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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Shmini Atzeret**

I have been saying *Yizkor* for my father, Avraham ben Yosef ז"ל since 1970. I recite the formulistic prayers and I think about the soul of a man whose face I recognize only from old black and white pictures and whose life I know only through my mother's stories. When I recite *Yizkor*, I think about my father who died too soon to see a gray hair on his head and I think about my only son, who bears his name.

ז"ל understood that our holidays are fraught with complex emotions that stir within us memories, so they instituted *Yizkor* on *Yamim Tovim* to help us focus our feelings. *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur doesn't offend my sensibilities – "who will live and who will die?" *Yizkor* on *Pesach* and *Shavuot* does not conflict with my perception of those holidays. But I must confess that *Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* has bothered me since 1980.

I was just beginning my studies in Israel in the fall of 1980. I was 20 years old and had already been saying *Yizkor* for half my life. But the experience of *Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* in Israel that year bothered me in a visceral way that has stayed with me until now.

In *Galut*, we celebrate *Yom Tov Sheni*, which was originally instituted because of an uncertainty in the calendar, but which was retained even after the calendar was fixed, as a penalty for living outside of Israel. Therefore, we have two *Seddarim* on *Pesach*; and two days of *Yom Tov* at the end of *Pesach*. On *Shavuot*, we spend two days celebrating the giving of the *Torah*.

But *we* split *Shmini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah* into two distinct celebrations. We do it so routinely that we fail to even notice how radically different this approach is from all other *Yamim Tovim*. The problem is that the two days are in fact one holiday. Both days are יום השמיני חג העצרת

ביום השמיני-עצרת, תהיה לכם : כל-מלאכת עבדה, לא תעשו  
 (במדבר כט : לה)

In Jerusalem in 1980, I celebrated *Shmini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah* as a single day for the first and only time in my life and I was struck but how the congregation recited *Yizkor*,

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cried for loved ones lost, and a few minutes later, sang and danced with great joy holding the *Sefer Torah*. I simply couldn't reconcile the mixing of emotions. But as strange as it was from my perspective, I also realized that that is the way *זו"ל* intended us to celebrate *שמייני עֲצָרָת*. Rather than bifurcate our sorrow and celebration into two separate consecutive days, we are supposed to cry during *Yizkor* and rejoice with the *Torah* in the same breadth.

It is no coincidence that the *Torah* reading for *Simhat Torah*, which is *Shmini Atzeret*, is the death of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. *V'zot Hab'rahka* concludes the *Torah* with a description of the final moments in the life of *Moshe*, standing at the threshold of the Land of Israel to which he has led the Israelites after forty years in the desert. He is to be allowed only to see Israel from the top of Har Nevo, to view its farthest regions but not to cross over into the land itself.

א וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מֵעֲרֵבֹת מוֹאָב, אֶל-הַר נְבוֹ, רֹאשׁ הַפְּסֵגָה, אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי יְרֵחוֹ; וַיִּרְאֶהוּ יְהוָה אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַגְּלִלָּה,  
עַד-דָּן.  
ב וְאֵת, כָּל-נַפְתָּלִי, וְאֵת-אָרֶץ אֶפְרַיִם, וּמְנַשֶּׁה; וְאֵת כָּל-אָרֶץ יְהוּדָה, עַד הַיַּם הָאֲחֵרוֹן.  
ג וְאֵת-הַנֶּגֶב, וְאֵת-הַכּוֹכָר בְּקִעַת יְרֵחוֹ עִיר הַתְּמָרִים--עַד-צֹעַר.  
ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו, זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיַּעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר, לְזָרְעֲךָ, אֲתַנְנָהּ; הֲרֵאִיתִךָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ,  
וְשָׂמָה לֹא תַעֲבֹר.

That he died an ordinary death like all human beings is explicitly stated:

ה וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד-יְהוָה, בְּאָרֶץ מוֹאָב--עַל-פִּי יְהוָה.  
ו וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּגִי בְּאָרֶץ מוֹאָב, מוֹל בֵּית פְּעוֹר; וְלֹא-יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת-קְבֻרָתוֹ, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

That he was extraordinary until the moment he died is also recorded:

ז וּמֹשֶׁה, בֶּן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה--בְּמֹתוֹ; לֹא-כִהְתָּה עֵינָיו, וְלֹא-נָס לַחַה.

That the people were aware of the extent of their loss at his death is reflected in the description of the month-long period of mourning they observed.

ח וַיָּבֹכוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּעֲרֵבֹת מוֹאָב, שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם; וַיִּתְּמוּ, יָמֵי בְכֵי אַבְל מֹשֶׁה.

The *Torah's* final words are a recounting of *Moshe's* career and his crucial role in the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt:

י וְלֹא-קָם נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּמֹשֶׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ יְהוָה, פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים.  
יא לְכָל-הָאֹתוֹת וְהַמוֹפְתִים, אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחוּ יְהוָה, לַעֲשׂוֹת, בְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם--לְפָרְעָה וְלְכָל-עַבְדָּיו, וְלְכָל-אֶרְצוֹ.  
יב וְלְכָל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה, וְלְכָל הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה, לְעֵינֵי כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The *Torah* provides a vivid description of the Land of Israel, it paints a portrait of *Moshe* as prophet and liberator; it even gives us the details of the change of leadership and its transfer to *Yehoshuah*. Finally, the *Torah* describes the death and burial of *Moshe* and the mourning of the people.

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What is missing in the narrative is *Moshe's* personal reaction to the words of God describing his impending death, his actual death and his burial. We hear God saying: וְשָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר but not a word of *Moshe's* feelings and thoughts and the moment his life's work were coming to an end.

What is absent in the *Torah* is more than made up in the *Midrashic* literature.

The *Gemarah* (*Bava Batra* 15a) records a dispute about the authorship of the very end of the *Torah*:

We learn in a *Braita* that these final 8 verses of *Torah* were written by Yehoshua. Since the *Torah* states: "And *Moshe*, God's servant died"

It is inconceivable that *Moshe* wrote these words of his own death.

Therefore we conclude that up until this point, *Moshe* wrote the *Torah*, but the last few verses were written by Yehoshua. This is the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan.

תניא כמאן דאמר שמונה פסוקים שבתורה יהושע כתב

דתניי וימת שם משה עבד ה'

אפשר משה מת וכתב וימת שם משה

אלא עד כאן כתב משה

מכאן ואילך כתב יהושע דברי ר"י

The imagery is troubling to the now universally accepted orthodoxy that all of *Torah*, was given to *Moshe Rabbeinu*. At least one *Tanna* believed that it is simply inconceivable that *Moshe* recorded the story of his own death and the subsequent *Shloshim*.

But the *Gemarah* continues:

Rabbi Nechemya retorted: No; until this point God dictated and *Moshe* transcribed; from this point onward, God dictated and *Moshe* transcribed while crying.

ואמרי לה ר' נחמיה אלא עד כאן הקב"ה אומר ומשה אומר וכותב

מכאן ואילך הקב"ה אומר ומשה כותב בדמע

I find the *Midrash* remarkable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that while it informs us matter-of-factly that *Moshe* was crying, it does not tell us why he was crying. The *Midrash* left it to us to analyze; so with that in mind, I would like to offer a few possibilities that I hope we can extrapolate lessons from.

1. *Moshe* is scribing the account of his own death. With tears flowing down his eyes, he writes God's words; that he will soon die and be buried in an unmarked grave, his children will never visit his grave; his students, will not erect a monument. The people will move on after a month of mourning.

No wonder *Moshe* was crying; death is always scary, even for the only man who talked with *HaShem* face to face; death is downright frightening when it has to be faced alone.

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The lesson to be learned then is that we have a duty to see to it that no one feels alone in death, or in life. Our obligation is to comfort the lonely, even if they appear strong and able, to invite others to our *Seddarim*, to host others and to visit the sick.

- I would like to suggest another explanation for *Moshe's* tears that is equally disturbing. *Moshe* was not afraid to face his own death; after 120 years, he knew it was his time. He was not crying because his grave would be unmarked, since he was wise enough to appreciate that his body was being properly cared for by the Ultimate *Chevra Kadisha*, God Himself.

*Moshe* was crying because he heard the final words of the *Torah*:

וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּמֹשֶׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ יְהוָה, פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים

And there did not arise a prophet since then in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face. (Deut. 34:10)

What pained *Moshe* more than anything was the knowledge that his children would not rise to the great heights that he had experienced. What made him cry was the realization that his children and students and people would not know God as he had, פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים.

It is a natural tendency for parents to want their children to surpass them. Our parents for whom we say *Yizkor* on this *Yom Tov* smile, knowing that they raised good children, generous children, kind and compassionate members of the human race and *Klal Yisrael*.

And our parents who are thankfully still alive gain *nachas* daily from seeing us give *tzedaka*, send our children to *Yeshiva*, be a part of a community that shares Shabbat and *Yom Tov*.

And we, who sacrifice so much for our children, delight in seeing the fruits of our labor. We cry tears of happiness when we hear them sing *Z'mirot*, give a *Dvar Torah*, *daven* from the *Amud*, sing *Anim Z'mirot*, quote a *Rashi*, kiss a *Mezzuzah*, make a *Bracha*, and find a mate who is similarly steeped in *Torah* and *Midot*.

וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּמֹשֶׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ יְהוָה, פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים

*Moshe* cried the most painful of tears knowing that his own spiritual successes would not be matched by his children and students. That was the mark of his greatness and extraordinary humility, and it was also the source of much personal tragedy and pain.

- I would like to suggest yet another explanation for the tears of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. Through legislation and *Nevuah*, *Moshe* knew that Jews would read the *Torah* in an annual cycle.

Thus, he knew that:

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יב ולכל היד הנזקה, ולכל המורא הגדול, אשר עשה משה, לעיני כל-ישראל.

would be followed immediately by:

א בראשית, ברא אלהים, את השמים, ואת הארץ.

*Moshe* was both happy and sad, and his tears were of joy and of sorrow simultaneously. He was sad that his life was drawing to an end, but he was comforted in knowing that there really is a 'circle of life', and that his life's work would continue through generations that experienced famines and pogroms, destructions, Crusades, Holocausts, Intifadas and the reunification of Jerusalem.

Like *Moshe*, we, too, can cry at the loss of those people who impacted our lives and still be comforted knowing that their good deeds and life lessons live on. And like *Moshe*, we too can be comforted even as we face our own mortality, if we live lives worth living.

4. One final suggestion for *Moshe's* tears. When *Moshe* wrote the words:

ח ויבכו בני ישראל את-משה בערבת מואב, שלשים יום; ויתמו ימי בכי אבל משה.

he couldn't help but think about the description of the death of his brother *Aharon*.

ט ויראו כל-העדה כי גוע אהרן; ויבכו את-אהרן שלשים יום, כל בית ישראל.

*Aharon* was mourned by every member of Israel, כל בית ישראל, *Moshe*, however, was mourned by the nation collectively, implying that there were some members of *klal Yisrael* who did not mourn him. *Rashi* points out that *Moshe* was the lawgiver and *Dayan*; in rendering decisions, he no doubt alienated litigants. *Aharon*, however, was "a lover of peace and a seeker of peace"; he made peace between fighting spouses; he made peace between brothers. He made peace between children estranged from parents. He made peace between feuding neighbors. For *Aharon*, truth and justice and right and wrong took a back seat to harmony and love and peace, just as it did for God when He chose to create the universe.

*Moshe* was not jealous of his brother (in life or death) but he was nevertheless pained by the stark contrast to the reaction to his own death. On his deathbed, *Moshe* realized that the mantle of leadership had cost him dearly in terms of personal relationships. In being *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the man *Moshe* had become estranged from his own wife and children. And being the leader, making tough decisions, meant that he was not always appreciated.

Again, while this realization pained *Moshe* so deeply that he shed tears, there is a valuable lesson for us. We know our limitations; we will never see God פנים אל-פנים. But we can certainly be men and women who are lovers of peace and seekers of peace, people who embrace peace and harmony in our lives and relationships.

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We have a choice about how we will be mourned and remembered, and it will be based on whether we let events take control over us and shape our relationships, or whether we embrace a life motto, as did *Aharon*, and let that motto guide our relationships.

We can chose to be someone who embraces peace, and love, and harmony; we can decide to be a lover of peace and a seeker of peace, or we can chose to be rigid and right, and thus often alone.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to remember *Moshe Rabbeinu* as a real man who lived, a man who inspired and sacrificed; a man who led a nation but who also loved and cried and mourned opportunities lost.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to remember that *Moshe* was denied entry into *Eretz Yisrael*, but that we are able to walk the streets of Israel and we must avail ourselves of that opportunity whenever possible.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to put some thought, after *Yom Kippur*, that we get only so many go-rounds of the *Torah* cycle. *Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the time to realize that life is fleeting and we must make our days count.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to decide to embrace the philosophy of *Aharon*, to be “a lover of peace and a seeker of peace”; to be a *Baal Tzedaka*, a *Baal Chessed*, a kind and compassionate member of the community, to contribute our resources and to extend our hands beyond the walls of our homes.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to remember that life can be scary and that whenever possible, we owe it to others to hold their hands and to lend a shoulder to cry on so they are not alone.

*Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* is the perfect opportunity to realize that singing and dancing and crying are not mutually exclusive.

Above all, *Yizkor* on *Shmini Atzeret* it is the perfect opportunity to remember.

*Chag Same'ach!!*

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