



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

## **Parshat Mattot-Mase'i: Descent for the Sake of Ascent** Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn Class of 2016

אין זה כי אם ירידה זו היא צורך עליה, "This descent must be for the sake of ascent".

We have all said a version of these words. Sometimes as a question: "Can this struggle really lead to success?" "Is this all worth it?". Other times as a hopeful prayer: "May this be the last low point on my upward journey". But in his *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe actually says these words as a statement of fact: "This going down is for the sake of going up".

*Emunah* and the capacity to find goodness and meaning no matter what, is something we as Jews all strive to feel in our kishkas. But as we all know, when bad things happen-- when our loved ones die, when we are feeling disappointed or hurt in our relationships, or when we are going through a bout of spiritual disconnection-- having hope, perspective, and the belief that our struggle is worthwhile is hard.

And so, with the Alter Rebbe's words, we are faced with a challenge: How *can* we say and really mean, אין זה כי אם ירידה זו היא צורך עליה, "This descent is for the sake of ascent", when we feel sad, hopeless, and angry? Is it even possible?

Let's look at Moshe's response to one of his moments of struggle to gain more insight. In our parsha, *Matot-Massei*, God reminds Moshe that not only will he not lead the people into Israel, but he will have to watch from afar and then die. אַחַר תִּקְּצֹף אֶל-עַמִּיךָ, "After [B'nai Yisrael conquers the land] you will be gathered to your people". And yet, in this moment when he could have objected and expressed his disappointment, sorrow, and fears, Moshe follows God's command and acts in the best interest of B'nai Yisrael. He empowers others to triumphantly lead the people in God's battle, וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מִשָּׁה. He gives them the instruction and chizuk to conquer the land he will never enter.

Moshe shifts his perspective and ours. His silence about his personal struggle makes it clear that he does not deny his loss. A response with words may have even diminished his struggle, as we have seen elsewhere in Aharon's silence after the death of his sons. And yet, instead of dwelling on the bad, Moshe chooses to be proactive and think beyond his pain. He focuses on those whom he loves and leads, and he empowers them to do what he cannot. As we have seen him do many times before, Moshe models humility, honesty, the capacity to surrender to God's plan, and the ability to make goodness no matter what.

Later in Devarim, Rashi teaches that in regards to how Moshe handled his imminent death outside of the land of Israel, God said to Moshe, רב לך הרבה מזה שמור לך, "More than [the land of Israel] is reserved for you", רב טוב הצפון לך, "Much is the goodness that is kept for you". Because of his shift in perspective and his choice to empower the people despite his loss, we see that Moshe is not only comforted but also rewarded with God's goodness.

*Moshe* made it so that his descent was for the sake of his ascent.

Rav Soloveitchik offers a similar model to Moshe's shifting of perspective, and it is one that applies to us right now. Regarding "the three weeks", the time of mourning for the Beit HaMikdash that we

are presently in, the Rav teaches that though we are heartbroken over the destruction of Hashem's home, as we should be, we must also find comfort in the fact that God destroyed the Temple and not us. Hashem could have wiped us out many times, but instead He decimated His own home.

That God saved us charges us with the task of being worthy of being saved. We must create goodness and empower each other. We must care for each other, as we failed to before. We must make meaning, legacy, and a home for God in our lives even without a physical Temple.

With the Rav's wisdom, we view the inconceivable tragedy and destruction of the Beit HaMikdash as צורך עליה, for the purpose of ascent, because in the face of exile we learn what our sins and failings are, how to do better in the future, and how to internalize gratitude for what we do have. It is our choice and obligation to make our story not just about destruction and descent, but also about gratitude, rebuilding, and ascent.

עליה צורך היא זה כי אם ירידה זו היא צורך עליה, "This descent is for the sake of ascent". To utter the Alter Rebbe's words of faith in the face of sadness, hopelessness, and anger is certainly possible. Through Moshe and the Rav, we see that it requires we be willing to shift our perspectives and proactively make our lives about creating goodness and Godliness.

This Shabbat, let's practice saying the Alter Rebbe's words, not as a question or as a prayer, but instead as a statement of fact. For we will be rewarded with the goodness we create in the midst of our destruction and loss.

Our struggles will lead to success. Our sorrows are part of a greater story of joy. Our pain is not for nothing. Our descent is part of our ascent.



*Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn is a member of the spiritual leadership at B'nai David-Judea Congregation, an Orthodox shul in Los Angeles. She received her semikha from Yeshivat Maharat and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Brandeis University with a degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Classical Studies Archaeology and Ancient History. Rabbanit Alissa is also a Board Certified Chaplain (BCC) through Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC). Rabbanit Alissa is on the board of NAJC and on the board of the Rabbis and Cantors Retirement Plan. She is a member of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Clergy Roundtable and the Pico-Robertson Mental Health Neighborhood. In 2017, she was chosen as one of the Forward50, the Forward's annual list of the 50 most influential, accomplished, and interesting American Jews.*