

Parshat V'Zot HaBracha: On Writing and Dying with Tears

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In the final verses of the final chapter of the Torah, Moshe, beloved leader of Israel, dies.

1 And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, [to the] top of the summit facing Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the Land: The Gilead until Dan, 2 and all [the land of] Naftali, and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, until the western sea, 3 and the south, and the plain, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, until Zoar. 4 And the Lord said to him, "This is the Land I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." (Deuteronomy 34:1-4)

א וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מֵעֲרַבְתּוֹ מוֹאֵב אֶל־הַר נְבוֹ רֹאשׁ
הַפְּסֹגָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי יְרֵחוֹ וַיְרְאֶהוּ ה'
אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַגִּלְעָד עַד־דָּן: ב וְאֶת־
כָּל־נַפְתָּלִי וְאֶת־אֶרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת־
כָּל־אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה עַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרוֹן: ג וְאֶת־הַנֶּגֶב
וְאֶת־הַכְּנָר בְּקִעַת יְרֵחוֹ עִיר הַתְּמָרִים עַד־צֹעַר:
ד וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזָרְעֶךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה
הָרְאִיתִיךָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְשָׂמָה לֹא תַעֲבֹר: (דְּבָרִים לֵד:
ד-א)

At the peak of Mt. Nebo, Moshe glimpses what he will never see up close, the Promised Land. Its glory laid out before him, he bears witness to the near-fulfillment of the ancient dream, but is withheld from experiencing it. "You shall not cross over there," he is reminded one last time. And then he expires.

5 And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there, in the land of Moab, by the mouth of the Lord. 6 And He buried him in the valley, in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Pe'or. And no person knows the place of his burial, unto this day. 7 Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eye had not dimmed, nor had he lost his [natural] freshness. 8 And the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days, and the days of weeping over the mourning for Moses came to an end. 9 And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands upon him. And the children of Israel obeyed him, and they did as the Lord had commanded Moses. 10 And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, 11 as manifested by all the signs and wonders, which the Lord had sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his servants, and to all his land, 12 and all the strong hand, and all the

ה וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עַבְד־ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאֵב
עַל־פִּי ה': ו וַיִּקְבְּרֵהוּ בְּגִי בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאֵב
מִזֶּה בֵּית פְּעוֹר וְלֹא־יָדָע אִישׁ אֶת־קְבֻרָתוֹ
עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: ז וּמֹשֶׁה בֶן־מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים
שָׁנָה בָּמָוֶתוֹ לֹא־כָהָתָה עֵינָיו וְלֹא־נָס לַחֹה:
ח וַיָּבֹכּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּעֲרַבְתּוֹ
מוֹאֵב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְמָוּ יָמָיו בְּכִי אֲבָל
מֹשֶׁה: ט וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נּוּן מְלֵא רוּחַ חֲכָמָה
כִּי־סָמַךְ מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדָיו עָלָיו וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֵלָיו
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:
י וְלֹא־קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר
יָדָעוּ ה' פְּנִים אֶל־פְּנִים: יא לְכָל־הָאֲתָת
וְהַמוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרָיִם לְפָרְעוֹה וְלְכָל־עַבְדָּיו וְלְכָל־אֶרֶצוֹ: יב
וְלְכָל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלְכָל הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: (דְּבָרִים
לד: ה-יב)

great awe, which Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel. (Deut. 34:5-12)

With these words, the Torah ends.

These last eight verses pose a challenge to traditionally faithful readers of the Torah text, those who read all five books as the dictate of God to Moshe. Who actually wrote these verses? Since they give an accounting of Moshe's death, how could he have written them down? But if he did not, who did? And how then can the integrity and holiness of the Torah be maintained?

Referencing the Talmud and Midrash, Rashi raises and offers some answers to these questions:

And Moses... died there: Is it possible that Moses died, and [then] wrote, "And Moses... died there"? But [the answer is:] Moses wrote up to that juncture, and Joshua wrote from then on. Says Rabbi Meir: But is it possible that the Torah Scroll would be lacking anything at all, and yet Scripture states (Deut. 31:26), "Take this Torah Scroll" [and Moses commanded this to the Levites; so, according to the above opinion, is it possible that the Torah Scroll referred to there was an incomplete one, up to the juncture of Moses's death? This cannot be!] Rather, [continues Rabbi Meir, we must say that] The Holy One, blessed is He, dictated this [i.e., the verses "And Moses... died there" and beyond], and Moses wrote it in tears. [BT Baba Batra 15b, Sifrei 33:34] (Rashi, Deut. 34:5)

וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה. אֶפְשָׁר מֹשֶׁה. מֵת וְכָתַב "וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה", אֲלֵא עַד כָּאן כָּתַב מֹשֶׁה, מִכָּאן וְאִילָךְ כָּתַב יְהוֹשֻׁעַ. רַבִּי מֵאִיר אֹמֵר, אֶפְשָׁר סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה חָסֵר כְּלוּם, וְהוּא אֹמֵר "לִקְחָ אֶת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה" (לְעִיל לֹא: כּו), אֲלֵא הַקֵּב"ה אֹמֵר וּמֹשֶׁה כּוֹתֵב בְּדַמָּע (ספרי שני; ב"ב טו ע"א): (רש"י, דברים לד:ה)

According to the Talmud, it was R. Judah (and some say R. Nehemiah) who stipulated that the last verses of the Torah were written not by Moshe, but by Joshua, his successor. After the death of Moshe, someone else had to take up his pen. Someone else had to tell the story of his passing. On account of this, there are many legal thinkers who view the last eight verses of the Torah as less holy, as it were, and several *halakhot* (laws) were put in place to reflect that diminished status.

But it is the latter position, ascribed to R. Meir by Rashi (and the Sifre) and to R. Shimon by the Talmud, that I'd like to explore. The last words of the Torah were indeed dictated by God and scribed by Moshe, they say. But not (only) in ink, as was everything else. Rather, in tears. Ever the teacher and ever the leader, Moshe performed one last heartbreaking mission before his death. He recorded his own end. וּמֹשֶׁה כּוֹתֵב בְּדַמָּע.

What did this mean? To Rashi and the Ritva, Moshe was overcome by anguish at the prospect of his own demise--perhaps due to his inability to enter the land of Israel, perhaps due to his fears of what might become of his people, or perhaps due to sheer impotence in the face of frightful mortality. He wrote what he needed to write prophetically, but he did so overwhelmed by sorrow. He could write but he could not speak its content, as he did with the other parts of the Torah.

"God would say": Moshe would repeat what God said to ensure that he was not mistaken and then he would write down [what he heard]. "Thereafter, Moshe wrote in tears": He did not repeat God's word [he could only write them down] out of anguish. (Rashi, BT Menachot 30a)

הקב"ה אומר- ומשה אומר אחריו כדי שלא יטעה בכתב וכותב. מכאן ואילך משה כותב בדמעה- ולא היה אומר אחריו מרוב צער. (רש"י, בבלי מנחות ל.)

On this view, the final verses of the Torah were written in ink, but ink infused with the salty water of Moshe's tears.

Another view, offered by early *chassidim* as well as the Vilna Gaon—not a common pairing—is that the word "דמע" ("tears") can also refer to mixtures, in this case jumbles of letters not yet intelligible. Moshe thus did not write through tears, but through confusion.

Our rabbis taught (BT Bava Batra 15a) that the eight final verses of the Torah were written by Moshe in tears. I heard in the name of the great rabbi, our leader the Baal Shem Tov z"l, that "*dema*" (tears) actually refers to mixtures, as is known from the Talmud (BT Gittin 52b) [which uses the phrase] "*ha'medamea*" referring to something that contains mixtures. The holy Torah [of Moses] was not missing a single letter, only during his lifetime, they were in different arrangements. (*Sefer Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, V'Zot Habracha*)

אמרו רבותינו ז"ל (ב"ב טו ע"א) ששמונה פסוקים שבתורה משה כתב בדמע, שמעתי בזה בשם הרב הגדול מוהר"י בעל שם טוב ז"ל שהכוונה בדמע לשון עירוב, כידוע מלשון הגמרא (גיטין דנ"ב ע"ב) המדמע, והיינו מה שהיה בזה צירופים אחרים, כי אין התורה הקדושה חסרה אות אחד רק שבחיייו היו צירופים אחרים וכו': (ספר בעל שם טוב על התורה, פרשת וזאת הברכה)

The final verses were dictated to Moshe as scrambled letters, and were thus indecipherable to him. It was only after his death that the letters fell into their rightful place.

The final opinion, offered by R. David Tzi Hoffman (1843-1921), among others, was that Moshe's tears functioned as a kind of "invisible ink." They made an imprint on the Torah, but they would need to be revealed and reinforced with ink over time. The necessary act post-mortem was not to unscramble letters already written but to render readable that which existed only as a hint.

All of these interpretations suggest profound lessons embedded in these last lines of the Torah, lines written in tears *and* ink, in tears *then* ink, or in the midst of great confusion. Moshe's final gift to the people was this complex rendering of his own death. Buffering the news of his own loss, he offered them one last *chessed*, one last kindness, one last teaching "*b'dema*." What was it?

To those who say that Moshe cried his way through to the end, it seems that Moshe left an important legacy of tears. After all the talk "face to face," the promises, the stories, the agonies, and the miracles, the greatest lesson of all that Moshe models is how to cry with God, how to render oneself raw and vulnerable and real. The rabbis of the Talmud say, "Every gate has been locked except for the gates of tears" (BT Bava Metzia 59a). Standing at that gate, Moshe teaches us in his final moments that no matter where one finds oneself; no matter how despairing one might feel; no matter

how close one lies to the end, God hears, though He might not heed, the tears of those who call to Him.

To those who see in these final verses a history of confusion, letters scrambling and unscrambling, Moshe's final lesson is one about the radical instability of text. At the end of a book that announces itself as a static one, we are exhorted to see that it is instead essentially dynamic. What made sense in one constellation of words or circumstances might give way to new interpretation. The letters can dance and play and move. And we must insist that they continue to do so.

Finally, to those who imagine tears imprinted ever-so-subtly into parchment, only to be filled in over time, it seems that the Torah did not actually come to an end with the death of Moshe. It instead left us with an invitation to continue the story. We must keep writing. We must keep living. We must find a way to fill in the outlines left by our great teacher as we each take our place in the unfolding Jewish story.

R. Jonathan Sacks articulates these sentiments well. He writes:

[T]he Baal Shem Tov—founder of the Hassidic movement in the eighteenth century—said that the Jewish people is a living *Sefer Torah*, and every Jew is one of its letters....I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come this far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. (R. Jonathan Sacks, *Letter in a Scroll*, p. 39, 47)

Moshe remains a teacher until the very end, showing us all the power of tears, the instability of written text, and the importance of continued participation in the evolving story that is ours. From this ending that is not an ending, we may now return to the beginning of the Torah to start all over again. *Chazak chazak ve'nitchazeck.*



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