

Shabbat V'zot Habracha 5787

Shemini Atzeret

Responding to Jonah Grossman and Cora Pessin

Cora and Jonah, thank you for these truly excellent divrei Torah. You taught us so much with your words, each of you individually and both of you together. Here we are at the very end of the Torah and the very end of Moses's life. You both naturally focused on questions of leadership, transition, and mortality. You saw beautiful lessons about how to lead, including keeping a positive attitude, prioritizing the needs of the people, and building a life filled with purpose. In Moses's reluctance to die, Cora you saw his humanity. In his death you saw that ultimately Moses is just a person. I'm going to come back to that. And then, when Moses passes leadership to Joshua, calling upon the people to trust and stand behind their new leader, you saw a vital lesson for leaders today. That perhaps Moses's greatest act of leadership was the act of giving up his role as leader. His acceptance of that moment rings loud and clear in our day.

Jonah, you ended with a very touching tribute to your great grandpa Mike, about remembering him and Moses as model leaders, and about continuing to live the lessons he taught you with his life. That message was even more powerful because of the many beautiful sparks of Torah in your words. For example: the idea that what it means for G-d to still be with Moses after he dies is that we keep Moses alive by studying the Torah; or the idea that the story of our parashah is all about separation, just like the separations in G-d's creation of the world, which we will be reading tonight. You taught us that separation is an act of ordering chaos, an act of making space for a future to exist, for a next generation to step into leadership, like the two of you as you become b'nei mitzvah.

I want to focus for a moment on the detail of the hidden grave of Moses. As you taught us, our parasha says: **וְלֹא-יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת-קִבְרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:** "No one knows his burial place to this day." Jonah, you wisely suggested that this was about enabling the Israelites to move on, so they wouldn't get stuck in the past.

Commenting in the early 14th century in France, Ralbag, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon agrees with you but goes further. He says the following: "If the place of

his burial would be known, future generations would err by making a god out of [Moses] considering what had become publicized about the wonders he had performed.”

If this sounds far fetched to you, consider the contrast between Moses’s burial place and the pharaohs’. The Egyptians built massive pyramids to mark the graves of their leaders, who were worshipped as living gods. And it wasn’t only Egyptian pharaohs who were seen as gods. Akkadian leaders claimed divine status. Alexander the Great truly believed that his father was Zeus and that he himself was a god. Roman emperors were also deified, particularly after their deaths. This is part of why *melech ha’olam*, eternal king or king of the world, became the primary metaphor in Jewish blessings. It was a point of contrast between the true authority of the One G-d, and the human kings who were presenting themselves as gods.

If you think about it, this very question of whether a person can be a god is the primary departure point between Christianity and Judaism. Jesus was a human being who Christians also believe was a god. In contrast, Judaism places a lot of protection against worshipping human beings as if they were gods. In this case, making Moses mortal, burying him in a grave outside of the Promised Land that could never be found, and making him so imperfect that he died because of a sin – ignoring G-d’s command to hit the rock instead of speaking to it. In Judaism, even our greatest heroes are portrayed as flawed. This is a bright line for Judaism. We do not worship human beings, no matter how much we admire them.

Now, to complicate this question I want to return to something you said, Jonah. Rabbeinu Bahya said that G-d was still with, or within, Moses after he died. In Judaism, none of us is G-d, not even Moses, but all of us equally have G-dliness within us. There are lots of ways we talk about this. We’re made in G-d’s image as we’ll read next week in Genesis. We also learn at the creation of human beings that we have *nishmat chayim*, a living soul, within us and that we are a *nefesh chayah*, a living being or a living soul. We have *ruach Elohim* upon or within us. Torah tells us in several places that Moses has this *ruach Elohim*, spirit of G-d, and the three of these together are the three aspects of soul we typically talk about in Judaism: *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. The *nefesh* is the aspect of soul that animates the body and that dies with the body. The *ruach* –meaning

spirit, wind, breath – is the aspect of soul that is most universal, shared among all life. The neshama is the unique quality of soul that is particular to each of us. It's our essence. You might say that someone has a beautiful or sweet neshama. This is about their unique soul.. You may know that rabbinic tradition understands the neshama as returning to G-d each night when we sleep and then finally when we die. That's why each morning at first consciousness we thank G-d for returning our neshama to us so we can live.

In Hasidic texts there are beautiful expositions of our intimate relationship with G-d's presence. Kedushat Levi, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev taught the following on Rosh Hashanah: "We must always try to bring to our consciousness that from moment to moment the Blessed Creator, in great love and mercy, instills in us new vital force; from moment to moment the Blessed Creator renews our very being. This is what the rabbis meant when they said regarding Psalm 150 "*Kol Haneshama Tehallel Yah*, for each and every breath praise Yah." That is, at each moment, the breath [leaves] and the blessed Holy One [returns it to us]. In this manner... we are actually created anew as a new creature from moment to moment."

Me'or Eynayim, Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, teaches that when G-d is called Chayei HaChayim, Life of Life, it means "that the vitality of all life in the world, including that of beasts, cattle, birds, and humans, is G-d's own Self, the Life of Life. G-d is the life force within all that lives. When you are feeling low, think of this: "Am I not alive? Who is this life-force within me? Is it not the Blessed Creator?" G-d is indeed present right here, just in this reduced form."

Putting this all together, in Judaism no single human being – no matter how amazing, important, or powerful they are – is G-d. But every single human being has G-d within us, equally. As you taught us, Jonah and Cora, this means that when our leaders die or their leadership term ends, they must transfer leadership to the next generation. Separation, saying goodbye, is an inevitable aspect of being human. Only G-d is eternal, and in that sense each of us has eternity within.

As we roll the Torah from its end to its beginning at Simchat Torah tonight, we reaffirm our participation in that never ending circle – of learning and of life. Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek. Chag Sameach, Shabbat Shalom.