

The Parshah in a Nutshell

# Vayelech

*Deut. 31:1-31:30*

The Parshah of *Vayelech* ("**And He Went**") recounts the events on Moses' last day of earthly life. "I am one hundred and twenty years old **today**," he says to the people, "and **I can no longer** go forth and come in." He transfers the leadership to Joshua, and writes (or concludes writing) **the Torah** in a scroll which he

entrusts to the Levites for safekeeping **in the Ark** of the Covenant.

The mitzvah of *Hak'hel* ("**Gather**") is given: every seven years, during the festival of Sukkot of the first year of the **shemittah cycle**, the entire people of Israel -- men, women and children -- should gather at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where the **king** should read to them from the Torah.

Vayelech concludes with the prediction that the people of Israel will turn away from their covenant with G-d causing Him to **hide His face** from them, but also with the promise that the words of the Torah "**shall not be forgotten** out of the mouths of their **descendants**."



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# Vayelech

Deut. 31:1-31:30

Summary and Commentary

## Moses Went

The section of Vayelech (and the next two parshiot of *Haazinu* and *VeZot HaBrachah*) describes the events and words spoken on the **last day** of Moses' life:

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## Commentary

**last day:** *I can no longer go out and come in... (31:2)*

G-d said to Moses: "Such is the way of the world: Each generation has its teachers. Until now was your portion to serve Me; now has come the portion of Joshua your disciple."

Said Moses to G-d: "Master of the Universe! If it is because of Joshua that I must die, let me become his disciple."

Said G-d to him: "If that is your wish, you may do so."

So Moses arose early in the morning to Joshua's door, and Joshua was sitting and teaching. And Moses bent his frame and covered his mouth, and Joshua did not see him... And all of Israel came to Moses' door, but found him at Joshua's door, and Joshua was sitting and Moses was standing. And the people said to Joshua: "Joshua! What has happened to you, that Moses our master is standing and you are sitting?" As soon as Joshua lifted his eyes and saw this, he immediately tore his garments and cried and wept: "Master! Master! Father, my father and lord!"

Said the people to him: "Moses our teacher! Teach us Torah."

Said he to them: "I have not license."

Said they to him: "We shall not leave you!"

Then a voice came forth from heaven and said to them: "Learn from Joshua!" and they accepted it.

Joshua sat at their head, Moses to his right and the sons of Aaron to his left; he sat and taught, and Moses did not understand his teaching.

After they stood up, the people of Israel said to Moses: "Moses our teacher, explain the teaching to us."

Said he to them: "I know it not" and Moses was stumbling and failing.

At that moment, he said to G-d: "Master of the Universe! Until now, I asked for life. Now, my soul is placed in Your hand."

*And Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. And he said to them: "I am a hundred and twenty years old this day, I can no longer go out and come in; and G-d has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan..."*

Moses entrusts the leadership of Israel to Joshua. He puts the Torah **into writing**, and commands them the mitzvah of Hak'hel ('gathering'): every seven years, on the Sukkot festival following the *shemittah* year, "Gather the people together, men, and women, and **the babies**,

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## Commentary

(Midrash Tanchuma)

**Moses went:** *And Moses went... to all of Israel (31:1)*

But the Torah doesn't tell us *where* Moses went on this last day of his earthly life. The Chassidic masters say: Moses entered into the core of every Jew of every generation, so that every Jewish soul possesses a spark of the soul of Moses.

(Maayanah Shel Torah)

**years:** *I am one hundred and twenty years old today (31:2)*

Today my days and years were fulfilled; on this day I was born, and on this day I shall die... This is to teach us that G-d fulfills the years of the righteous to the day and to the month, as it is written (Exodus 23:26): "I shall fulfill the number of your days."

(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a)

**into writing:** *And Moses commanded the Levites... Take this book of the Torah, and place it to the side of the ark of the covenant of G-d, that it may be there for a witness unto you (31:25-26)*

Our sages debated in [the talmudic tractate] *Bava Batra* concerning this Torah scroll. There are those who say that a shelf extended from the outside of the Ark, and on it the Torah scroll was placed. And there are those who say that it was placed to the side of the Two Tablets [inscribed with the Ten Commandments] within the Ark. (Rashi)

**the babies:** *Gather the people together, men, and women, and the babies... that they may hear, and that they may learn (31:12)*

Rabbi Dosan ben Horkinas saw Rabbi Joshua [ben Chananya] and proclaimed: "Whom to teach knowledge? ... those weaned of milk' (Isaiah 28:9). I remember his mother bringing round his cradle to the study hall, so that his ears should pick up words of Torah." (Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 1:6)

and your stranger that is within your gates"; the king shall then read from the Torah to them, "that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the L-rd your G-d, and observe to do all the words of this Torah."

Moses again warns of the **hiding of the divine face** which shall occur when the people abandon the Torah; indeed, G-d Himself **predicts** that this will be the case. "This song" must therefore serve as an everlasting testimony to ensure Israel's eventual return and rapprochement with their G-d

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## Commentary

**hiding of the divine face:** *And I, hide shall I hide my face from them (31:18)*

There are times when G-d hides His face. But then there are times when G-d hides His face and we don't even realize that His face is hidden; we dwell in darkness, and think it is light. This is a double *galut*, a concealment within a concealment.

(The Chassidic Masters)

**predicts:** *So that this song may be a witness for Me... And this song shall testify as a witness for them (31:19)*

Thus the prediction that the people of Israel will abandon the Torah and will be punished for their sins, serves as a "witness" both for the people and for G-d. For the people, that they have been forewarned of the consequences of their deeds. And for G-d, that He should not be too harsh on them, since He Himself foresaw it all and said, "For I know their inclination, and what they do, even now, before I have brought them into the land of which I promised..." (Malbim)

## A PRECISE LIFE

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson

*And Moses went and spoke the following words to all of Israel. And he said to them: "I am one hundred and twenty years old today..."* Deuteronomy 31:1-2

*Today my days and years were fulfilled; on this day I was born, and on this day I shall die... This is to teach us that G-d fulfills the years of the righteous to the day and to the month, as it is written (Exodus 23:26): "I shall fulfill the number of your days."* Rashi, ibid.; Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a

A year is more than a quantity of time: it is a cycle, a sequence of transitions that runs its course only to repeat itself again and again. On the physical level, a year marks the completion of the solar cycle and the repeat of the sequence of seasons and the life-cycles it engenders. On the spiritual plane, each year brings a repeat of the various spiritual influences unleashed by the festivals (freedom on Passover, joy on Sukkot, etc.) from their fixed position on the Jewish calendar.

Thus, the Hebrew word for "year," *shannah*, means both "change" and "repetition." For the year is an embodiment of the entire range of transformations that constitute the human experience. Each year of our lives only repeats this cycle, though on the higher level to which a year's worth of maturity and achievement have elevated us. In other words, one can say that we all live for one year, and then relive our lives for as many times as we are enabled, each time on a more elevated level, like a spiral which repeats the same path with each revolution, but on a higher plane.

Therein lies the significance of a life that is "fulfilled" in the sense that it consists of complete calendar years. Moses was born on the 7th of Adar and passed away on the same date, as was the case with a number of other *tzaddikim* (perfectly righteous individuals).

The world we inhabit has both a spiritual and a physical dimension. While these are but the two faces of a single reality, not always is the one a precise mirror of the other. Thus there were many *tzaddikim* whose lives were "fulfilled" in the spiritual sense -- in that the potential in each of their days and moments was optimally realized -- yet this "fullness" did not find expression in the calendar dates of their birth and passing. Physically, their final year on earth was "incomplete." But then there were those great men and women whose physical life was a crystalline vessel of its spiritual content, reflected in the fact that "G-d fulfills their years to the day and to the month."

## TRANSLATING TRUTH

Eight hundred years ago, Maimonides wrote to his translator, Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon: "One who wishes to translate from one language to another by rendering each word literally and adhering to the original order of words and sentences... will end up with a translation that is difficult and confusing. Instead, the translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject and then explain the theme, according to his understanding, in the other language..."

This is elementary to any translation attempt. The question, however, that the translator faces is: How far to go? For every translator grapples with two conflicting aims: the aim of faithfully conveying the content of the original, and the aim of making it not only understood to his intended audience but also as attractive and as "natural" as possible in its foreign enclotment.

This dilemma is doubly acute when it comes to conveying the teachings of Torah to an audience whose primary point of reference is Western Secularism. Here the translator or "adapter" is attempting to bridge two worlds which differ in far more than language and idiom; two worlds which differ in their very conception of intellectual discourse and articulation.

One example of many: The modern Western mind recognizes no sacred ideas or inviolable axioms. In communicating a thought, there is no greater sin than "taking yourself too seriously," being "dogmatic" and failing to offer a "balanced view." Above all, one mustn't be so *sure*: keep it light, with a periodic wink at the audience that says, "Hey, guys, I may be teaching you something, but don't think that I'm this pompous know-it-all. We're just throwing some ideas around."

Torah, on the other hand, unabashedly goes about the business of informing and instructing its student. As G-d's blueprint for existence, it is free of self-deprecating humor and moral ambivalence. It presumes that you are taking it seriously and proceeds to tell you the way things are and the way they ought to be. And yes, it regards the truths it conveys with reverence.

So what is the translator/adapter to do? Basically, he has two options. He can limit his tampering with the original text or idea to its rearticulation in the new language, while preserving the Torah's style and approach. If the Western mind will judge it "religious," "archaic" and "close-minded," so be it. Ultimately (once you solve the problem of how to get someone to read it), its eternal content will assert itself over the reader's prejudices.

Or, the translator can assume, to a certain extent, the tone of modern writing. He can attempt to truly *translate*---"to grasp the sense of the subject and then explain the theme, according to his understanding, in the other language" not only in the dictionary sense of "language" but in the broader cultural-conceptual sense as well.

But is there a choice? Does the Torah allow one to articulate its teachings in such a manner? The Lubavitcher Rebbe addresses this issue by finding its precedent in Torah.

In the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy, the Torah describes how, on the last day of his life, Moses committed the entire *Chumash* (the "Five Books of Moses") to writing. He then commanded the Levites: "Take this Torah scroll, and place it at the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the L-rd your G-d, and it shall be there as witness for you."

Rashi, in his commentary on the verse, writes: "Our sages debated in [the talmudic tractate] *Bava Batra* concerning this Torah scroll. There are those who say that a shelf extended from the outside of the Ark, and on it the Torah scroll was placed. And there are those who say that it was placed to the side of the Two Tablets [inscribed with the Ten Commandments] within the Ark."

Everything in Torah is a lesson in life and carries an eternal and universal relevance. What, asks the Rebbe, is the deeper significance of this debate?

Our sages tell us that the entirety of Torah is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments given to us at Sinai and inscribed by G-d on the Two Tablets of the Covenant. Over the next 38 years, as the people of Israel wandered through the desert, Moses taught them the particulars of Torah, which he also wrote, by Divine dictation, in the *Chumash*.

In other words, the *Chumash* is the first "translation" of Torah, its first rearticulation into terms comprehensible by its intended audience. Moses saw the entirety of G-d's communication to humanity embodied in the Ten Commandments; but the Jewish people needed a more detailed and explicit version. Hence, G-d's re-communication of His word and law through Moses' mind and quill with the *Chumash*.

Thus, explains the Rebbe, the debate between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Judah (voicers of the two opinions cited in Rashi) is a debate as how one is to communicate Torah. According to Rabbi Meir, the Torah scroll must be kept within the Ark which holds the Tablets of the Covenant. While the "translation" may detail what was generalized and express what was implied, it is not to depart from the context of the original. It must confine itself to the area enclosed by the "walls" that define the original articulation.

Rabbi Judah disagrees. The Torah is placed on a shelf outside of the Ark's walls. True, it must adhere to the content and spirit of the original--the shelf, remember, is firmly attached to Ark's exterior--but it must extend into the space occupied by those who are still outside of the original's parameters.

This sheds light on another thing that the Talmud says about Rabbi Meir. A rule of thumb in the Talmud is that whenever

Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Judah disagree on a matter of Torah law, we follow the opinion of Rabbi Judah. Why is this so? The Talmud quotes Rabbi Acha bar Chanina as having said: "It is revealed and known before He who spoke the world into being that there was no one equal to Rabbi Meir in his generation. So why was the law not established in accordance with his views? Because his colleagues could not fully comprehend his reasonings." The fact that Rabbi Meir insisted on keeping his expositions on Torah completely within the context of the pure idea meant that those of a lesser comprehension of Torah than himself could not fully relate to what he was saying.

Perhaps, concludes the Rebbe, this is why Rashi cites Rabbi Judah's view before Rabbi Meir's, reversing the order in which they are quoted in the Talmud. Rashi is telling us that, in most cases, Rabbi Judah's approach is the desirable one, while Rabbi Meir's is preferable only in regard to a minority of audiences and circumstances.

The Rebbe often told the following story:

Among the disciples of Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch (the second leader of the Chassidic movement), there were differing opinions regarding the dissemination of the esoteric teachings revealed by their master. There were those who argued that the sanctity of this most intimate aspect of Torah must be safeguarded and shared only with a select worthy few. Others, chief amongst them Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (who was later to found the Chabad branch of Chassidism), were of the opinion that they must be circulated as widely as possible; they transcribed Rabbi DovBer's teachings, made many copies and actively distributed them to the wider Jewish community.

One day, one of these transcriptions was discovered languishing in a mound of garbage. The sight of this caused great pain to all Rabbi DovBer's disciples, and renewed the critique of those who "cheapened" their master's holy words with their indiscriminate distribution. Rabbi Schneur Zalman responded with a metaphor:

"The king's son had fallen ill," he began his tale, "and the royal doctors could offer but a single cure: a potion that would be prepared from the powder of a certain gem. This gem, however, served as the centerpiece of the royal crown. Furthermore, even if the crown--the most precious possession of the throne--were to be dismantled, only a slim hope existed to save the prince's life, who had deteriorated to the point that his ability to swallow the potion was in doubt.

"But the king decreed: 'Grind, pour and squander my most precious of treasures. Perhaps a single drop will enter the lips of my son and his life will be saved...'"

*Based on the teachings of the [Lubavitcher Rebbe](#); adapted by [Yanki Tauber](#)*