



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Reflections Upon the Year's End”

It is the last Sabbath of this year, and we will shortly usher in the New Year.

Without a doubt, there is quite a bit of sadness attached to this Sabbath, and indeed, to this time of year. Sure, we look forward to a new year with new blessings and new opportunities. But we cannot escape the fact that this year was marked with its frustrations, disappointments, and even, yes, tragedies.

It is in a state of physical and spiritual exhaustion that we find ourselves on this last Sabbath of the year. Our energies are spent, our vigor diminished. Amazingly, this mood is especially reflected in the opening verses of the second of this week's double Torah portion, *Nitzavim-Vayelech* (*Deuteronomy* 29:9-31:30).

"Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. He said to them: I am now 120 years old, I can no longer come and go. Moreover,

the Lord has said to me, 'You shall not go across yonder Jordan.'" (*Deuteronomy* 31:1-2)

Who cannot hear resignation in the voice of Moses, and perhaps even a note of despair?

Rashi notes the words of our Sages, who are surely in tune with Moses' mood when they comment, "The traditions and the well-springs of wisdom were shutting down for him."

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, known because of his masterwork *Ohr HaChaim* as the "saintly" Ohr HaChaim, answers the question raised by the mystical Zohar: "Moses went...? Where did he go?" He suggests that the phrase "Moses went..." signifies that "he felt that his soul was leaving him, and that he was aware that his end was drawing near on that day."

And so, this year is waning, as is the life of Moses. A cloud of sadness envelops us, and though there is the glimmer of the New Year's light upon the horizon, it somehow feels that there is still a great distance between us and that light.

I once, in the grips of this mood of sadness during this same time of year, paid a visit to my parents' grave. This act of homage was consistent with the ancient Jewish custom of visiting the graves of one's ancestors during the month of Elul, just prior to Rosh Hashanah.

As I stood before my mother's grave, may she rest in peace, it was the fragrance of the sweet holiday meals which she prepared that rose to my nostrils, and the image of her

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kindling the holiday candles that appeared before my eyes.

As I stood before my father's grave, and he died quite a few years before my mother, I had a different experience entirely. My father was a prayer leader in the synagogue, a *baal tefilah*, literally a "master of prayer." I closed my eyes and remembered standing beside him as he positioned himself before the lectern at the front of the small synagogue in which he habitually prayed.

At that poignant moment, there emerged from the recesses of my memory a teaching of the sainted Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Although I had not seen that teaching in print for many years, at that moment I could recall the text verbatim. It was a teaching on the very text which we are now considering: "And Moses went and spoke..."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok pointed out that, when our Sages referred to the prayer leader, they sometimes said, "One goes down before the lectern;" but sometimes they said, "One passes before the lectern." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, therefore, distinguishes between two modes of the experience of prayer.

In the first instance, the person feels spiritually inadequate, and turns to the words to lead him as he approaches God. Such a person "goes down before the lectern." This teaching becomes more impactful when one realizes that the Hebrew term for lectern, *tei-va*, also means "word." He "goes down before the word," relying upon the liturgy itself to compensate for his personal limitations.

In the second instance, on the other hand, we have the person who "passes before the lectern." This person "leads the words." He is, in a sense, spiritually independent of the text of the liturgy, so righteous is he. This, writes Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, was the level of Moses

through most of his life.

"However," concludes Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, "when Moses was at the end of his days and when the fountain of wisdom was no longer accessible to him, he regressed to the level in which 'words led him.' This is the meaning of 'And Moses went and spoke'—that he went to the word, which was above him."

As I stood before my father's grave, enchanted by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's profound insight into the experience of prayer, I realized that my father's unique talent was his ability to begin the services he led as one who "went down before the lectern". But then, with the sweetness of his melodic voice and with the passion of his unadulterated sincerity, he rose to a higher level, and not only "passed before the lectern" himself, but inspired others to ascend with him to that higher sphere.

As the current year ebbs away, we are overcome by remorse, and we regret our failures and shortcomings. We certainly feel spiritually inadequate. But we can take solace in the fact that we have access to "the words." In just a matter of days, we will be able to go "down before the lectern," and allow the sacred words of the High Holiday liturgy to lead us to a higher and purer place.

Moreover, we can all be hopeful that we will be inspired, if only temporarily, to rise above the rank of those who "go down before the lectern," and reach the spiritual heights of those who "pass before it."

Shana tova umetukah; a happy and sweet New Year. ■

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