

MOSHE RABEINU'S LAST DAY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And Moshe went... (31:1)

Peculiarly, the pasuk does not specify where Moshe went. Targum Yonasan (an Aramaic translation of the Chumash written by the Tanna R' Yonasan ben Uziel) writes, "Moshe went to the Beis HaMidrash (study hall)." (Evidently, we can assume that if Moshe went anywhere, it was most likely his favourite place - the Beis HaMidrash.) Why did he go there now?

Moshe begins his speech (31:2), *"I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go and come."* Is it possible, asks Rashi, that Moshe could no longer "go and come" - that he was experiencing a loss of strength and vitality? Impossible! The Torah writes (34:5-7), "So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there in the land of Moav... Moshe was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye had not dimmed and his vigour had not diminished." Rashi answers that "going and coming" must be understood not in a physical sense, but rather "that the wellsprings of knowledge and wisdom were withheld from him on the day of his death," i.e. he was unable to "go and come" through the Gates of Wisdom.

Moshe therefore went to the Beis HaMidrash to study, in order to continue his life of learning Torah until the moment of his death. [Lev Simcha]

There is an important lesson to be learned from this. Sometimes our avodas Hashem (service of Hashem) "goes" - it feels satisfying and fulfilling. Sometimes it doesn't. At times it seems that things don't "go" at the worst possible moment.

Case in point: It is said that a chassan (groom) on the day of his wedding is like a king - everything he asks (from Hashem) will be granted. I remember being very psyched-up as a chassan. I got up early to say Tehillim (Psalms) before davening (praying), and planned for myself a day of prayer and inspiration. To make a long story short: It didn't "go". My prayers just didn't feel the way I thought they would. They were uninspired. And nothing I could do helped.

Often this can happen to a person during the Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe). Sometimes, even after having made ample preparations, our prayers just don't have the "feeling" we expected. It can be very frustrating, especially for someone who has invested a fair amount of time and effort in preparing for his prayers. How are we to react when this happens? Are we to throw in the proverbial towel and give up?

It is well known that for a tzaddik, a righteous person, the day-of- death is a highly elevated time. The Holy Zohar discusses at great length the mystical day-of-death of its author Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Imagine, then, the irony that Moshe Rabbeinu, on the day that he is to depart from this world, has the Gates of Wisdom slammed shut in his face!

How did Moshe react? He went to Beis HaMidrash. It is as if to say, "Since I find myself right now unable to serve Hashem - to learn Torah and communicate with Hashem - in the elevated state to which I am accustomed, I will go to the Beis HaMidrash and study Torah there like a simple Jew." No dejection. No depression. Just the simple realization that "it's not up to me." A person can be asked for no more than to do his very best with the moment he has been given. If this moment is meant to be spent serving Hashem with deep feelings of inspiration and fervour - great. If it is meant to be spent serving Hashem simply by just saying the words of tefilah (prayer) or Torah with the most concentration one can muster - so be it. Lack of inspiration is not an excuse for ceasing to serve Hashem.

The fervour with which the holy tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov served Hashem is legendary. It is said that R' Levi Yitzchak could never fall asleep on Motzei Shabbos out of excitement for laying tefillin Sunday morning after not having done so on Shabbos. On the first night of Sukkos, he would wait up all night in anticipation of fulfilling the mitzvah of esrog and lulav in the morning. And when the morning sun came out, he would take out his esrog and lulav and kiss them over and over again out of great love. In fact it is told that once, in a state of great excitement, when reaching for his arba minim he accidentally forgot to open the doors of his cabinet, and put them straight through the glass.

Little known is the year-long period during which all of R' Levi Yitzchak's spiritual elevation was taken from him. Nonetheless, during that year, he served Hashem as would a simple Jew, through words of prayer and studying the Torah to the best of his abilities.

This was a nisayon, a test. Was R' Levi Yitzchak's service of Hashem dependent on the feelings of awe and inspiration he was accustomed to? It should never be. Sometimes these things are beyond our control. We have to follow the example Moshe Rabbeinu set for us on the day of his departure from this world. We have to do our best with each moment, and put in time each day davening and learning. See you in Beis HaMidrash...

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