

# Imagining the End of Moses

*And I pleaded with the Lord...Let me please go over and see the good land.* (Deut. 3:26). The Holy One, Blessed be He, responded: *Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again!* (Deut. 3:26).

Said Moses: You have written in your Torah: *If the servant declares, 'I love my master'... he shall remain an eternal servant* (Exodus 21:5f). I am such a servant! I have loved you, your Torah, and your children, and I do not want to go free. I do not want to die.

Said God: I have decreed death from the days of the very first human. Moses replied: The first human deserved to die, for an easy commandment was given to him and he transgressed! But I should not die! God said: Abraham, who sanctified my name in the world, died. Moses replied: Abraham sired Ishmael, whose progeny anger you!

God said: Consider Isaac who stretched forth his neck upon the altar. Moses replied: From Isaac there came forth Esau [Rome] who destroyed the Temple and burned your palace! God said: Consider Jacob from whom there issued twelve tribes, not one of them blemished. Moses replied: Jacob never ascended to the heavens. Neither was he like a ministering angel, nor did you speak with him face to face or give him the Torah from your own hand!

The Holy One said to him: *Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again!*

Moses said: Master of the Universe, I am but a single person and Israel is six hundred thousand. Many times they sinned against you. I pleaded on their behalf and you forgave them. You look after six hundred thousand and will not look after me? God replied: A decree concerning an individual is not the same as a decree for a community. Furthermore, up until now the hour was given to you and now the hour is no longer yours....

He said: Master of the Universe! Rise from your throne of justice and sit upon the throne of mercy so that I will not die! Let my sins be nullified through whatever afflictions you will bring upon me, but do not subject me to the terror of the Angel of Death! If you grant my request, I will sing your praises to the whole world. As David said, *I will not die, but live and proclaim the deeds of the Lord* (Psalm 118:17).

When Moses saw that God would not protect him, he went to the heavens and the earth and said to them: Oh, Heavens and Earth! Plead on my behalf! They answered, "Before we plead on your behalf, we will plead on our own behalf. For it is written: *The heavens will melt away like smoke; the earth will wear out like a garment* (Isaiah 51:6). Moses then approached the sun and the moon and said to them: Plead on my behalf! They answered: Before we plead on your account we will plead for ourselves. For it is written: *The moon shall be ashamed and the sun abashed* (Isaiah 24:23). He went to the stars and the constellations, saying to them: Plead on my behalf. They replied: Before we plead on your behalf we will plead for ourselves. For it is written, *All the host of heaven shall molder* (Isaiah 34:4).

Next, Moses went to the Great Sea. The Sea said to him: Ben Amram, what has happened? Are you not the same Ben Amram who came to me with your staff, who struck me and split me into twelve passages? Nor could I compete with you because of the Divine Presence that marched at your right hand. And now, what good has all of that glory done for you?

Once the Sea had reminded him of what he had done in his youth, he cried and wept, saying, *Oh that I were as in the months gone by* (Job 29:2), when I walked before you and was a king in the world!

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: All of this anguish! Why? He responded: I am afraid of the Angel of Death. The Holy One said to him: I will not turn you over to him.

Up until now, it has been your lot to serve before me. And now, this lot has been taken from you and the time has come for Joshua your student to serve. Moses said: Master of the Universe, if it is on account of my student, Joshua, that I am to die, I will become his student. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: If you want to do that, go and do it.

Moses got up early; Joshua was already sitting and expounding. Moses stood hunched over with his hand on his mouth so that Joshua could not recognize him in order that Joshua not be unsettled and defer to him. Now, some had gone to Moses' tent to learn Torah. They asked: Moses, our teacher, where is he? And they were told that he had gone early to Joshua's tent. They went and found him at the entrance to Joshua's tent while Joshua was sitting and teaching. Moses stood. They said to Joshua: What is this? Moses stands and you sit? When Joshua looked up and saw Moses, he ripped his clothing, cried out and wept: My master! My lord! My father! Why do you bring upon me guilt and sin? The people said: Moses, our teacher, teach us Torah. He said to them: I have no authority. They said to him: We will not let you go. A divine voice came forth and said to them: Learn from Joshua. They then took it upon themselves to sit and to learn from Joshua who sat at the front with Moses at his right and the sons of Aaron at his left.

Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: From the very moment that Joshua introduced his lesson and said: "Blessed is the One who delights in the righteous and in their teachings," the traditions of wisdom were removed from Moses and given to Joshua. And Moses was unable to understand what Joshua was expounding. As the people arose from the lesson, they said: Moses, give us the epilogue to this teaching. Moses replied: I do not know how to respond to you. And Moses, our teacher, of blessed memory, stumbled and fell.

Then Moses said: Master of the Universe, until now I begged for life, but now I place my soul into your hand. Now that Moses had reconciled himself to death, the Holy One said: *Who will stand up for me against evil men?* (Psalm 94:15). Who will stand up for Israel when I am angry? Who will stand up and do battle for my children? Who will plead on their behalf when they sin against me? ....

The angels came and said to Moses: The very hour has come for you to depart from the world. He replied: Wait for me until I bless Israel who found no joy in me all my life because of the warnings and reproofs with which I had to confront them. He began to bless one tribe at a time. But when he realized that the hour had grown short he gathered them all together into one blessing. The angels said to him: The hour has come for you to depart from the world. Moses said to Israel: I have troubled you greatly concerning Torah and commandments. Now, forgive me. They replied: Our master, our teacher, you are forgiven. And Israel said to him: Our teacher, Moses, we have angered you and increased your troubles. Forgive us. And Moses said: You are forgiven.

The angels came and said to him: The last moments of your life have come. He said: Blessed be the Eternal Living Name forever and ever. He said to Israel: I beg of you, when you enter the land remember me and my bones. And they said: Woe to the son of Amram who ran before us like a horse and his bones fell in the wilderness.

They came and said to him: The last half moment has come. He lifted his arms and placed them over his heart and said to Israel: Observe the end of humble flesh and blood. The hands that received the Torah from the Source of Power fall into the grave. Just then his soul exited with a kiss. As it is said: *And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab from the mouth of God* (Deut. 34:5). And neither Israel nor angels buried him. Rather: *And he [God] buried him in the valley in the land of Moab...* (Deut. 34:6).

(From the midrash, Deuteronomy Rabbah)

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