

# **The Death of Moses — An Epilogue**

**A D'var Torah on Parashat V'zot Hab'rachah (Deut. 33:1 – 34:12)**

**By Martin Graffman, M.D.**

*“V'zot hab'rachah asher beirach Moshe ish ha'elohim et-b'nei Yisrael lifnei moto.”*  
*“This is the blessing that Moses, man of God, bestowed on the Israelites before his death.”*

In this final Parashah of the Torah, we empathize with Moses who can obtain only a glimpse of the Promised Land prior to his death. For more than forty years, Moses has struggled to understand and accept his partnership with God. At God's command, he has learned — sometimes with great doubt, and at other times with great difficulty — to shepherd a flock of people from the comfort of idolatrous slavery to a land of promise, a land of milk and honey where one might experience the anxiety of freedom. At the dawn of his success and on the eve of his life, Moses wants to lead his people across the Jordan, but God refuses to let him. Yet lovingly, God grants Moses a visual obituary. If we are not bewildered by God's decision, then we are at least righteously indignant.

What if every man successfully concluded his life knowing that he would remain the “best” both in life and after it? What if, at the time of his death, he knew that he was the strongest man alive, and no one would ever be stronger? Or, at the time of his death, he knew that he was the richest man in the universe, and there would never be anyone richer? Or, that he had been the wisest man that had ever lived, and there would never be anyone wiser? Would this be the best of all possibilities for man?

What if every man concluded his life knowing that, although he struggled during his life, and although he was at times successful, every success would be surpassed? Or that, during his lifetime, he struggled to be the strongest man alive, that he was for a short time the strongest, but then others, stronger, surpassed him? Or that, during his lifetime, he struggled to be richest man alive, that he was the wealthiest of all men for a short time, but that others became richer? Or that, during his lifetime, he struggled to be the wisest man alive, that he was the wisest of all men for a short time, but that others became wiser? Would *this* be the best of all possibilities for man?

What if every man, during his life, struggled because man must, and that — in spite of that struggle, or because of it — came to love the struggle? After the expulsion from Eden, God ordained struggle for man. The authors of our heritage interpreted the expulsion from Eden as a punishment, but man learned to see it as a gift, and therefore learned to love it. Man learned to love the struggle for strength and wealth and wisdom. During his life, man did at times briefly experience strength, wealth, and wisdom; however, he

learned that his joy was born not of achieving strength, wealth, and wisdom, but in pursuing them. Therefore, after the joy of his victories had dissipated, he soon yearned to pursue them once again. Is this the best of all possibilities for man?

What if that same man also learned that the greatest joy of all was to be found in teaching other men wisdom, and they, now as teachers, could infinitely experience and transmit this same powerful, rich, and joyful wisdom?

Moses, our teacher, was to suffer and, through suffering, learn the fate of all men — the tragedy of life's limitations yet the infinite joy of the teacher. He, the teacher, became the giant on whose shoulders we stand so that our shoulders, in turn, could support even others. Moses learned through God's grace that the gift of wisdom is never the discovery but rather the act of discovering, and that the joy of the teacher lies not in what has been taught but rather in the teaching. Moreover, he, the teacher, is forever tied to the student, and there will be forever students who will want to know.

Our rabbi has begun a new chapter of his life, in Israel. We, both Rabbi Donnell and the Torah Study *talmidim*, like Moses, may feel loss and bewilderment, and even perhaps righteous indignation. But our rabbi, the teacher, is forever tied to us, his students, and there will forever be students, perhaps students of Rabbi Donnell's students, who will want to know.

**“The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom. Therefore use all your means to acquire understanding.”<sup>1</sup>**

**“Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances ... Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples....”<sup>2</sup>**

**“Happy is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gets understanding.”<sup>3</sup>**

**“To get wisdom is better than gold. And to get understanding is preferable to silver.”<sup>4</sup>**

**“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be wiser yet.”<sup>5</sup>**

“And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days.”<sup>6</sup>  
I, my rabbi's student, prefer to say, “Thank you.”

Amen, v'Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 4:7.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 4:5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 3:16.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 16:16.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 8:9.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 34:8.