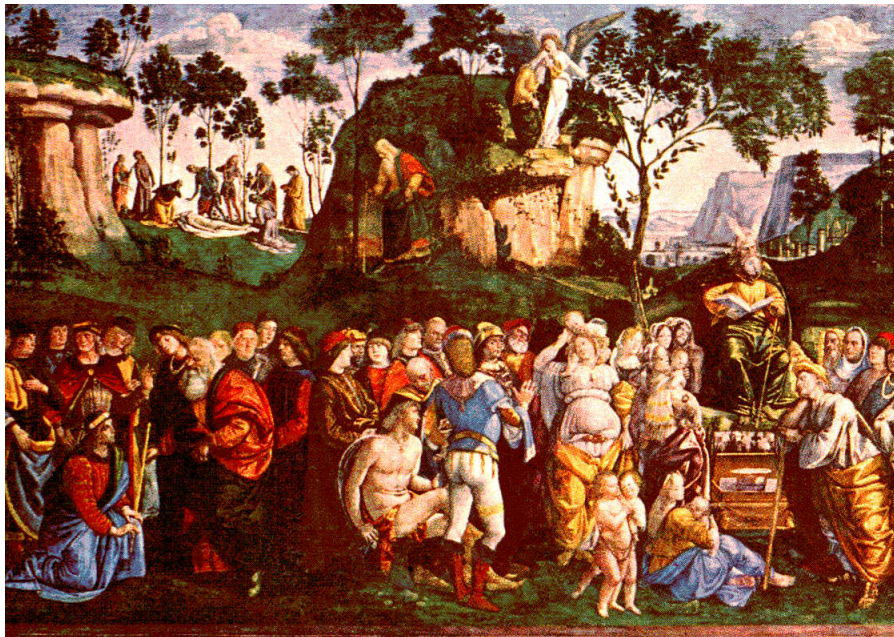


***DEATH OF MOSES IN TORAH AND MIDRASH:  
A SACRED JOURNEY THROUGH THE STAGES OF DYING***



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## **DEATH OF MOSES IN TORAH AND MIDRASH - A SACRED JOURNEY THROUGH THE STAGES OF DYING**

Early in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is informed that he will die without realizing his life-long dream of entering the Promised Land. In *Parshat Ve'etchanan*, we find rather curt dialogue between Moses and G!d: *"Please let me cross the Jordan River"*, says Moses, *"Let me see the wonderful Promised Land, the beautiful hills, and the mountains of Lebanon across the Jordan"* (Deut. 3:25).

This is not 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: *"Adonai was angry at me, and he would not listen. Adonai angrily told me, 'That is enough! Do not speak to Me any more about My decision'"* (Deut. 3:26). Essentially G!d tells Moses 'this is non-negotiatiable', shutting out the possibility of further protest or rebuttal.

Displaying mercy, G!d 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 nothing more: *"because you will not cross the Jordan River."* Joshua not Moses will bring the people into the Land (Deut. 3:27-28).

Reading further in *Parshat Ve'etchanan*, Moses shares this news with the entire Israelite nation, saying 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). Here we are left with the sense that Moses accepts his fate with total equanimity. It appears to be the end of the matter; there is no further discussion on the topic. Even in *Parshat Ha'azinu*, as Moses reviews his life, he says nothing further about his immanent death. However, in the closing verses of Deuteronomy 32, G!d 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)*

עַל־הָהָר הָעֶבְרִיִּים הִזָּה הָר־נֹבֹךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי יַרְחוֹ וְרָאָה אֶת-אֶרֶץ  
כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֻחֻזָּה: וּמֵת בְּהָר אֲשֶׁר אֲתָה עֹלֶה שָׁמָּה וְהָאֶסְף אֶל-עַמִּיךָ  
בְּאֶשֶׁר-מֵת אֶהְרֹן אַחִיךָ בְּהָר הַהוּא וַיֵּאסֹף אֶל-עַמּוּיָו... כִּי מִנִּגַּד תִּרְאֶה אֶת-הָאֶרֶץ וְשָׁמָּה לֹא  
תָבוֹא אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. דְּבָרִים לֵב: מִט-נ, נב

Again there are no protestations from Moses; he has effectively been silenced much earlier. As the story of Moses ben Amram v'Yocheved winds down to its final conclusion, with the factual nostalgia of a newspaper obituary we are told:

*So Moses, Adonai's servant, at His command died there in the land of Moab. Adonai buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-Peor. No one even to this day, knows the place where he was buried. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, but his eyes were sharp and he was still strong and healthy (Deut. 34:5-7).*

וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד-יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל-פִּי יְהוָה: וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּגִי בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב מוֹל  
בֵּית פְּעוֹר וְלֹא-יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת-קְבֻרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: וּמֹשֶׁה בֶן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמָתוֹ  
לֹא-כָהָתָה עֵינָיו וְלֹא-נָס לַחַהּ. דְּבָרִים לָד: הִזִּ

While the Torah does report on the grief of the Israelite people - "*For thirty days the Israelites mourned Moses on the plains of Moab*" - nowhere in Deuteronomy do we get a sense of Moses' reaction to his untimely death, east of the Jordan. Uncharacteristically, he comes across as an obedient servant, surrendering to G!d's decree with barely a word of complaint. This is not the Moses who argued with G!d throughout his leadership career. The way in which he accepts his death suggests that perhaps something is missing here.

In turning to Midrashic tradition we discover a radically different point of view regarding Moses' death than that documented in Torah. In *Midrash Rabbah* (XI,10); *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Va'ethanan* 6); *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (Piska 305); and *Midrash Petirat Moshe* we find extensive documentation of Moses' argumentative disputations with G!d. 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. Moses did not want to die! Throughout Midrash we see his passionate self-advocacy for a stay of execution so that he could enter the Promised Land, as he believed he was rightfully entitled.

Material presented below from *Deuteronomy Rabbah* and *Tanhuma* illuminates Moses' process of psychological transformation in response to the immanence of his death. Based upon the work of Rabbi Allan Kensky, [Allan Kensky, "On Death and Dying and the Last Days of Moses"] we shall see that Moses goes through, what amounts to, the five stages of dying - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance - as articulated by the Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Each stage has its own characteristic emotional reactions, leading towards a slow and yet inevitable acceptance of death.

When first told he shall not enter the Promised Land, Moses sidesteps the import of the

decree, rather overtly **denying its inevitability**. According to *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, after the heavenly High Court finally decreed his death sentence, Moses ignored it, assuming it simply did not really apply to him. He reasoned that since G!d had forgiven Israel in response to previous requests, G!d would 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)*

ישראל חטאו חטאות גדולות כמה פעמים וכיון שבקשתי עליהם רחמים מיד קבל ממני  
שנאמר (דברים ט) הרף ממני ואשמידם מה כתיב תמן שמות ל"ב וינחם ה' על הרעה  
(במדבר ל"ב) אכנו בדבר ואורישנו מה כתיב תמן (שם במדבר י"ד) ויאמר ה' סלחתי  
וגו', אני שלא חטאתי מנעורי לא כל שכן כשאתפלל על עצמי שיקבל ממני

Even knowing that the decree against him had been sealed, Moses' denial of his death persisted, with him continuing to assume that his actions would vanish 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).*

וכיון שראה משה שנחתם עליו גזר דין גזר עליו תענית ועג עוגה קטנה ועמד בתוכה,  
ואמר איני זז מכאן עד שתבטל אותה גזירה, באותה שעה מה עשה משה לבש שק  
ונתעטף שק ונתפלש באפר ועמד בתפלה ובתחנונים לפני הקב"ה עד שנודעו שמים  
וארץ

In *Midrash Tanhuma*, the headstrong, cantankerous Moses emerges. He is argumentative with G!d, belligerent, even somewhat sarcastic. In the tone of his dialog we see Moses' anger about his immanent 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; translation Allan Kensy).*

רבונו של עולם לשוא דשו רגלי ערפל, לשוא רצתי לפני בניך כסוס, סופי רימה ותולעה ... אמר לו כבר קנסתי מיתה על אדם הראשון, אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם אדם [הראשון] היה ראוי למות, מצוה קלה צוית אותו ועבר עליה, ואני לא אמות, א"ל הרי אברהם שקידש את שמי בעולם ומת, אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם הרי יצא ממנו ישמעאל שגזעו מכעיסין לפניך, שנאמר ישליו אהלים לשודדים ובטוחות למרגיזי אל לאשר הביא אלוה בידו (איוב יב ו), א"ל הרי יצחק שפשט צוארו על גבי המזבח, אמר לפניו מיצחק יצא עשו הרשע, שהחריב מקדשך ושרף היכלך, א"ל הרי יעקב שיצאו ממנו שנים עשר שבטים, אמר לפניו יעקב לא עלה לרקיע, ולא דשו רגליו בערפל, ולא קיבל תורה מידך, ולא דיבר עמך פנים אל פנים

All Moses' emotionality notwithstanding, G!d held steadfast in His decree. G!d bolted the gates of heaven to ensure Moses' prayers not be accepted, and that he not be granted continued life, nor enter the Holy Land.

Seeing that neither denial nor anger were effective, Moses became more desperate, and began bargaining with G!d. *"Master of the Universe"* said Moses, *"if You will not bring me into Eretz Israel, leave me in this world so that I may live and not die"* (Deut. R. XI, 10). G!d's refusal was swift. Again Moses pleaded: *"Master of the Universe, if You will not bring me into Eretz 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). G!d 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. G!d was unmoved, and again silenced Moses. In various ways, Moses continued his pleading, begging for mercy of heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars, planets, mountains, hills, and ocean none of whom could intervene on Moses' behalf. Yet in this grasping final acts, we see how willing he is to go to all ends of the earth to stay alive, and to see experience the unfulfilled vision of his life, to enter the Promised Land.

Eventually Moses asked a supernal being known as *Sar Panim* (Minister of the Interior), who spoke with dispassionate veracity: *"Moses my Master, why all this trouble? I have already heard from behind the curtain that your prayer will not listed to in this matter."* (Tanhuma, V'Ethchanan 6).

In this retort, the reality of his 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. 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 G!d: *“I am afraid of the angel of death” (Ibid)*. Moses is not yet ready to surrender to his own demise. As one close to death, he is needing comfort from the those around him. With his brother and sister already dead, Moses, the man of the mountain, yearns for tender comfort from the G!d 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, comforts Moses: *“Fear not, I myself will attend to you and your burial” (Ibid)*.

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 G!d and with the Israelite nation. *Tanhuma* describes how Moses sees Joshua taking over as teacher of the Israelite nation, and seeing this Moses is finally able surrender to G!d: *“Master of the Universe, until now I have asked for life, now my life is given to you” (Tanhuma, v'Etchanan 6)*.

An odd shift now transpires, as Moses finally begins to accept the reality of his death. We see in the Midrash that now G!d 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?’ (Psalms 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?” (Ibid)*.

In *Tanhuma*, Moses completes his relationship with the Israelite people. Satisfied that his legacy will continue through Joshua, he gives his final blessings, as we see recorded in Chapter 33 of Deuteronomy - *“This is the blessing, with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death” (Deut. 33:1)*. He 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 Moses is prepared to die.

The moment of death arrives, and after all the *Sturm und Drang* G!d 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 G!d:

*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 3 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 thy stay in the body of Moses at a hundred and twenty years; now thy 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).*

**באותה שעה עמד משה וקידש עצמו כשרפים וירד הקדוש ברוך הוא משמי שמים העליונים ליטול נשמתו של משה ושלשה מלאכי השרת עמו מיכאל וגבריאל וזגזגאל, מיכאל הציב מטתו של משה וגבריאל פירס בגד של בוך מראשותיו וזגזגאל מרגלותיו מיכאל מצד אחד וגבריאל מצד אחד אמר הקב"ה למשה משה השקיף עיניך זה על גב זה והשקיף עיניו זעג"ז אמר לו הנח ידך על החזה והניח ידו על החזה אמר לו הקף רגליך זעג"ז הקיף רגליו זעג"ז זה על גבי זה באותה שעה קרא הקב"ה לגשמה מתוך גופו אמר לה בתי מאה ועשרים שנה קצבתוך היותך בגופו של משה עכשיו הגיע קצך לצאת צאי אל תאחרי... באותה שעה נשקו הקב"ה ונטל נשמתו בנשיקת פה**

And finally, as the grand finale to a sacred story of wandering and yearning to live the destiny of G!d's calling, the Torah so eloquently and simply reminds us:

*There never was another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Adonai knew face to face. No one else could have performed all the wonders and miracles that Adonai 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).*

**וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ יְהוָה פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים: לְכָל-הָאֲתוֹת וְהַמּוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרֹעַה וּלְכָל-עַבְדָּיו וּלְכָל-אֶרֶץ: וְלֹכַל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלֹכַל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל: דברים לד:י-יב**

Through Midrash we discover a more elaborate depiction of Moses' death than that delineated in Torah. In the range of emotions experienced by Moses, we see the essential nature of the human encounter with death, stark and unadorned, but full of potential for healing and redemption. As in his life, so in his death Moses teaches us how to wrestle with G!d to live a life of authenticity, a life imbued with a sense of G!d's presence.

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