

Parashat V'Zot HaB'rakhah וְזֹאת חֲבֵרָכָה

Torah: Deuteronomy 33:1–34:12

Haftarah: Joshua 1:1–18

The Passing of a Hero

General Overview

Moses then said “Master of the Universe, I ask of Thee one favour before I die, that I may enter and that all the gates of heaven and the deep be opened and people shall see that there is none beside Thee.” God replied, “You declare, ‘There is none else (*'od*)’ I too, say: And there has not arisen a prophet since (*'od*) in Israel like unto Moses”

(D'verim Rabbah 11.8)

This is our final Parashat in Deuteronomy and it is also our last glimpse of Moshe, the main subject in this portion. It is fitting, therefore, that after so many events in Israel's brief history so far, we now focus on the passing of the man who was almost singlehandedly responsible for our existence as a nation.

Exposition

Thus, as Deuteronomy concludes, we see the Holy One giving honor to this hero of Israel. Accordingly, we will examine:

- I. Moshe's Final Words
- II. Moshe's Final Resting Place
- III. Moshe's Final Tribute

In this excerpt from Parashat V'Zot HaB'rakhah, we will focus on section III, Moshe's Final Tribute.

III. Moshe's Final Tribute

It is unquestionable that Moshe's life is virtually unparalleled in Jewish history. There simply has not been anyone who has accomplished as much as Moshe. Even the Lord Himself recognized this, as indicated by some of the things He says about Moshe in this last parasha. In fact, in this sidra, we have at least three designations for Moshe.

A. Moshe — Prophet

Notice, however, that he is not called “the” prophet. Even in Hebrew, the definite article is omitted. This is because, while Moshe was a great prophet, he is not The Prophet of which he spoke in Deuteronomy 18. That person is the Messiah.

B. Moshe — Servant of the Lord

Secondly, Moshe is called a “servant of the Lord,” in 34:5. Again, there is no definite article in front of “servant.” Only the Messiah is The Servant of the Lord, as we find in Isaiah 52–53. Moshe was called a servant simply because his life was characterized by one of sacrificial submission to the Lord's commands.

This is the first time in the Bible that someone is referred to as a servant of the Lord, which itself is an amazing tribute to this great man. Rabbi Alan Ullman sees more into this than might meet the average eye! He suggests that this designation “servant of the Lord,” might be a strong hint concerning Moshe’s Hebrew name, the name his parents might have given him when he was born. After all, the name “Moses” is not originally a Hebrew name, but an Egyptian one — given to him by the Pharaoh’s daughter who found him in the basket in the water. Ullman says that the designation “servant of the Lord” is, in Hebrew, ‘eved Adonai (יהוה עבד) and comes over into English as “Obadiah.”¹

C. Moshe — Man of God

Thirdly, in 33:1, Moshe is referred to as a “man of God.” Both his successor, Joshua, and Israel’s greatest king, David, also call Moshe a “man of God,” as we can see in Joshua 14:6 and in the title of Psalm 90. However, up to this point, Moshe had never before been called by this title. In the immediate context of chapter 33, “Some commentators consider that this title was accorded him to stress the prophetic origin and force of the words he utters there,”² so that “The blessings to be uttered by the ancient leader would carry with them the authority of God.”³

However, this title means more than just that. It also refers to the kind of life Moshe lived both in front of Israel and before the Holy One. The record of his life throughout the Torah is a written testimony of his godliness. Nonetheless, Moshe was still a man. The Lord, in fact reminded him of just that in 32:52 when he told him, once again, that he was not to go into the Promised Land — hinting at the sin that had caused that prohibition.

D. Moshe — Exalted By His People

Unfortunately, many rabbis over the years have tended to neglect Moshe’s inherent sinful flesh, his normal humanity, and have presented a rather exalted portrait of him. For example, Leibowitz cites a modern commentator as saying this about Moshe: Moshe, just before his death, “attained the highest degree of spiritual perfection.”⁴

It is important, however, for the point we will be making, to see an ancient example of this exaltation of Moshe. The Midrash comments on this phrase “man of God” as it referred to Moshe. These comments, though written, perhaps, in the latter half of the 300’s CE, may have expressed the popular thinking about Moshe during the Second Temple period. Here is what one midrash says about him:

R. Tanchuma said, “If Moses is referred to as ‘God’ why is he also termed ‘man,’ and if ‘man’ why also ‘God’?” The reason is this: When he was cast into the river of Egypt [the Nile] he was a man; but when the river was turned into blood by Moses, he was as God. Another explanation: When he had fled from before Pharaoh he was a man, but when he drowned [Pharaoh in the sea] he

¹ Rabbi Alan Ullman is the head of Rodef School of Jewish Studies, Newton, MA (USA). This information was gleaned in one of his classes.

² Nechama Leibowitz, new Studies in Devarim, 370.

³ Craige, Peter, *Deuteronomy (NICOT)*, 391.

⁴ Leibowitz, op. cit., 371.

was as God. Another explanation: When he went up to heaven he was a man But when he came down from heaven he was as God. Whence this? For Scripture says, "and they were afraid to come nigh him" (Exodus 34:30).⁵

This midrash, naturally, falls short of attributing any part of deity to Moshe. However, it does present a very high view of him by our Sages. In addition to this midrash, we also know of other rabbinic literature which elevates the stature of Moshe. Another good example is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which place Moshe next to the angels as the only created beings that come just under God Himself. This latter example becomes very important for us when we try to understand the comments in Hebrews comparing Moshe with Yeshua.

E. One Greater Than Moshe

It is important to understand the profound respect that the Jewish sages have had for Moshe in order to begin to understand the comments about the "Greater than Moshe" — Yeshua, as is recorded in Hebrews chapter 3.

The titles attributed to Moshe in this final parasha of the Torah were certainly earned by him. However, if Moshe was a prophet with no equal, a servant of God, and a man of God, how much more so was/is the Messiah? Isaiah calls the Messiah "The Servant of the Lord," as He is pictured accomplishing Israel's calling for them and atoning for sin.

The Gospels tell us that the people were amazed at the authority Messiah Yeshua had in His teaching when He faithfully and accurately explained the Torah to them, as would a true prophet of God. In addition, He also gave predictive prophecy in Matthew 24–25, as well as other places. Moshe, of course, too, was a prophet, but he was never actually called "The Word of God," as was Yeshua (John 1:1, 14).

Finally, even though Moshe was called "the man of God," Yeshua, on the other hand was not only called the prophetic "son of man," but also the "Son of God," who lived an absolutely sinless life. After all, should we expect less from the Messiah? Because of this, Hebrews tells us

[Yeshua] has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. (Hebrews 3:3–4)

According to these verses, we should in no way diminish the honor due rightfully to Moshe. However, as highly as we esteem Moshe, as a man of God, we can honor Yeshua the Messiah, because of Who He is and what He has done. Once again, upon completing a book of the Torah, we are traditionally called upon to recite, "Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!"

חזק! חזק! ונתחזק!

"Chazak! Chazak! Venitchzeik!"

Be strong! Be strong!

² Nechama Leibowitz, *new Studies in Devarim*, 370.

³ Craige, Peter, *Deuteronomy (NICOT)*, 391.

⁴ Leibowitz, op. cit., 371.

⁵ Devarim Rabbah 11.4.

And may we be strengthened

The strength with which we are to be strengthened is the strength we receive from the Holy One when we become new creations in Him through personal faith in the atonement, resurrection, and person of His Messiah, Yeshua.

This strength becomes a reality in our lives when we, as new creations, live out the Torah — and the rest of the Scriptures. He gave us the power to do so when He gave us His Spirit. The more we live out who we are in Messiah, reflected by the Scriptures, the stronger we become to resist the flesh and the Evil One. It is when we are strong in Him that our lives will be able to bring Him the glory, honor and praise that He truly deserves as the God of the universe, the God of Israel, and the Lord of our lives.

We trust that your study of the Written Torah has not only strengthened you but also has added new depth to your relationship with the Living Torah, the “Greater than Moshe,” Yeshua our Messiah, the Son of God, the Holy One of Israel.