

After a set of laws pertaining to vows, we read that Moses has some unfinished business to complete before he dies:

**וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. נָקָם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים
 אַחֲרֵי תֹאסֹף אֶל עַמִּיךָ. (בְּמִ' לֹא: ב)**

Exact retribution of the Children of Israel from the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered to your kinspeople. (Num. 31:2)

In the aftermath of the idolatrous Midianite seduction, 24,000 Israelites had died. By luring the Israelites into idolatry just as they were about to enter their destination, the Midianites transformed a triumphant moment into a disaster. It was humiliating and catastrophic. It was also a powerful reminder that Israel would always have to be on guard against the idolatry and its associated evils. It is puzzling that God would want this to be Moses' final act before his death. Indeed, now that he knows he will die immediately after this war, we would think that he would want to stretch out the preparations and the campaign for as long as possible. But instead, he acts immediately, effectively hastening his own demise. Rabbi Yehuda picks up on this in the midrash (Numbers Rabbah 22:2):

**אֵלֹהֵי הָיָה רוֹצֵה מֹשֶׁה לְחַיּוֹת כְּמָה שְׁנִים הָיָה חַי, שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ
 בְּרוּךְ הוּא נָקָם וְאַחֲרֵי תֹאסֹף. תִּלְהֵ הַכְּתוּב מֵיָתְנוּ בְּמִדְיָן, אֲלֵא לְהוֹדִיעָךְ
 שֶׁבָּחָו שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, אָמַר בְּשִׁבְלִי שֶׁאֲחִיָּה יַעֲקֹב נִקְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִיָּד
 (בְּמִדְבָּר לֹא, ג): וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם לֵאמֹר...**

If Moses had wanted to live a little longer, he could have, since the Holy One blessed be He said to him, Exact retribution and afterwards you will be gathered... (i.e. die). However, the text connects Moses' death to the war against Midian to teach us Moses' praiseworthiness. Moses said: Am I supposed to live in order to delay (God's justice) and the retribution of Israel? Immediately, Moses spoke to the people...

According to the midrash, Moses' decision to subordinate his self-interest, i.e. survival, to the fulfilment of divine justice was an act of greatness. He understood that nothing superseded God's justice, and that to be the leader of Israel meant that he would be God's agent in delivering God's justice to Midian and by extension, to the rest of the world. That would be his final act. As with all final acts, that act would define him forever. Using the same phrase,

be gathered to one's kin, let us see how other characters in the Torah are defined by their final acts.

1. Death of Abraham Gen. 25:5-8	וַיָּמָו אַבְרָהָם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ לְיִצְחָק. וְלִבְנֵי הַפִּילִגְשִׁים אֲשֶׁר לְאַבְרָהָם נָתַן אַבְרָהָם מִתְּנוֹת וַיִּשְׁלַחם מֵעַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בְּעוֹדָו חַי קְדָמָה אֶל אֶרֶץ קְדֵם...וַיָּגָע וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשִׁבְיָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשֹׂבַע וַיֹּאסֹף אֶל עַמִּיו.
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Abraham gave over all that was his to Isaac. And to the sons of the concubines that Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Isaac his son while he was still alive, eastward, to the Eastland...then he expired. Abraham died at a good ripe-age, old and satisfied [in days], and was gathered to his kinspeople.

2. Death of Isaac Gen. 35:27-29	וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב אֶל יִצְחָק אָבִיו מִמְרָא קְרִית הָאַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן אֲשֶׁר עַר שֵׁם אַבְרָהָם וַיִּצְחָק. וַהֲיָיו יָמֵי יִצְחָק מֵאֵת שָׁנָה וְשָׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה. וַיָּגָע יִצְחָק וַיָּמָת וַיֹּאסֹף אֶל עַמִּיו זָקֵן וְשֹׂבַע יָמִים וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אוֹתוֹ עֲשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּנָיו.
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Jacob came home to Isaac his father at Mamre, in the city of Arba—that is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. And the days of Isaac were a hundred years and eighty years, Then Isaac expired. He died and was gathered to his kinspeople, old and satisfied in days. Esav and Jacob his sons buried him.

3. Death of Jacob Gen. 49:33	וַיְכַל יַעֲקֹב לִצְוֹת אֶת בְּנָיו וַיֹּאסֹף רַגְלָיו אֶל הַמַּשָּׁה וַיָּגָע וַיֹּאסֹף אֶל עַמִּיו.
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Jacob had finished charging his sons; then he gathered up his feet onto the bed and expired, and was gathered to his kinspeople.

4. Death of Aaron Num. 20:24-26	וַיֹּאסֹף אַהֲרֹן אֶל עַמִּיו כִּי לֹא יָבֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר מָרִיתֶם אֶת פִּי לְמִי מְרִיבָה. קַח אֶת אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת אֱלֶעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְהַעַל אֹתָם הַר הָהָר. וְהַפָּשַׁט אֶת אַהֲרֹן אֶת בְּגָדָיו וְהַלְבַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת אֱלֶעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְאַהֲרֹן יֹאסֹף וַיָּמָת שָׁם.
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Let Aaron be gathered to his kinspeople, for he is not to enter the land that I am giving to the Children of Israel— since you [both] rebelled against my orders at the Waters of Meriva. Take Aaron and Elazar his son and bring them up on Hill's Hill; strip Aaron of his garments and clothe Elazar his son in them. Aaron will be gathered and will die there.

1. Abraham's last act was to create and execute an estate plan. First, he clarifies beyond any question or doubt that his entire estate will go to Isaac. This is despite the fact that there are several other possible claimants to that estate, namely, the sons of his concubines: Ishmael, the son of Hagar, and Zimran, Yokshan, Medan, Midian, Yishbak and Shuah, the sons of Keturah. By giving them "gifts" and sending them out of the land while Isaac was still alive, Abraham makes it clear that Isaac is the sole heir. The "gifts" - which were probably items of significant value, function as a kind of compensation to them for their loss. But Abraham's goal was clear: to bequeath the land and his estate to Isaac alone. We tend to overlook this detail and see it as a footnote to Abraham's life. However, it ought to be seen as one of the most important defining moments of his life and his character. **From the moment Abraham was introduced to us in the Torah, until his death, he is portrayed as someone who is able to uniquely combine an unparalleled devotion to God together with an extraordinarily fierce ability to determine and protect his self-interest.**

2. Contrast this with Isaac. When Isaac dies, the Torah doesn't tell us of anything that Isaac *does*. Rather, it tells us that **Jacob came home**. This reminds us, of course, that Isaac never leaves the land. But it should also remind us of

the additional blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob, that is, after Jacob stole Esau's blessing. (Gen. 28:1-4).

So Isaac called for Jacob; he blessed him and charged him, saying to him: You are not to take a wife from the women of Canaan. Arise go to the country of Aram, to the house of Betuel, your mother's father, and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother. May God Shaddai bless you, may he make you bear fruit and make you many, so that you become a host of peoples. And may he give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your seed with you, for you to inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.

Even though this last scene reinforces the portrait of Isaac as the most passive of all the patriarchs, it also reasserts his identity as Jacob's father. When Jacob comes home to *Isaac his father* prior to Isaac's death, it solidifies the generational continuity and validates Isaac's most important role: he was the bridge between Abraham and Jacob.

3. With the death of Jacob, the nucleus of the future nation of Israel is finally intact. Prior to his death, Jacob assembled his sons around his bed, (Gen. 49:1):

Then Jacob called his sons and said: Gather round, that I may tell you what will befall you in the aftertime of days.

We often refer to this passage as the *Testament of Jacob*. It imprints each of the future tribes with the words that will characterize them forever, such as: *The scepter shall not depart from Judah* (Gen. 49:10), *Benjamin a wolf that tears to pieces!* (Gen. 49:27), etc.

Part blessing, part prophecy, part reprimand, part accolade, the *Testament of Jacob* functions as the literary coda to a complicated life of personal struggle, displacement, rivalry and reconciliation, combined with extraordinary personal tragedy, and redemption. As the father of the nation, Jacob lays out the spiritual map for Israel's future in his final moments.

4. In the final scene of Aaron's life, Aaron, like Isaac is passive. The priestly vestments are transferred from him to his son. The meaning of his final moment is direct and simple: **the priesthood transcends death, and its continuity from Aaron will be eternal.**

These different examples of final moments and their meanings bring us back to Moses. In truth while the war with Midian - which we read as Moses' total commitment to God's justice - was supposed to be Moses' final act, there are at least two other moments which could constitute Moses' final acts before he is **gathered unto his kin**. In last week's parasha God said to Moses (Num. 27:12):

Go up to these Mountains of Avarim/The-Region-Across and see the land that I am giving to the Children of Israel. [When] you have seen it, you will be gathered to your kinspeople,

But immediately after that, Moses implores God to appoint a successor (Num. 27:16-17):

Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, make accountable a man over the community who will go out before them, who will come back before them, who will lead them out, who will bring them back, so that the community of the Lord will not be like a flock that has no shepherd.

While Aaron's death signifies the religious continuity of the people in the form of a dynastic priesthood, Moses, prior to his own death, wants to ensure the non-dynastic political continuity of the people in the form of a worthy successor. While the Torah tells us that the war with Midian will be Moses' last act, the truth is that we still have a long way to go before Moses **will be gathered to his kin**. An entire book awaits us in which Moses will deliver speeches, recount important moments, reiterate commandments, issue new quasi-constitutional commandments relating to the land and governance, and deliver a concluding set of blessings and curses. Not to be outdone by Jacob, he will also deliver his own final testament and blessing. And when we read his final, *final* moments, we will see that before he dies, Moses will be with God alone. In his final scene, God will personally show Moses the entirety of the land and declare, (Deut. 34:4):

זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק
אֶתְנַתְּנָהּ רְאִיתִידָהּ בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר.

This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying: To your seed I give it! I have let you see it with your eyes, but there you shall not cross.

If Moses' were to have died immediately following the war with Midian, we would have concluded that the essential meaning of Moses' life was that he was supposed to be an instrument of God's justice. But by situating Moses' death immediately following the moment that God shows him the land, we are left to conclude that the defining feature of Moses' life was **his relationship with God**. The enduring final image of Moses, standing on Mount Nevo and gazing at the land, will serve ultimately as a symbol of Israel: that Israel is permanently located at the nexus of past and future. Moses may not be able to enter the land himself, but his words do, and they will forever shape the destiny of the people of Israel.

The final acts and words of a person's life are definitive. They shape our memories of people and disclose the essence of who they were. First impressions matter; but last impressions will last...forever. Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS DAY 302. WE PRAY FOR THE HOSTAGES AND THEIR FAMILIES. MAY GOD HEAL THE WOUNDED SOLDIERS OF THE IDF AND PROTECT ISRAEL DURING THIS TIME OF GREAT UNEASE AND FEAR OF TERROR.

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by David Brotman and Cindy Patrych Brotman in honor of the birth of their grandson, Owen Jules Leiner. Mazel Tov!