

"Hope at the End"

While our gates have closed and the New Year of 5779 is in full swing, we find our prophet Moses still clinging on to his final moments with the Israelites. His fate has been sealed and Moses is acutely aware that he will not be entering into the Promised Land with his community. Joshua will soon assume the reigns of leadership. Moses has prepped him and everything seems to be in order. The reality is difficult to accept, but Moses handles it by sharing important words in one of his final declarations to the people.

In the portion of Ha'azinu in the book of Deuteronomy we find a moving and heartfelt poem. Moses implores the people to hold on to these words. He even states that they should be heard by the heavens and the earth. How can such places absorb what is being said? Moses is a mortal being and his community will also know a time when the end of their days are near. But, the heavens and earth are lasting. They have been created in God's image. They are the perpetual witnesses of all that the Israelites will inherit.

While we might expect to see a message of hope or even one of great pride from Moses, we don't. Moses admonishes the people for being unworthy of God's blessings. Is this a way to end his tenure? It certainly doesn't seem fair to criticize the people at such a tender moment. Is Moses' timing truly off? Is he a bit senile? Tradition tells us no, so how can we better understand what is happening?

Moses warns the people that they must remain steadfast in following God's ways. They can't grow too comfortable in their new environment. Moses made his mistakes and so did the people. Judaism has never taught that perfection is the goal, but rather we are commanded to fulfill the commandments with the highest kavannah or intention. Moses is responsible for the well-being of future generations. After his years of leadership Moses has the right words. He implores the people in a harsh, but direct way.

Moses is many things: he is a prophet, a leader, but ultimately a teacher. We can think back to our teachers and educators over the years. What types of teachers had strong and lasting impressions? Often it was those who required the most, the ones with a reputation of being strict. But, what did we gain in return? If we were able to complete all that was asked, we received tools that still remain with us today. The relationship between teacher and student is one of the most meaningful relationships of any in our tradition. The balance and partnership between each person helps sustain us over the course of a lifetime.

Moses expects a strong reaction from his community. He wants them to truly reflect on all that has come before them. They must be ready and prepared for the next phase. While it will come with many benefits, it will also require a great deal of work. We feel the emotion in the

heavy poem Moses shares with his community, his family. It's not a collection of meaningless phrases. It carries weight, depth and warnings.

Leaving behind a meaningful legacy is what helps us mark important times of transition. Understanding the end of life isn't easy. We yearn for days of brighter hope and optimism. Through Moses' heartfelt poem he finds the right words at the right time. Moses speaks from a place of deep emotion. In this final verses of Torah he is no longer a military leader or even a judge, he sits with the people as their guardian and protector. In the words of the Israeli poet, Judah HaLevi, Moses becomes a "harp for God's song."

Moses is a *klei kodesh*, a holy vessel. He grew and developed into an incredible leader. Moses didn't accept the position without having some doubts in his ability. He served as God's humble servant throughout his life. Now, as Moses watches the gates close on his reign he shows raw emotion. While his heart is heavy with reality of the next phase of his life, he shares his feelings openly. Challenges will exist, and the Israelites will have difficult days. But, in the end it will be worthwhile and fulfilling. They will follow through on words of Torah and work hard at maintaining a close relationship to God.

There is a message of hope at the end of Moses' poem. He believes that his people will know goodness and plenty in the years and generations to come. They will embrace words of Torah. And, in return, the years will be good and fruitful for them. It won't be easy. There will be challenges and hurdles, but they will grow to be a magnificent nation, full of God's blessings.

We are here today, not by accident or simply because of our prayers. It's because we have followed through on Moses' words. It hasn't always been easy for us. We've had our share of tough times. But, we gather proudly today as a community to share these important lessons. At the opening of our New Year, we celebrate our inheritance. We are motivated to act in the name of all those who have come before us and those who will follow. They inspire and influence us in the most beneficial ways.

As the portion of Ha'azinu comes to a close, God tells Moses to view the Land from afar. Moses should see what is next. It is because of Moses' efforts that the Israelites have reached this monumental phase of their lives. The vision of what's to come assures Moses that he has fulfilled his role until the end.

Moses models how to leave an important position with grace and dignity. He shows kindness and compassion through his direct and firm words to the people. At a time when he could have been self-indulgent, he wasn't. He spoke from a place of deep caring and concern for his beloved nation.

We have great pride in our stories and heritage. They are ours to shape and mold in our age. Moses leads by example. Disappointments will inevitably be part of life, and when they are we can seek the comfort we need. Moses departs on a note of hope. He shares his optimism that the future will be strong.

Today, we can be assured that in our own ways we have brought honor to Moses' name and to all of his teachings. We support each other as our lives are sweetened with words from our tradition. Ultimately, this is our greatest joy. We are sustained by Torah. Moses helps us understand what it can be. It is ours to mold and shape. As long as we don't stray too far from the holy path we can take great pride that we're doing the right thing and making the best choices.

As we mark this time of transition from the familiar to the new, let us be mindful that our tradition is special and spiritual. Let us seek the support and help we need from our forbearers whose lives continue to be a blessing for us today and for future generations. Amen.