

MOSHE WENT, BUT NEVER LEFT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Moshe's last day on earth is at hand. His leadership of Israel is about to end. His physical strength has not failed him but he is unable any longer to come and to go. The Talmud explains that the time of a ruler can in no way infringe not even a hairs breadth on the time of the next ruler. It is no longer the time of Moshe. It is the time of Yehoshua. As in the life of almost all humans, Moshe leaves the world with some regrets and unrealized hopes. He will not lead the people of Israel into the Land of Israel and he himself will not be buried there. His two sons will not succeed him in leadership and special prominence. And, he has seen into the dark tunnel of future Jewish history and is therefore acutely aware of the tragedies, difficulties, struggles and challenges that face his beloved people and their descendants throughout the coming ages.

Yet he is comforted by the fact that his beloved Yehoshua will take his place and bring Israel into its homeland and guide them in settling it. He is also comforted by the promise of God that Israel will survive all of the vicissitudes of its history and eventually be redeemed and strengthened physically and spiritually. The Midrash has Moshe attended to in his final hours by God Himself, so to speak. Thus death itself has no terrors for him, only the sadness of leaving a world where so much can be accomplished for a world that is eternal but poses no further challenge.

The title word of the parsha vayeilech Moshe went is itself interesting and yet puzzling. Where is Moshe going? If it is to speak to the Jewish people, he always did so from the confines of the camp of holiness surrounding the mishkan/tabernacle. The Midrash provides us insight into the word vayeilech he went. It states that Moshe now went from tribe to tribe, from tent to tent of the families of Israel to take leave of them. He showed them that his love for them knew no bounds and that even though he ruled over them with a strong hand and an uncompromising demeanor, everything that he did in his forty-year stewardship of Israel was done with Divine blessing and enormous care and love. To confirm all of this in the minds of the Jews, he now visited them all he went to them to say goodbye and as we will read in a few short weeks, to bless them and strengthen them.

Even on the last day of his life, the welfare of the Jewish people is Moshe's main concern and preoccupation. Is there any wonder therefore, that there arose none like Moshe in all of human history? Moshe is the paradigm of leadership, of selfless concern and wise guidance for an often contentious and fractious society. Moshe went in this week's parsha but his influence and teachings remain with Israel and in fact all of humanity on a continuing and eternal basis.

Shabat Shalom.

Shana Tova.

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