

Moshe: The Tragedy of Greatness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on that very day (*b'etzem hayom hazeh*), saying: “Go up this Mount Avarim [to] Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, that is facing Jericho, and see the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel as a possession, And die on the mountain upon which you are climbing and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.” (*Sefer Devarim, Parashat Haazinu, 32:48-50*, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The phrase, “*b'etzem hayom hazeh*,” introduces the tragic narrative that depicts Moshe’s impending death. It is found 10 other times in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (the Five Books of the Torah), namely, in *Bereishit*, *Shemot*, and *Vayikra*. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on the *Sifrei*, the halachic *Midrash to Sefer Devarim*, notes that our expression is used in a parallel manner in two of these instances:

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on that very day: In three places Scripture employs the phrase: *בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה* [which has the meaning, “at the strongest light of the day”]. First, regarding Noah, Scripture states, “On that very day (*בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה*) Noah entered [... the ark]” (*Sefer Bereishit. 7:13*), which means in the glare of full daylight. Noah’s contemporaries said: “We swear by such and such, that if we notice him about to enter the ark, we will not let him proceed! Moreover, we will take axes and hatchets and split open the ark!” So the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “I will have Noah enter at midday, and let anyone who has the power to prevent it, come and prevent it!”

Second, regarding Egypt, Scripture states, “On that very day (*בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה*), the L-rd brought [the children of Israel] out [of the land of Egypt]” (*Sefer Shemot 12:51*). The Egyptians said: “We swear by such and such, that if we notice them about to leave, we will stop them! And not only that, but we will take swords and other weapons, and kill them!” So, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “I will bring them out in the middle of the day, and let anyone who has power to prevent it, come and prevent it!”

Likewise here (*Sefer Devarim* 32:48), regarding Moses' death, Scripture states, "on that very day (וְיִמּוּ הַיּוֹם הַהוּא הַזֶּה)." The children of Israel said, "We swear by such and such, that if we notice Moses [ascending the mountain to die], we will not let him do so! The man who brought us out of Egypt, divided the Red Sea for us, brought the manna down for us, made flocks of quails fly over to us, brought up the well for us, and gave us the Torah - we will not let him!" Thereupon, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "I will have Moses ascend the mountain [to his resting place] in the middle of the day!"

According to the *Sifrei* and Rashi, "on that very day," is deployed in our three verses whenever there is a manifest challenge, albeit hidden from the explicit text, to Hashem's authority. Therefore, when the people of Noach's time, the Egyptians and even our own forebears refused to accept the Master of the Universe's Divine decree, He acted in a completely public manner that demonstrated the abject futility of man's rebellion against His will. In sum, no force, regardless of the degree of it's power, can stand before the Creator of the Universe.

Unfortunately, as the *Sifrei* and Rashi make manifestly clear, the Jewish people of Moshe's time acted no differently than the people during Noach's time or the Egyptians during *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt). What should our ancestors have done on Moshe's behalf instead of rebelliously confronting Hashem? In other words, how could they have effectively altered G-d's decree so that Moshe would not have had to die and would have been allowed to lead the Jewish people into *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel)? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the "Rav" by his followers and disciples, answered these questions in the following manner:

It was not the fault of the Jewish people that Moses made a mistake [by striking the rock instead of speaking to it, *Sefer Bamidbar* 20:8-13]. But had the people possessed a sensitivity and love for Moses similar to the love that Moses felt for them, they would have torn the decree into shreds. It was their fault... When he was told that he would not enter the Land of Israel, Moses pleaded for forgiveness. Had the people joined him in prayer, the Holy One would have been forced to respond. But they did not join. Thus we

read in *Parashat Va-etchanan* that with tears in his eyes Moses tells them, “*Va-etchanan*” (Deut 3:23): I prayed alone. It was not *va-nitchanan*, we prayed. I was a lonely solitary prayerful person; I prayed, no one else joined in with me. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, editors, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, page 212, underlining and brackets my own)

The Rav’s answer is so poignant that it brings one to tears. The depth of Moshe’s love for *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) was all but unrequited. Moshe had sacrificed every aspect of his personal happiness to serve his people. He divorced his wife, hardly knew his own children and lived alone. All of this was in order to be ready to communicate and commune with the Holy One Blessed be He at a moment’s notice – all on the people’s behalf. Yet, where was their recognition for Moshe’s total self-sacrifice? Why did they abandon him? Why did they not join him in *tefilah* (prayer)?

Rav Soloveitchik offered the following analysis for the disconnect between Moshe and his beloved people, and why he existentially remained “a lonely solitary prayerful person”:

Moses was too great for his generation. He rose high above them. His vision was too penetrating, his depth superhuman, his sweep too high. They could not follow him; they failed to understand him. Had they understood and appreciated him ... Moses would have been admitted to the Promised Land. The people’s guilt consisted in their not opening up to Moses’ influence, in resisting his redemptive and cathartic power, in not being willing to become his disciples. Of course Moses suffered the consequences. (Page, 214)

In truth, we should not be overly surprised that “Moses was too great for his generation,” and that the people “could not follow him; they failed to understand him.” Indeed, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) notes that Moshe’s entire being and prophecy were different in kind and degree from those of anyone else who had ever lived:

1) [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets in a dream or vision. Moses, our teacher, would prophesy while standing awake.

2) [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets through the medium of an angel. Therefore, they perceive only metaphoric imagery and allegories. Moses, our teacher, [would prophesy] without the medium of an angel.

3) Moses' appreciation of prophecy would not be through metaphor, but through open revelation, appreciating the matter in its fullness.

4) All the [other] prophets are overawed, terrified, and confounded [by the revelations they experience], but Moses, our teacher, would not [respond in this manner] ... Moses' mental power was sufficient to comprehend the words of prophecy while he was standing in a composed state.

5) All the [other] prophets cannot prophesy whenever they desire. Moses, our teacher, was different. Whenever he desired, the holy spirit would envelop him, and prophecy would rest upon him.

6) When prophecy departs from all the [other] prophets, they return to their "tents" - i.e., the needs of the body like other people. Therefore, they do not separate themselves from their wives. Moses, our teacher, never returned to his original "tent." Therefore, he separated himself from women and everything of that nature forever. He bound his mind to the Eternal Rock. [Accordingly,] the glory never left him forever. The flesh of his countenance shone, [for] he became holy like the angels. (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 7:6, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, selections my own)

Even though every word of Maimonides rings true and is echoed time and again by Torah luminaries throughout the generations, it is nonetheless tragic that our forebears were unable to truly encounter Moshe and thereby be his advocates through prayer before the Almighty:

[For] if *Benei Yisrael* had proven themselves worthy of communing with Moses, of being his disciples, if they had displayed the intellectual and emotional capacity to receive and absorb *Torat Moshe*, then Moses would have entered and conquered the Promised Land, and he would have been anointed as the King Messiah. Jewish history would have found its realization and fulfillment immediately upon entering the land. (Rav Soloveitchik, page 214)

Sadly, our nation continues to wait for *biat haMashiach* (the coming of the Messiah) and the "realization and fulfillment" of Jewish history. With Hashem's ultimate *chesed* (kindness), let us hope and pray that the *Mashiach* will not tarry long, and that Zechariah the prophet's vision will be fulfilled soon and in our days: "And the L-rd shall become

King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one.” (*Sefer Zechariah 14:9*, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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