

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter LII: Vaveilech (Deut. 31:1–31:30)

Essay 1. Why was it important for Moses to die on his birthday?

מדרש פליאה "בן-מאה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אָנֹכִי הַיּוֹם" בְּיוֹם הַנֵּה נִוֹלְדָתִי וּבְיוֹם הַנֵּה אָמוֹת. הַדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב "וְלֹא־קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה" עכ"ל. וְהוּא תִימָא. וּבְסִפּוּר עֲמָק [הַלְכָה] ¹ כָּתֵב בְּזֶה פִירוּשׁ יָפֵה וְעֵי"ש.

There is a wondrous Midrash: “I am 120 years old today.”² On this day I was born, and on this day I will die.” This is what is written, “Never again did a prophet arise in Israel like Moses.”³ This is strange. In the book *Emek Halacha*,⁴ a nice explanation is written on this, and see there.

וּלְדִידָן נִרְאָה לֹמֵר דְּאִיתָא בְּזוֹהַר פְּרִשְׁתָּ בְּהַעֲלוֹתָ דְּכַמְּה פְּעָמִים מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ ע"ה מָסַר עַצְמוֹ לְמִיתָה עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא נִתְקַבְּלוּ דְבָרָיו, וּפְעַם אַחַת מָסַר עַצְמוֹ לְמִיתָה מֵתוֹדֵ רוּגְזוֹ וְעֵשָׂה פִירוּת, דְּהִיבּוּ בְּמִתְאוּנְנִים שְׁאָמַר "הֲרַגְנִי נָא", מִיַּד הָיָה אֲסִיפֵת שְׂבָעִים זְקָנִים וְהִתְנַבְּאוּ אֶלְדָּד וּמִידָד שְׂיָמוּת מֹשֶׁה עכ"ל.

For us, it appears to say as it’s brought in the Zohar, parashat Beha’alotcha, that:

Sometimes our teacher Moses, may he rest in peace, offered himself up for death [as an atonement] for Israel, but his words were not accepted. But one time, in his anger, he offered himself up for death, and [his offer] bore fruit. That was with “those who complained,” i.e., “if only we had meat to eat; we remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.”⁵ During that incident, Moses said to G-d, “If You

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¹ The first edition erroneously read “*Emek Beracha*,” which was written by Abraham Horowitz (1550–1615).

² Deut. 31:2.

³ Deut. 34:10.

⁴ Menachem Maneli ben Baruch Segal (d. 1742), *Emek Halacha* (Padua 1739), parashat Masei. He writes that he heard the Midrash from his older brother, Yitchak, and later heard it from Rabbi Naftali Hertz [Mazia-Ashkenazi], av beit din of Lwow [d. 1668]. He explains that evil could occur on the date of a righteous man’s death, unless he died on the date of his birth, in which case the anniversary of his birth would ward off the evil. Yoma 38b says that when one righteous man dies, another is born, so why can’t the birth of the younger man ward off the evil from the death of the older righteous man? That only works if the younger righteous man is like the older one. That is why the Midrash stated that Moses had no equal. If Moses had died on a day other than his birthday, evil would have occurred, because any righteous man born on that day would not have been like Moses.

⁵ Num. 11:4–5.

would deal thus with me, **kill me rather, I beg You.**⁶ **Immediately, they had the gathering of 70 elders,**⁷ **and Eldad and Medad**⁸ **prophesied that Moses would die.**

- Zohar, Beha'alotcha, III:155b

ולפי זה היינו יכולים לטעון ולומר, חס ושלום, שמשנה מת בשביל שקלל את עצמו ומסר עצמו למיתה והוא גנאי למשה. ולכן המדרש הנ"ל בא לאפוקי סברא זו "כרמאה ועשרים שנה" וכו' ביום זה נולדתי וביום זה אמות, שנה הוא מילוי הימים שנגזר עלי מעת לידתי והקב"ה משלים שנותיהם של צדיקים וכו'. וסיבת מיתתי לא הייתה מחמת כעס חס ושלום, והראיה שביום זה נולדתי וביום זה אמות, דאי תימא שקלל את עצמו ומשום הכי נתקצרו שנותיו מה טעם הנה להשלים לו הימים, אחר שנתקצרו לו השנים מכל שכן הימים, אלא נדאי שמת בשביל שהגיע קיצו ולא מחמת הקללה שמסר עצמו למיתה.

According to this, we could make a claim, G-d forbid, that Moses died because he essentially cursed himself and gave himself up to death. This thinking is a reproach to Moses. Therefore, the above Midrash comes to exclude this opinion. “ ‘I am 120 years old today.’ On this day I was born, and on this day I will die.” I.e., Moses meant: **“For this is the completion of the days that were decreed for me from the time of my birth, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, completes the years of the righteous** from day to day and from month to month, as it is written: ‘The number of your days I will fill’ (Ex. 23:26).”⁹ **“For the reason for my death was not because of anger, G-d forbid, and the proof is that on this day I was born, and on this day I will die.”** If you will say that he essentially cursed himself, and because of this, his years were cut short, what is the reason for [G-d] to complete his days? After his years were shortened, why particularly were his days important? Rather, surely he died because he had come to his lifespan’s natural end, and not because of the curse that he offered himself to die.

ומביא ראיה מהפסוק "ולא-קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה" דלכאורה קשה מה בא הכתוב הנה ללמדנו ומאי נפקא לן מיניה. ועוד שזהו דבר הנראה לעינינו אם יקום אחר כמוהו או לאו. ואם נאמר שהכתוב בא כדי להרבות בשבחיו של משה, הלא גם לזה אין צורך כלל שכבר אנו יודעים דמי עלה שמים וירד כמו משה? ועוד כבר פתיב שאין בשום הנביאים כמו משה "אמיהיה נביאכם" וכו' "לא-כן עבדי משה". ועוד הנה לו לומר "יקום" בלשון עתיד, ועוד הנה לו לומר "ולא-קם נביא . . . כמשה" ומהו "בישראל".

[The Midrash] brings a proof from the Scripture, “Never again did a prophet arise in Israel like Moses.” It is apparently difficult to understand what this Scripture comes to teach us, i.e., what practical difference does this make to us? Also, this is something that appears to our eyes as if speculating if another like him will arise in the future or not. If it is said that the Scripture comes in order to increase the praise of Moses, isn’t it so that there is no need

⁶ Num. 11:15.

⁷ Num. 11:16–25.

⁸ Num. 11:26–27.

⁹ Sotah 13b.

for this at all, for we already know that who else ascended to Heaven at Mount Sinai and descended like Moses?

Also, it is already written that there was no other prophet like Moses, as it was written, **“If there will be prophets of the L-rd among you, I will make Myself known to them in a vision; I will speak to them in a dream. It is not so with My servant Moses.”**¹⁰ I.e., “The L-rd spoke to Moses face-to-face, as one person speaks to another.”¹¹ Also, [Scripture] could have said, **“Never again will there arise,” in the future tense. Also, [Scripture] could have said, “Another prophet didn’t arise like Moses,” and what is the reason for specifying, “in Israel”?**

וְחִוּץ מִמָּה שֶׁדָּרָשׁוּ רַז"ל יֵשׁ לֹמַר שֶׁהַכְּתוּב בָּא לְהַשְׁמִיעֵנוּ שֶׁכָּל הַזְּכוּת הַגְּדוֹל שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לֹא הָיָה אֲלֵא בְּשִׁבִיל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכִמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ רַז"ל "לְהִרְדּוּ כִּי שָׁחַת עִמָּךְ" כְּלוּם נִתְּתִי לָךְ גְּדוּלָּה אֲלֵא בְּשִׁבִיל יִשְׂרָאֵל. עֲכָשְׁיוּ שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל חָטְאוּ לָמָּה לָךְ גְּדוּלָּה. וְכֵן הוּא בִּיְלֻקוּט עַל פְּסוּק "עֲמַד וְיִמְדַּד אֶרֶץ", מְדַד הַקֶּב"ה כָּל הַדּוֹרוֹת וְלֹא מִצָּא דוֹר רָאוּי לְקַבֵּל הַתּוֹרָה אֲלֵא דוֹר הַמִּדְבָּר עכ"ל.

Apart from what the rabbis of blessed memory explained, it can be said that the Scripture comes to inform us that all the great merit that Moses had was only because of Israel. As [the rabbis] of blessed memory said:

“The L-rd spoke to Moses: **‘Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely.’**”¹² **I gave you greatness only for the sake of Israel. Now that Israel has sinned, why should you have greatness?**

- Berachot 32a

Similarly, it is written in the Yalkut Shimoni for Habbakuk, remez 563 on the verse, **“[G-d] stood and measured the world”**¹³: **The Holy One, Blessed be He, measured all of the generations, and the only generation He found suitable to receive the Torah was the generation of the Wilderness.”**

וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמַר הַכְּתוּב "וְלֹא־קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה", שֶׁאֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁזְּמַן נְתִינַת הַתּוֹרָה הִתְחִיל בִּימֵי אַבְרָהָם כְּדֹאֲמַרְיֵנוּ שֶׁתָּא אֵלֵּפִי שְׁנֵי הָיָה עֲלֵמָא שְׁנֵי אֲלֵפִים תּוֹרָה, מְכַל מְקוּם לֹא הָיָה יָכוֹל הַקֶּב"ה לִיתְּנָה קוּדֵם מִשּׁוּם שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה עֲדִיין הַדּוֹר רָאוּי לְכַד, וְכִשְׁנֵיגִיעַ הַדּוֹר הָרָאוּי בְּזְכוּת זֶה הַדּוֹר נוֹלַד מֹשֶׁה. וְלָכֵן כְּשִׁמְתָה זֶה הַדּוֹר מִן הָרָאוּי שֶׁיָּמִינֵהוּ אֵף מֹשֶׁה. וְזֶהוּ שֶׁמִּשְׁמִיעֵנוּ הַכְּתוּב שֶׁל "וְלֹא־קָם נְבִיא" וְכוּ' כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא נִאָּמַר שֶׁמֹּשֶׁה מֵת בְּשִׁבִיל שֶׁקִּלְלָה אֶת עַצְמוֹ חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם, אֲלֵא כְּדִי לְהִיּוֹת עִם בְּנֵי דוֹרוֹ הוֹאִיל שֶׁקִּבֵּל מֵהֶם אֶת גְּדוּלָּתוֹ.

This is why the Scripture said, “Never again did a prophet arise in Israel like Moses.” The time of the giving of the Torah began in the days of Abraham, as it is said:

¹⁰ Num. 12:6–7.

¹¹ Ex. 33:11.

¹² Ex. 32:7.

¹³ Habbakuk 3:6.

Six thousand years is [the duration of] **the world**. Two thousand [years are characterized by] chaos; **two thousand** [years are characterized by] **Torah** [from the era of the Patriarchs until the end of the Mishnaic period]; and two thousand years are the period of [the coming of] the Messiah.

- Sanhedrin 97b; Avodah Zarah 9a

In any event, the Holy One, Blessed be He, was not able to give [the Torah] beforehand, because there was not yet a generation suitable for this. When a suitable generation arrived, it was in the merit of this generation that Moses was born. Therefore, when this generation died, it was appropriate that even Moses would die. This is what the Scripture of “Never again did a prophet arise” informed us, in order that it wouldn’t be said that Moses died because he cursed himself, G-d forbid. Rather, he died in order to be with the members of his generation, since he received his greatness from them.

ומה שנתנבאו אלקדד ומידד על מיתת משה באותו זמן של אסיפת שבועים זקנים ששרתה רוח נבואה עליהם, יש לומר דנה הנה משום דכיון שראו אלו הנביאים ששרתה רוח הקדש עליהם והיו פחותים הרבה ממדרגת משה רבנו ע"ה. בנדאי הנה להם לומר בעצמם מה תועלת לנבואה זו אם משה גדול מהם ונלא בכלל מאתים מנה ולא תהיה זאת להם לשום כבוד, דבשלקמא השבועים הראשונים יש להם הכבוד להיות נמנים בסנהדרין אכל אלו השנים נשארו במחנה. ולפיכך אותו רוח הקדש בעצמו ששרתה עליהם הודיעם שימות משה ואז יהיו אלו נחשבים ויהיה להם גדולה וכבוד כדאמרינן בסוף מגילה יהי רצון שתגיע לחצי ימי. אמר לו, ולכלהו לא? אמר לו, הבאים אחריו—בהמה ירעו!?

Regarding what was prophesied by Eldad and Medad about the death of Moses at the time of the assembly of 70 elders upon whom spirit of prophecy rested, it can be said that this was because they saw that these prophets upon whom Divine inspiration rested were very far below the level of our teacher Moses, may he rest in peace. Certainly, they could have said to themselves, what is the use of this prophecy, if Moses is greater than them, and “100 is included in 200.”¹⁴ I.e., just as 100 is subsumed within 200, the prophecy of Eldad and Medad, as well as the prophecy of the 70 elders, would be subsumed within the prophecy of Moses, who was greater than them all, and there would be no honor for them. Granted, the first 70 elders had honor to be named to the Sanhedrin, to judge the people, and they went outside the camp and gathered around the Tabernacle to prophecy, but these two men, Eldad and Medad, remained in the camp, and they weren’t named to the Sanhedrin, and they had no honor, as their prophecy was less than that of Moses.

Therefore, the same Divine inspiration by itself that rested upon them informed them that Moses would die, and then because of this prophecy that the people hadn’t heard previously,

¹⁴ Bava Batra 41b and Sanhedrin 31a: “With regard to what did [Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel] disagree? [They disagree] with regard to one set [of witnesses], where one [witness] says [that a litigant owes] one hundred dinars and one [witness] says [that he owes] two hundred; as [in such a case], Beit Shammai say that their testimony is divided [and they do not combine to form a set of witnesses], and Beit Hillel say that two hundred includes one hundred [and they combine to form a set of witnesses].”

[Eldad and Medad] would be considered to have greatness and honor, as it is said at the end of tractate Megillah:

At the time of [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha's] departure [from this world], [Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi] said to him: My teacher, bless me. He said to him: **May it be [G-d's] will that you [live to] reach to half of my days.** [When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi heard this, he asked in astonishment: Are you saying that] **to the entirety of [your days I should] not [reach]?** [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha] **said to him: Shall those who come after you [just] tend cattle?** [I.e., if you live as long as me, your sons will never be able to succeed you in the position of Nasi. As such, they will never achieve greatness in Torah, and it will be as if they just tended cattle throughout their lives. It is therefore better that your life not be so prolonged, so that they have the opportunity to rise to eminence.]

- Megillah 28a

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