

BS"D Parashat Chukat 5783

When did Moshe Rabbeinu's death process begin?

Barring incidents of accidental death or premeditated murder, when is the moment that can be pinpointed as the beginning of a person's death process?

Some claim that we begin leaving this world at the very moment we arrive here. While others set the time at around 18 years of age, when the body begins to lose more cells than it produces.

Whatever the answer, the exception is Moshe Rabbeinu, regarding whom the Torah writes (Devarim 34:7):

מֹשֶׁה הָיָה בְּעֵת מוֹתוֹ בְּעָרְוָה עֵינָיו לֹא חָשְׁמוּ וְכֹחַוֹ לֹא יָבִישׁ

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not dim nor was his strength weakened.

The Torah testifies to the fact that Moshe was as physically vigorous and mentally astute at the age of 120 as he was as a young man and showed no sign of aging.

So, when did Moshe Rabbeinu's death process begin?

There are several other issues that require clarification:

1- Why were Moshe and Aharon denied the privilege of entering the major sanctity of Eretz Yisrael, and condemned to die in

the lesser sanctity of the eastern side of the Jordan River?

2- The episode of Korach and his followers occurred in the second year of the Jews' exodus from Egypt when the Mishkan and its Kohanic and Levitic personnel were established. The following parasha, Chukat, propels us forward 38 years when the Jewish nation is about to enter Eretz Yisrael. There is a 38-year blackout period between parashat Korach and parashat Chukat, when the Nation was encamped at Kadesh Barnea. Why?

3- In parashat Chukat, after the demise of Miriam and the disappearance of the ubiquitous well of water, the people came to Moshe with a request for water. Moshe is so furious that he calls them "Hamorim" – rebellious people. Moshe's reaction is far different than his reaction 38 years earlier, when these people's fathers requested water and Moshe brought their demands before HaShem rather than speaking harshly of them. Why?

4- In parashat Chukat, Hashem commands Moshe to speak to a certain rock; but Moshe hits the rock, as he did 38 years earlier. Why?

5- HaShem informs Moshe and Aharon that their conduct at the rock will precipitate their death outside the primary area of sanctity on the western side of the Jordan River. Hit the rock or speak to it? From the point of view of miracles, it's all the same. So why were Moshe and Aharon condemned to die without crossing the Jordan?

6- Thirty-eight years earlier, Moshe had been commanded to hit the rock to bring forth water. Why did HaShem change the method now?

I submit:

After the death of the male generation in the second years after leaving Egypt (except for Yehoshua and Calev), and after 38 years of Torah study under the tutelage of Moshe, HaShem

tells Moshe that the Jewish people have changed. The message is no longer heavy-handed, dictatorial leadership as expressed by hitting the rock, but a leadership that explains in Halachic terms how the nation should conduct itself.

But when Moshe heard the ungrateful, angry demands for water, he recalled the same blunt, irreverent demands of their fathers 38 years previously. In Moshe's mind, nothing basic had changed, despite the 38 years of Torah study. The people's rejection of HaShem's intimate relationship, as expressed by their demand to return to Egypt, reminds Moshe of the cries and threats of that day long ago. And in Moshe's mind, this rebellious conduct had to be answered in the same way it was 38 years ago – by hitting the rock.

HaShem appears and informs Moshe that there is little apparent change in the people – but the reason for their stagnation is that in the mind of this second generation there is no motivation to change. They see before them the same leadership under which the sinners at the Golden Calf were killed; the leaders who were born in the exile of Egypt and oversaw the demise of 600,000 Jews who had sinned by refusing to enter the land. In the minds of the people nothing really happened to initiate change.

HaShem informs Moshe and Aharon that as long as they continue to lead the nation, the slavery experience of 210 years would always loom large in the national consciousness, and that this inferiority complex would prevent them from achieving spiritual greatness.

Hence, in order to enable the nation to reach their potential as free men and women, a new leadership would have to be appointed. The demise of Moshe and Aharon was predicated on this reality.

The rudiments of the Torah, as well as the nation's new status as HaShem's chosen people, were understood intellectually

during the 38 years of study under Moshe and Aharon. However, the implementation was impeded as long as the slavery experience was still ripe in the nation's consciousness. In the minds of the "newborn" Jewish nation, the staff in the hand of Moshe was a substitute for the punishing rods in the hands of the Egyptian overseers.

HaShem knew that the long and arduous road that lay ahead for the Jewish nation in the coming 3500 years must begin with a healthy and proud Jewish nation liberating the Promised Land under the flag of the Torah. Moshe's staff, in its time, was necessary; but a people now under the dominion of Torah law required a new relationship with its leaders.

One thing is certain: In life, nothing remains the same. The challenges facing Am Yisrael today become ever more complex, as our existence in the world with Yishmael and Aisav becomes ever more threatening. New leaders ascend the platform of history to guide Am Yisrael in our difficult uphill journey towards that yet unrealized goal that was set by HaShem for His chosen people.

We can define the exact moment of the onset of Moshe's departure from this world. When in parashat Balak, Zimri ben Salu sinned in public, Moshe stood by not knowing what to do. At that moment, Pinchas recalled what he had learned from Moshe himself, that in these circumstances the sinners must be killed.

When Moshe lost his intimate connection with HaShem just at the moment when the nation needed him most, that was the sign from HaShem that the end was drawing near, and the time for a new leader in the liberation of Eretz Yisrael had begun.

IN OUR TIME

The multitude of present-day religious leaders who preach their personal divergent truths is tantamount to no leadership at all.

I am skeptical if a “world outlook” (hashkafa) of many of today’s religious leaders – formed and anchored in the thinking of our eastern Europe or North African or Middle Eastern galut experiences – holds the answers to the problems facing religious life in today’s Medinat Yisrael.

What are the qualities of the “leader” so necessary today? The answer can be gleaned from the words of Rambam in Hilchot Melachim chapter 11:

אדם המעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה ,הוא המלך המשיח ,כלומר המלך אשר יעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה ,הוא המלך המשיח ,כלומר המלך אשר יעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה ,הוא המלך המשיח ,כלומר המלך אשר יעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה ,הוא המלך המשיח ,כלומר המלך אשר יעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה ,הוא המלך המשיח ,כלומר המלך אשר יעלה את ישראל למעלה ויורד להם למטה .

If a King of the Davidic dynasty, who is erudite in the Torah and performs the mitzvot as David his father – both the written and oral Torahs – and influences the nation to return to the Torah and leads in fighting the wars of God, then he has the status of Mashiach. And if he succeeds in defeating our enemies and rebuilds the Bet Hamikdash and gathers in the remnant of Am Yisrael, then he is certainly the Mashiach.

From here we learn that the much sought-after leader for our time is (1) a talmid chacham, (2) a political figure, (3) a truly religious person, (4) a military man, and (5) a charismatic person.

A talmid chacham is one who has a wide and intensive yeshiva

education. A political figure implies one with a secular education that permits him to walk in the great halls of the world's capitals. A military person has military experience on the highest level. And a charismatic personality describes someone who is comfortable with all segments of our society.

If you were assigned the task of finding a person who fulfills all the requirements as outlined by the Rambam, where would you look?

Would you start your search in the Ner Yisrael yeshiva in Baltimore? Or would you waste your time searching in the Satmar yeshiva in Williamsburg or in Square Town? Would Teaneck answer your needs or the yeshiva in Lakewood? Could you find "the man" in Bnei Brak or in Meah Sha'arim? Searching in all of the above, I believe would be a very frustrating experience.

But I suggest that you associate with the future leaders of our nation – bnei Torah who learn and fulfill the Torah in the most serious manner. Individuals who also dedicate their lives, in love, to the rebuilding of our beautiful, beloved Eretz Yisrael and to the revival of our national heritage here in accordance with the Torah.

These future leaders implement the principles and details of the Torah in every walk of life – education, medicine, industry, agriculture, the military, social interaction and all the other facets of modern life, which bring honor to Hashem.

This is "Kiddush HaShem".

SHABBAT SHALOM and CHODESH TOV

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