

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech

The Longest Day

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe - Class of 2017

If you knew that tomorrow was the last day of your life - what would you choose to do today?

Rav Eliyahu KiTov describes Moshe's last day in his book *Sefer HaParshiot*, drawing on classic commentaries and *midrashim*. Even after completing everything God asked him to do, Moshe's commitment to Bnei Yisrael did not falter. Moshe put the people's needs first, in spite of his own intense disappointment and sadness that he would not be leading them into Canaan.

Following the events we read in Ki Tavo last Shabbat, Rav KiTov describes what Moshe did on his last day drawing on the verses in Nitzavim-VaYelech, the double-parshiyot for this Shabbat.

In a form of *hak-hel*¹ Moshe gathered all of the Israelites: men, women, children and *gerim* (strangers) to continue his farewell speech and deliver his final charge to the nation. His voice somehow carried through the throngs of people and reached the ear of every man, woman and child!

Parshat Nitzavim concludes with Moshe's teaching the nation the last two remaining mitzvot: *hak-hel* and writing a Sefer Torah.

The words that open Parshat VaYelech are puzzling.

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: (דברים לא:א)

"Moshe **went** and spoke these words to all of Israel."

Where did Moshe go? If Moshe had completed God's mandate to teach the Torah, what words did he need to add?

Ramban (Nachmanadies) explains that after gathering together as a nation, everyone dispersed and went back to their tents. Moshe **went** from the Levite camp to the Israelite camp to honor them, as one who approaches a dear friend to say good-bye.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch expands on this thought. Moshe went alone to the nation, taking his leave of them in a simple manner as a most modest man.

Rav KiTov describes the scene: Moshe went from tent to tent, from family to family, and from tribe to tribe, speaking to **each one** privately according to their own level of understanding. How well he knew his flock! Moshe went into each tent alone, but upon leaving, he was escorted out by the family. The Israelites were reluctant to say a final good-bye to Moshe.

וְהָיָה לָהֶם כְּחֵץ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם: "His leavetaking was hard for them."

S'forno views Moshe's actions through a pastoral lens. He explains that וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה "and Moshe went", is a language of הַתְעוֹרְרוּת - self-awakening. In S'forno's words: "After having concluded the matter of the covenant between God and this second generation of Israelites, Moshe now proceeds to comfort the people about his impending death. Moshe did not want the sorrow over his passing to diminish the joy that was felt upon reaffirming the covenant with God."

¹ **Hakhel**: A Biblical mitzvah for the whole nation to gather every seven years in Jerusalem during the Sukkot festival and hear the king read portions of the Torah.

Moshe recognized that the nation had a fear of the future. He told them (Deut 31:6):

חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירָאוּ "Be strong and of good courage, do not be frightened". He reassured them that Yehoshua would be an able leader who would take them in and help them conquer the Land of Canaan. Yehoshua would be with them and God would be with them.

Moshe then turned his mind to his successor. After reassuring the Israelites, he now needed to reassure and encourage Yehoshua to take heart. Moshe officially appointed Yehoshua as the new leader in front of the nation, using similar words of encouragement and good cheer:

חֲזָק וְאַמְץ: "Be strong and of good courage".

But his day was not over yet.

Moshe was instructed to write the whole Torah from Breishit till the end of Devarim. It was as if his finger was God's finger. He gave this Torah to Yehoshua and the priests and the elders who were to be the spiritual vanguard of the mitzvot. He instructed them on their role in preserving and safeguarding the ways of the Torah.

Moshe then took Yehoshua to the *Ohel Mo'ed* - the Tent of Meeting. God then instructed both of them to write the *shir* - poem - of Parashat Ha'azinu and teach it to the Israelites.

Finally Moshe's last day was drawing to a close.

The choices that we make are the building blocks of the legacy that we leave behind. Moshe took care of all the tasks that God mandated yet, as a great leader, Moshe chose to go further and address the spiritual and emotional needs of the nation. He did not shy away from the emotions of the people. He offered them closure on his passing, and hope for the future.

We have an beautiful ancient teaching which connects Moshe's comforting of each family to a verse at the very end of the Torah:

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל

"Moshe went and spoke these things to **all** Israel."

Going from tent to tent, reaching out to each family personally to say good-bye pierced each person's heart and left sparks of Moshe within. These sparks are with us to this very day.

That is why the Torah says in Deut 34:6 -

וְלֹא־יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת־קְבֻרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה

No one knows his burial place to this very day.

It is not necessary for us to know exactly where Moshe is buried.

A spark of Moshe's soul resides in the heart of every Jew.



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe serves as the Associate Rabba for the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. Her responsibilities include overseeing the conversion program, providing pastoral counseling, answering Halachik questions, overseeing shiva houses, teaching in the community, and more.

Previously she was the *Community Educator and Director of Mercaz Center for Adult Education* in Beth Tfiloh synagogue in Baltimore, MD.

Rabbanit Bracha's love of tefilla and ritual led her to be an experienced gaba'it and organizer of women's tefilla groups and partnership minyanim. She has taught many women and girls to leyn and is the voice of the JOFA Megillat Esther and Ruth Apps. Rabbanit Bracha is a dynamic and thoughtful educator who delights in learning with people of all ages. She especially enjoys teaching Torah and inspiring others to

learn.

During her time in Yeshiva, Rabbanit Bracha interned at United Orthodox Synagogue in Houston, Texas and at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. She participated in chaplaincy programs at New York Presbyterian Hospital and at a maximum-security women's prison.

Rabbanit Bracha is a 2017 graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, following a long career in hi-tech in Israel. She feels blessed to be following this path which nourishes and fills her soul.