



The Greatest Leadership Legacy • Parshat V'zot ha-Brakha

What endures when a leader leaves us?

A lyrical passage in the Jerusalem Talmud informs us that when certain scholars died, their expertise and uniqueness died with them. When Ben Azzai died, for example, diligent students ceased to exist. When Ben Zoma died, Torah interpreters ceased. When Rabbi Yehoshua died, goodness ceased from the world (JT *Sota* 9:16). The list of scholars and the gaps they left are lengthy. This does not imply that there would never again be diligent students, expounders of Torah, goodness in the world or the many other virtues and skills discussed. It suggests that these traits and behaviors were associated with particular rabbis, and the world was significantly diminished without them. This is what is lost, but the Talmud here does not tell us what endures after a leader dies.

For that, we turn to our Torah reading, *V'zot ha-Brakha*. After an entire book of farewell speeches, Moses no longer spoke. He was spoken to. The last chapter of Moses' life is one of the shortest in the Hebrew Bible, almost mirroring the pace at which a single human life is gone. One day there is a pulse. There is vibrancy; there is life. The next moment, there is not. The twelve verses in Deuteronomy 34 are all focused on this immense change in the Israelite universe. No one could ever replace Moses. God spoke to Moses face-to-face and performed signs and wonders through him. No one ever did what Moses did "in the sight of all Israel" (Deut. 34:12). And then, just like that, his many decades of service were over.

Here, Moses is identified as God's servant, an appellation of simplicity and profound honor. "And Moses *the servant of the Lord* died there in Moab, as the Lord said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beit Peor. To this day no one knows where his grave is" (Deut. 34:5-6). Moses was buried in enemy territory, opposite the place of one of his lowest points as a leader, as if the stain of this incident would forever remain close to him. Unlike the vast pyramids of Egyptian royalty and aristocracy, Moses' grave was unknown. It would neither become a place of cult worship nor signal to those who survived Moses that they should return to Moab. His death, like his life, was shrouded in mystery.

There is a well-known argument in the Talmud – BT *Bava Batra* 15a - as to who wrote the last 8 verses in the Torah. Was it Moses writing about his own death or Joshua, Moses' successor? Rabbi Shimon, using a prooftext from Deuteronomy 31:26, argues that Moses wrote every single letter in the Torah. God dictated each word; thus, Moses also wrote the last eight verses.

Rabbi Yehuda claimed it was Joshua. Moses laid his hands on Joshua, imbuing him with God's spirit, which would allow him to write the final words of the Torah after Moses died: "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses" (Deut. 34:9). It is hard to imagine that Moses, with his characteristic humility, would have written lines like the closing

verses of this chapter: “Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses...” (Deut. 34:10).

The Talmud adds one small detail to this scene. Moses, if he wrote these last eight verses, did so in tears. How could he not cry over his own death, over leaving the Israelites whose joys and burdens he carried these past forty years, over not being allowed into the Promised Land? “We now sense the full force of the drama of these last days of Moses’s life, writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “Moses knew he was about to die, knew he would not cross the Jordan and enter the land he had spent his entire life leading the people towards. Moses’ confronting his own mortality, asks us in every generation to confront ours” (“Defeating Death” *Covenant and Conversation*).

Contemporary research suggests that when leaders have thoughts about death, they tend to want more power rather than less, are more generous with their charity, and have an increased sense of purpose. Social scientists call this reality check “mortality salience.” Manfred Kets de Vries, a professor of leadership development and organizational change, writes in “Death: The Ultimate Motivator” (March 4, 2014) that “Death anxiety underlies much executive behaviour and action and as this anxiety intensifies, there are three common maladaptive responses: the first he calls “the manic defence.” Leaders, he claims, protect themselves from death through workaholicism, what he calls an executive’s “immortality system.”

Overwork is both valorized and compensated in many work environments, which blinds leaders from seeing the underlying cause of the tension they are really running from. This self-generated overload can be unhealthy for them and for those they work with. It can lead, according to de Vries, to low morale, enhanced turnover, substance abuse and other collateral damage. The second problem this denial amplifies is a refusal to deal with succession issues. The leader tells herself, “If I keep going, I will not die.” This can create situations where leaders hold onto positions long past their prime and lessen their impact and efficiency. The third issue de Vries identifies is what he calls the edifice complex. Leaders afraid of death want to create tangible legacies. I cannot die, but if I do, I will live on in bricks and mortar or

I will create unrealistic or unfair expectation that the next generation continue my legacy. In this way, I will still live.

Returning to our sedra, we might examine Moses’ death in light of these three defenses. Moses certainly worked around the clock, but his position was never something he personally desired. He refused several times, and even threatened to stop leading when he felt himself unable to do the work. Moses had a healthy desire for succession, even telling God explicitly that there cannot be a flock without a shepherd. By lovingly placing his hands on Joshua, he demonstrated that he was not trying to hold on to leadership by obstructing Joshua’s success. And lastly, Moses neither built, nor commanded others to build something tangible as a physical testimony of his leadership. His only building project was the *Mishkan* that enabled God to abide with His people.

“Unresolved death anxiety,” de Vries writes, “can result in heightened stress and psychological burnout.” Instead of resorting to the three behaviors he warns leaders against, he advises people to confront their mortality by building meaningful relationships with family and friends, giving charitable gifts and processing the anguish of death with emotional maturity.

Writing one’s own death in tears is the way, according to one opinion in the Talmud, Moses faced his demise. He stopped pleading with God to let him into the land and instead turned his attention to a future without him. He gave us the ultimate and enduring gift of meaning to pass on to the next generation: the Torah.

But Moses gave us two other enduring gifts. We are told that, “Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone” (Deut. 34:7). Moses, whose young eyes saw social injustice and a burning bush, was taken from this world full-sighted. His strength was intact. And in departing with these bodily functions undiminished, he left us the inheritance most necessary for developing Israel then and now: vision and strength.

In what way have you confronted your own mortality, and what legacy do you want to leave for those who come after you?