

Shemini Atzeret /Yizkor 2020 – Goodbyes of Sadness and Hope

We are in a season of goodbyes. It is the end of nature's growing season, the end of the holidays, We hold on for just two more - Shemini Atzeret – this Shabbat – and then Simchat Torah on Sunday. We do not want to say goodbye. That is how many lovely midrashim explain these last days of *chag*– we have been visiting with God for so long, they say, now we are reluctant to leave. And God is reluctant to let us go! So the Torah calls for another holiday, an *Atzeret*, a gathering day, or – *atzeret* also means - a stopping. We stop, we pause, (we have gotten used to that this year!); we hesitate, before we leave this special spiritual season.

As the trees and the holidays fade into hibernation, we linger for a few final hours, as though to acknowledge our sense of loss. We remember those who are gone, as we once again recite Yizkor prayers. We turn our thoughts to the impermanence of life as we consider the book of Kohelet. And on Simchat Torah – we read the poignant account of the death of Moshe.

The beautiful thing about these holidays is that we balance each goodbye with a message of hope. First – while chances are most of us did not *radically* turn our lives around during the season of repentance, we take one last moment to stop and remember that there can always be change and growth, however small and subtle.

We respond to nature's season by chanting Tefillat Geshem, the prayer for rain. Growing things go to sleep, or even die now, but we anticipate the rebirth that will come in spring. We express faith in the cycles of nature, of God's earth.

And of course, we cap off the season with the awesome moment when we complete our yearlong project of chanting the entire Torah. It is bittersweet to read the last words of Torah, which tell how Moshe gets a mere brief glimpse of the Promised Land, and then dies. But within minutes, we move from death to the ultimate story of life – the creation of the universe - as we chant the very *first* words of the Torah. We remember that the cycle of Torah is never finished; like the cycle of nature, Torah is renewed for us every year.

So before looking ahead, let us pause and remember Moshe. In the very last panel of the Torah scroll, we read the words: "And Moses died." Our ancient sages puzzled over these words. They believed that Moshe wrote the entire Torah, so they

wondered – how could he have written those words – "And Moses died." *Could* he have written those words? Did he narrate his own death? Some concluded that it was not Moshe, but Joshua his successor who added the final verses of Torah. But others insisted, no - every word of the Torah was written by Moses, including the description of his own death. God dictated, and Moshe wrote, even those words. How could he perform such a task?

Rashi quotes a midrash which imagines that Moses wrote the words, 'And Moses died' with tears – *b'dema*. Moshe is human, after all. After living an incredibly full life, now he has to let go. As for us all, God dictates when that happens, here in both senses of the word – God dictates. Here God says, "Copy this down: it is the account of your own death" and recites the words "and Moshe died..." as a teary Moshe dutifully moves his pen to write them.

The medieval commentator Rashba, understood the midrash differently. He imagined that Moshe indeed wrote those words with tears, but not with tears in his eyes; rather he wrote the words with tears on his pen. Moshe wrote most of the Torah with ink, he says, but these final verses he wrote with actual tears!

What a poetic and powerful picture! A man dipping his quill into his own tears to write of his last moments. The image is painful, but also evokes strength. And hope. The great Moshe our teacher draws from the outpourings of his heart to complete his task, his sacred teaching.

This midrash offers a perspective on how we might deal with loss. When we encounter sadness and grief in life, we may have tears in our eyes. It is of course natural to weep. But can we also find ways to write with our tears, to share what we have learned, to create something beautiful, even sacred?

On this day of endings, we counter the pain of loss with the powerful gifts of memory. The memories we carry, including the sadness, are part of us and part of the potential of our lives.

Let us resolve to dip our pens into our tears to create: to compose good deeds, acts of tzedakah and of lovingkindness. We look back, and then we move forward with hope, into life and the writing of our stories. Chag sameach and Shabbat Shalom