 Yom Kippur 5781 Rabbi Daniel H.  Liben

Moses our Teacher

A week and a half from now, on Simchat Torah, we will both conclude the Torah, and begin it again, in an unbroken cycle.    On that morning we will read the final verses of the scroll, telling of the death of Moses, and then immediately start the cycle all over again, with Bereshit- the creation of the world.  It’s a ritual that speaks both to the timelessness of our sacred texts, and one that, through the specific narratives that we read that day,  brings us from death to cosmic birth, forming a fitting  coda to the High Holiday season.

That same continuum of course, is mirrored right now, in our experience of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:  Ten days ago, we celebrated the birth of the world.  But, today, Yom Kippur, is steeped with intimations of death.

We starve our bodies of food today, in order to feel their vulnerability.  Traditionally, we wear a kittel, a simple white garment, both as a symbol of purity, but more pointedly, because it is the shroud in which we will one day be buried.

 And of course, the Mahzor abounds with references to death today.  We say Yizkor for our loved ones, and chant Eleh Ezkarah for our martyrs.  And, for good measure, we reprise yet again the Unetaneh Tokef of Rosh Hashanah, with its frightening vision of a Divine selection of who shall live, and who shall die.

Even the Torah reading, which describes the Biblical sacrifices for this day, sneaks in a reference to death, by mentioning, almost in passing, the death of Aarons’s eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu.

But then, the fast will end, and we will emerge from this day with a renewed sense of the preciousness of our lives, more earnest in our desire to measure our actions carefully, and to try to live our days more wisely.

It is something, isn’t it… the way this journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, from birth, to death, and back again to life, is a concentrated, ten-day version of the annual cycle of Torah reading: From the birth of the world to the death of Moses, and then back to creation, and a new beginning.

 Since midsummer, as I’ve followed the final stages of Moses' journey from Shabbat to Shabbat, I have felt myself drawn to his story more than in years past.  Mostly, Deuteronomy recounts Moses’ final instructions to the people, as they prepare to enter the promised land.  In much of it, he reviews his earlier teachings, and recalls places and events once visited.

All of it, however, is given with an urgency, and a passion, which is compelling and new.  For, what gives this final book of the Torah it’s dramatic cohesion is the knowledge that Moses won't be joining them, that Moses, the leader who led them out of Egypt, who shepherded them in the desert for 40 years and who, on more than one occasion, pleaded with God on their behalf to insure their very survival; *that* Moses, will die on this side of the Jordan, never seeing the land except from a distance, never having the satisfaction of seeing the job- his lifework-  completed.

I have to admit, that’s part of what is drawing me this season.  After 30 years, this is my final Yom Kippur sermon as your Rabbi, and there seems to me to be so much unfinished work.  For years, I have said that I never tired of being your Rabbi, and I never considered going anywhere else; because there was always so much more for us to accomplish together, so much still to see through.  And yet, here I am, giving this sermon, and wondering, like Moses, how can one leave the work unfinished?

Now, believe me, I’m not really comparing myself to Moses.  I’m only using myself as an example.  For all of us, the work of living is never done, never finished.  When we conquer one challenge, another presents itself; just when we think that we have established a stable order of things, life surprises us, and inexorably pulls us in a different direction.

I think that Moses’s *not* crossing over the Jordan, and only glimpsing the land from afar, is what makes him human.  If the Torah had given Moses that storybook ending, triumphantly leading the people across the Jordan just as he had led them across the Red Sea long before, he would be larger than life... but somehow less than human.  And that would have been a great loss, because we cannot model ourselves after superheroes; but only after flesh and blood like ourselves, who are destined to leave this world... in the middle of things.

Franz Kafka captures this aspect of Moses’ story beautifully.  He writes, “*He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it’s incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. The dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life, incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life is too short but because it is a human life.”*

From this perspective Moses’ fate is simply emblematic of the human condition.  The Torah, however, describes it as a Divine punishment, against which Moses struggles sorely near the end.  Near the beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses reveals that he once pleaded with God to let him continue on with them. “Allow me, I pray, to see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, ...but the Lord was wrathful with me on your account, and would not listen to me. The Lord said, ‘Enough! Never speak to me on this matter again!’”

And our hearts are with Moses in this.  Surely, the judgement does not fit the crime, which was specified earlier in the Torah, in *parshat Chukat*.  If you don’t recall it, let me paint the scene for you: Miriam, Moses' sister, had died, and the people were crying out bitterly for water.  God tells Moses to speak to a rock, in order to release from it a life-giving flow of water.  But, Moses lifts up his staff, and strikes the rock instead, and for this act, God seals his fate and he will not enter the land.

 Torah commentators point out that years earlier, God had told Moses to do precisely that, to bring forth flowing waters from a rock by striking it with his staff!  Certainly, the punishment of ending his career short, right before its completion, simply for this minor and understandable deviation is too harsh.

But there is more: when Moses struck the rock that second time, water did flow and slake the peoples’ thirst.  However, Moses, angry and frustrated with their long history of rebellions and complaints, belittled them and shouted at them.   “Hear now, you rebels...you want water?  Here is your water!”   And this is when God issued the decree.

Moses, it seems, completely misunderstood what God intended to achieve in that moment. Consider the situation: Miriam had just died. The people were in grief, and in need of an act of healing and comfort.  God wanted Moses to draw forth life-sustaining water not, this time, through an act of power, but through the power of speech. God wanted to reveal Himself, through Moses, as a caring, nurturing Presence.  Instead, Moses scolded them, revealing only anger and frustration.

 Falling back on the memory of what had worked before, and mentally stuck in his years of frustration with this most difficult people, Moses bungled it.

And, even in this, Moses is our teacher.  How often do we miss the opportunity to connect, to heal and to uplift, because the past distorts our vision of what is actually happening right now?  So often, we misread the present through the lens of the past.

Today, on Yom Kippur, part of our work is to soften that lens: to let our longstanding stories of hurt, the stories in which we are always the victim and never in the wrong, to let those stories drop, and allow for a gentler picture of the other guy to emerge.  The moment Moses could no longer do that, was the moment it was clear that his ability to guide his people was waning.

And yet, did God *have* to punish him so severely; to die with the rest of his generation, on the far side of the Jordan?   To cast him away like an outmoded piece of equipment?  Certainly Moses, who spoke to God face to face, who led the people out of slavery, and carried their burden for 40 years, deserved more?

Surely, Moses has no expectation that he will live forever.  His greatest anxiety is not that he will die, but that there will be no one to fill his shoes when he is gone. His great fear is that the people, so prone to forgetfulness, and rebellion, will not be able to live without him to guide them.  “*Zachor*! Remember!”  he says, throughout Deuteronomy, like a mantra, again and again.   “Do not forget either the lessons I’ve taught you, or the great goodness that God continually provides you!”

After all the speeches, the exhortations and the harangues, what Moses leaves them with is a song- a poem- *Ha'azinu*, which we read just two days ago during Shabbat services.  In his role now, not as a lawgiver but as a seer, he predicts the future- our future, and it's not pretty.  Yes, we will settle the land, and God will bless it, and our lives will be good; but then, we will be distracted by idols of our own making, and we will come to think that we ourselves are the source of our good fortune, and God will pour out his anger on us, and rip us off the land, and our suffering will be great.  Yet, ultimately, God will take us back.  If you memorize this poem, at least, Moses tells us, then maybe there is some hope for you.

Sometimes, the fears that keep me up at night are not that dissimilar from Moses’s, albeit through a more metaphorical understanding of exile and alienation.  I worry about our commitment to the value of Jewish peoplehood, in a world of fluid and shifting identities.  I fear that we have become so distracted by the blandishments of a materially rich world, that we misplace- lose sight of- the values, mitzvot and practices that ground us.  I could go on.  And if these things keep me up at night, imagine the burden that Moses was carrying. How I pity him!

There is a scene, back in *parshat Pinchas*, where Moses shares this fear with God, beseeching: “Lord God, Source of the Breath of All Flesh, at *least* appoint for them a leader, someone who shall go out before them, and bring them in, so that they will not be like sheep, without a shepherd.”  And God does offers Moses some comfort:  He assures Moses that there will be such a leader, Joshua Ben Nun, and that he will be the shepherd that the people need.

I imagine God saying to him, “Moses, stop and just take a breath. *It’s not all about you!*  You (and for that matter, each of us) are on this earth to do your piece, as best you can, and then to hand it over to the next leader, and to the next generation.”

Then the text moves, abruptly, to a description of the holiday calendar: the sacrifices that the people will make from Sabbath to Sabbath and season to season.  And this too, I believe, is meant to be a comfort to Moses.  God invites Moses to understand that Klal Yisrael, the totality of the Jewish people, is greater than any one leader, even than Moses.  Our strength is in our connection to the rhythms of Jewish time, the sacred calendar fixed within Israel’s consciousness.   From Shabbat to Shabbat and season to season, our marking of the life cycle and of the seasons will carry us, always, as it has to this very moment.  As individuals, we live and die.  But as a people, in spite of destruction, exiles and holocausts, we continue on, from Sabbath to Sabbath, and season to season.  And, in every generation, we expand the tradition, and find new ways to see ourselves in the Torah that Moses has bequeathed us.

There is a scene in the Talmud where God shows Moses the future by transporting him more than a thousand years to the Study Hall of Rabbi Akiva.  Sitting in the back row with the novice students Moses is completely bewildered, hearing Akiva expound on subjects in ways that were totally unfamiliar to him.  Yet, at the end of his lesson, Akiva concludes with the words, “Thus we learned from Moses at Sinai!”

If God had transported Moses into the 21st century, what would he have made last spring of zoom seders, or last week, of a young woman blowing shofar for us on Rosh Hashanah from 1,000 miles away, or Jews wishing each other a *Tzom Kal* on Yom Kippur through a computer chat box? He would recognize, I hope, the Jewish people: still observing our special days, the days that bind us to each other and to God, still reading from the Torah scroll that bears his authorship, from Shabbat to Shabbat and season to season.

In the end, what most saddens me about his story is not that Moses dies on the far side of the Jordan.  This is the nature of a human life, to leave something unfinished.  Rather, I am troubled by a different bit of unfinished business, something he might have accomplished, in the time allotted to him.   Although he clearly, even desperately, loved the people of Israel, he might have trusted them more.  From my humble vantage point as a congregational Rabbi, I would offer to Moses to trust that people “will hear and they will do” in their own time.

Rabbis offer Torah as a ladder to climb or a path to follow, filled with mitzvot, learning, spirituality, and enduring values.  And we trust that each of you will take on that next mitzvah, commit to a new practice, discover your own expression of the divine calling, as your life continues to unfold before you.  There really is no litmus test: each of you is a precious, necessary part of what makes us a kehillah.  Moses’s haranguing and threatening, however, only increased his own suffering, and the suffering of his people.

There is a beautiful Midrash that senses this tension between Moses and his community, and imagines a resolution, a peacemaking at the end, that the Torah itself doesn’t really supply:

*It was finally time for Moses to ascend Mt. Nevo, but he pleaded with God: "just one more thing.   Wait until I bless Israel. Because of the warnings and reprimands I heaped upon them, they never found any ease with me." So Moses blessed them... including all of them in a single blessing. And he said to Israel, "Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me."  The people replied, "Our master, our lord, you are forgiven." In their turn they said to him, "Moses our teacher, we troubled you even more, we made your burden so heavy. Please forgive us." Moses replied, "You are forgiven.*

My friends, this is the last Yom Kippur that I will be standing here as your Rabbi. So let me not allow the opportunity to pass:

For the times I pushed you further than where you were ready or able to go, I ask you to forgive me.

For the times I failed to see the fullness of the image of God within every one of you, I ask you to forgive me.

For the times I saw some of you through the lens of past events, and not as you are right now, I ask you to forgive me.

And for the times I might have been more present to your need, and was not, I ask you to forgive me.

For thirty years, I have felt blessed to be your Rabbi.  For those moments when you failed to see me as a full person, created in the image of God, I forgive you.  Overwhelmingly, you have been loving, kind and generous.  The rest now longer matters.  For thirty years we strove to build a *Kehillah Kedoshah*, a community of Holiness and of *Chesed*.  Sometimes we achieved that, and occasionally we missed our mark. But we did as best as we could in any particular moment.  What more could one ask?  And on balance I think that together, we have been remarkable.

My friends, Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for the day of our death.   Let us resolve today to make amends with all the people in our lives, and to release all that unnecessary suffering. And, allow the legacy of those who came before us, and whose lives we remember today, to inspire us to live our days fully and lovingly.

L’Shanah Tovah Tikatei Ve’techateimu.