bargaining were ineffective, and did nothing to alter his fate. God was unmoved and once again silenced Moses. Being unrelenting, Moses continued his pleading in various ways, begging for mercy of heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars, planets, mountains,

hills, and ocean; sadly none of those forces of the universe were able to intervene on Moses' behalf. In these grasping and desperate final acts, we see how willing Moses is to go to all ends of the earth to stay alive and to experience the unfulfilled vision of his life, to enter the Promised Land.

This is very similar to what we see how dying people are more than willing to subject themselves to all kinds of medical treatments and procedures with the hope of staying alive, while knowing at some level their demise is inevitable. Just like we see with Moses' bargaining, the desperate pleading and bargaining leads nowhere, only to a slowly dawning awareness that the inevitable end is approaching.

Depression

Continuing his manipulative machinations, eventually Moses appeals to a transcendental, supernal being known as *Sar Panim* (Minister of the Interior), one of many angelic presences in Rabbinic literature. But even here, Moses' words fell on deaf ears. "Moses, my master, why all this trouble?" the angel responds with dispassionate veracity: "I have already heard from behind the curtain that your prayer will not listened to in this matter." (Tanhuma, V'Ethchanan 6) Sorry Moses, he is told, looks like you are running out of options.

In this retort, the reality of his impending death came home to Moses with powerful impact: “Moses put his hands on his head, and cried, who will pray for me?” (Ibid.) It is clear at this point that the stage of depression has set in. Like a cancer patient who has just been told there are no more treatment options, Moses is finally beginning to see the inevitable. Death is staring him in the face, and it hurts. For the very first time there are genuine tears of grief. Moses’ personal identity is beginning to dissolve, no longer is he the invincible leader who talked with Pharaoh and split the sea; climbed mountains and inspired an unruly nation for forty years. Vulnerable and defenseless, Moses confesses to God: “I am afraid of the angel of death.” (Ibid.)

Even as his defenses begin to wear down, Moses is not yet ready to surrender to his own demise. As one close to death, he desperately needs comfort from those around him. With his brother and sister already dead, Moses, the man of the mountain, yearns for tender comfort from the God who has been his life-long ally and nemesis. He begs: “Do not hand me over into the hand of the Angel of Death.” (Deut. R. XI, 10) In response to his fear, *Bat Kol*, a divine emissary—an aspect of the transcendent God that manifests in the human realm—comforts Moses: “Fear not, I myself will attend to you and your burial.” (Ibid.)

We see in these texts an exact mirroring of what

goes on for people in staring their own death right in the face. After the emotional roller coaster of denial of death, angry outbursts against God and manipulative machinations to try and change his destined decree, Moses realizes that his death cannot be stayed. He falls into a depressed sense of despair. But at the same time, we see him honor and accept his vulnerability. And it is this exact process that is evidenced so frequently when people realize there are no more medical treatments which can give them any sense of hope that they might live. There are no more maybes, there is only the reality and inevitability of death. Then, as we see with Moses, the only and best option is to open up to being with surrounding family and friends, and with God, in a spirit of humble vulnerability.

Acceptance

In the interplay of parallel, but variant, texts in Tanhuma and Deuteronomy Rabbah, we see Moses' life wind down, as he moves towards an acceptance of his death, and a peaceful resolution with God and with the Israelite nation. Tanhuma describes how Moses sees Joshua taking over as teacher of the Israelite nation. Seeing this Moses seems to relax knowing his legacy shall continue and he is finally able surrender to God: "Master of

the Universe, until now I have asked for life, now my life is given to you.” (Tanhuma, v’Etchanan 6)

As the struggle dissipates, and Moses finally begins to accept the reality of his death, an odd shift transpires. We see here that the polarity of conflict between God and Moses breaks down: with Moses no longer fighting desperately to stay alive and defy his ordained fate, God too begins to grieve, lamenting the loss of his long-time champion and defender.

Once Moses accepted his death, God opened and said: “Who will take my part against evil men?” (Ps. 94:16). Who will stand up for Israel in the time of my anger, who will fight the battles of my children, who will seek mercy for them when they sin before me? (Tanhuma, v’Etchanan 6)

Reflecting the human dynamic in acceptance of one’s own death, in Midrash Tanhuma we see how Moses now focuses on the completion of his relationship with the Israelite people. Satisfied that his legacy will continue through Joshua, Moses can reach far beyond his individual suffering and gives his final blessings to the nation, as recorded in Deuteronomy—“This is the blessing, with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death.” (Deut. 33:1) Moses asks for forgiveness for the pain he caused the people

in bringing them the Torah and the *mitzvot*. In turn, Israel asks Moses for forgiveness for the pain they have caused their revered leader. Closure takes place, all is forgiven, and after an exhausting ordeal Moses is finally and unequivocally prepared to die.

The moment of death arrives, and after all the *Sturm und Drang*, God and Moses are no longer in an adversarial relationship with one another. The final moments are full of blessing. Moses experiences the most peaceful death possible, the kiss of God:

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, and with Him were three ministering angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Zagzagel. Michael laid out his bier, Gabriel spread out a fine linen cloth at his bolster, Zagzagel 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 upon your breast," and he did so. He then said: "Put your feet next to one another," and he did so. Forthwith the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned the soul from the midst of the body, saying to her: "My daughter, I have fixed the period of your stay in the body of Moses

at a hundred and twenty years; now your end has come, depart, delay not ... Thereupon God kissed Moses and took away his soul with a kiss of the mouth ... (Deut. R. XI, 10)

Finally, as the grand finale to a sacred story of wandering and yearning to live the destiny of God's calling, the Torah so eloquently and simply reminds us:

There never was another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face. No one else could have performed all the wonders and miracles that God allowed Moses to perform before Pharaoh, in the land of Egypt, or any of the powerful miracles and awesome deeds that Moses performed before the eyes of all the Israelites. (Deut. 34:10-11)

From this creative collage of *midrashim*, we see a far more elaborate depiction of Moses' death than that delineated in Torah. In the multifaceted range of emotions experienced by Moses, we see the essential nature of the human encounter with death—stark and unadorned, passionate and dramatic but full of potential for healing and redemption. What Moses went through in his intense pleading for life, mirrors the kind of processes family members and friends go through in dealing with terminal illness and end-of-life

dramas. What we learn from Moses, in both life and in death, is to live with authenticity, following one's destiny, wrestling with God and striving for a life imbued with a sense of God's presence. It is this above all which will guide us dealing with the ultimate end-of-life callings all human beings are destined to experience.

- ripped symbolically and which I wore throughout week of mourning.
- 54 See “Poems About Baal Anat,” (trans. H.L. Ginsberg), in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 125, quoted by Bar p. 340.
- 55 Bar, *Ibid.*
- 56 See Gary Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance—Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
- 57 While *kinah* and its plural *kinot* are the terms used to describe funerary dirges in the Hebrew Bible, Amos 5:16 has an infrequently used term *nehi* to speak of songs of lamentation.
- 58 Bar, p. 313.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 60 Bar, p. 313. See Jennifer Joy Goldstein Lewis, *The Meqonenot and Beyond: Female Voices in Communal Prayer, Rabbinic Thesis*, New York: Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (March 2005), and Tova Gamliel, *Aesthetics of Sorrow—The Wailing Culture of Yemenite Jewish Women*, trans. Tova Gamliel (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2014).
- 61 Allan Kensky, “On Death and Dying and the Last Days of Moses,” *Reconstructionist* (Spring 1992), 25-27.
- 62 Kübler-Ross.

63 Ibid, p. 41.

64 Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974) 14:273-302, 1915.

65 Ernst Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

66 This term is used by Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Dying* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998).

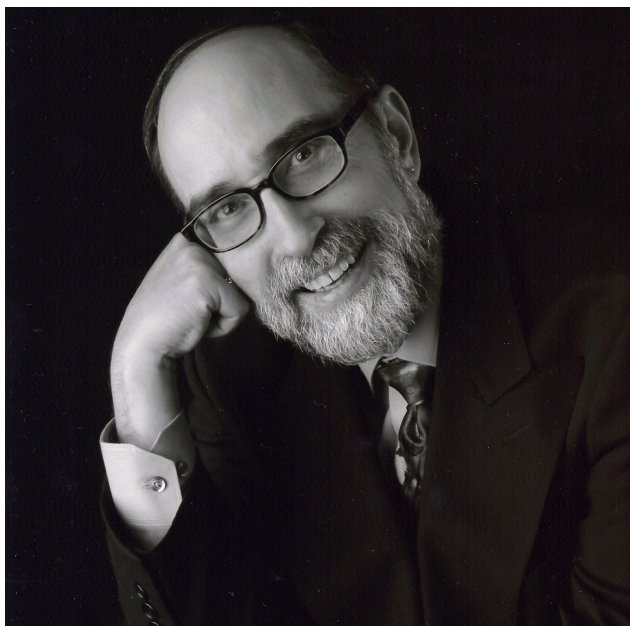


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In this brilliantly researched and clearly articulated treatise, Simcha Paull Raphael takes us on a journey into our ancient past and gives us back our instinctual capacity to understand and do honor to end of life experience and practice. This is one aspect of the human experience which does not beg to be improved upon with technological advances, but rather to be restored to the realms of mystery and intuition.

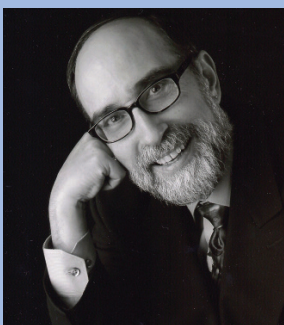
— Rabbi Nadya Gross, Co-Director of Programs, Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

Simcha Paull Raphael combines over three decades of therapeutic experience with careful readings of biblical texts to produce a well-crafted book that brings ancient insights into our own contemporary questions about death and dying.

— Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D., Professor of Biblical Studies, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Those already familiar with Simcha Paull Raphael's classic study Jewish Views of the Afterlife will welcome this insightful essay that almost reads as a prerequisite to his previous work. Here the author presents a dual perspective, both historical and contemporary, and guides the reader through a fascinating maze of biblical and midrashic texts rigorously scrutinized and analysed. Living and Dying in Ancient Times demonstrates that the ancient texts of Biblical tradition provide a valuable source of reflection on the reality of death and dying in our own world.

— Jean Ouellette, Ph.D., Études Juives, Université de Montréal



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