



Torah Portion: *Vayelech*: Deuteronomy 31:1-30

Commentary by Lawrence Hoffman

A subtle but important change has crept into our celebration of the High Holy Days. The whole holiday period was once called the Days of Awe-- -by which the rabbis meant real, all-out, no-kidding fear and trembling before the horrifying prospect of divine punishment.

My great-grandparents never sent cheery Rosh HaShanah cards. Instead of "Happy New Year," they asked to be "Inscribed," or even "sealed," for a "good year" meaning that the divine judge would exempt them from punishment due. On Yom Kippur grandpa dressed in a white kittel -- like a corpse awaiting judgment -- not a new suit and tie, as if Yom Kippur were a party.

We are less fearful today. People complain about the traditional prayerbook's monotonous reminder of sins we haven't done, and guilt we do not feel. Congregations grumble at sermons on repentance, preferring New Year messages of hope and vision.

On the other hand, the High Holy Days season still announces the tenuousness of human life. People still get sick and die, often unfairly, before their time. Lives still unravel in whys we never imagined when we planned them. But we no longer blame misfortune on ourselves, we refuse to believe that happiness is a reward for virtue and suffering a punishment for sin.

If not God-given "payoffs" for our goodness, what then are these ultimate goods of long life, good health, relationships that nourish and happiness in what we do? Knowing that they have little to do with human merit, we have concluded that they are gifts that come our way gratuitously. We call them blessings, a positive way of admitting that we are not captains of our fate and masters of our soul, that the very things that matter most are the things we guarantee the least.

Once an exercise in the anxious avoidance of punishment, the High Holy Days have become the occasion for art equally anxious prayer for blessing: for gifts that come our way in other than the normal channel of having been earned.

Moses knew that, too, the rabbis say. This week's Torah portion, Parashat Vayelech, reminds us of this week of repentance by observing, "Moses went and spoke these words to all of Israel." The commentators ask, "Moses went? Where did he go?" The Malbim responds, "He went to receive a blessing from every Israelite."

When sin and punishment still dominated Jewish thinking, shtetl dwellers would spend the day before Yom Kippur going door to door to plead for personal pardon from those they might have hurt during the preceding year. The parallel task for our time would be to go person by person to elicit wishes for

bleasing. Though receiving blessing is beyond our power to guarantee, just the knowledge that those we know wish blessings for us is a blessing in itself. If they let us know they love us they can actually be blessings that drop into our crowded lives like sunshine on a rainy day.

We may no longer feel comfortable begging door to door for pardon; but collecting heartfelt blessings from those we love? That's another story. What a way to start the new year!

I have in mind the traditional dinner for friends and family on the eve of Rosh HaShanah. Blessings were once monopolized by an official family patriarch who gave them, and children who received them. Then we learned that mothers, too, could offer blessing: and now we need to know that even children can give (not just receive) a blessing that is unique to who they are. What would grandparents offer their children's children if they were invited to have their say? What would our own children say to you if you told them they were a blessing to you? That they, as much as you, can invoke God's gifts?

They might surprise you by what they ask on your behalf. And they might surprise themselves by discovering that more than mere recipients of parental largess, they are bountiful givers of heartfelt wishes for what their parents want most.

A second commentary to our verse, "And Moses went," explains that Moses traveled through the camp waking up the people, the way, according to Saadiah the shofar sends a wakeup alarm to all who hear it. As Saadiah understands it, the shofar says, "Wake up from your moral stupor! Wake up to the need to return to God!" No doubt, the shofar does. But the shofar repeats as well the lesson already learned a week before from the verse, "Moses went." It awakens us to the power we all have regardless of our age and standing, and beyond the measure of external success that life has dealt us: the power to bless.

Don't let this High Holy Day season pass with a simple "Happy New Year." Fill a magic moment at your Yom Kippur table letting those you know and love invoke blessings on each other. Blessings are hard to come by; we need all we can get.

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VAYEILECH

It commonplace for us to speak of Moses as Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our Teacher. But Moses was far more than a teacher. Moses was the greatest of the prophets if Israel. A prophet is similar to a bodhissattva in the Buddhist tradition. Both seek the ultimate truth and both choose to bring it to the people rather than dwell apart in some spiritual revelry. In this portion we discover what it means for Moses to be enlightened. - *Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro*

Torah

Moses went and said these things to all Israel: I am now 120 years old. I am no longer able to go out and come in. Moreover HaShem has said to me: You cannot go over there.... (Deuteronomy 31: 1-2).

Peshat (Simple Reading): Why does Moses have to say these things to all of Israel? Can't they see he is old and infirm? What does he gain by making this admission? What do the people gain by his admission? What might you can by it as well?

Remez (Literary Reading): Why does Torah say go "out and in" rather than in and out, the more common usage? Is it necessary to go out before we come in? But then is that different than needing to be in before we can go out? Does in imply out and out imply in? And, if so, is there anything such as really in or really out in and of themselves? Or is each a relative of the other? What might this be saying about life and its supposed opposites?

Drash (Interpretive Reading): Reb Mordecai Leiner of Izbica taught that Moses is saying he has reached the stage of complete enlightenment. It is no longer necessary for him to go in or out or over there. All is here and now. There is no

Land other than that beneath his feet. There is no in or out, only here. The journey is set aside because the place is found. What keeps you on the path rather than recognizing you have already arrived? What keeps you tied to in and out, here and there, us and them, God and creation?

Sod (Mystical Reading): In this portion Moses embraces all opposites in a greater unity. This is the epitome of enlightenment: the relative is embraces and is embraced by the absolute. In Hebrew we say yesh/ the world of opposites is linked to ayin/the world of unity and both are manifestations of God, the One beyond both relative and absolute. This awareness of the unity of yesh and ayin is the goal of all spiritual practice. Yet once attained we realize there was nothing to attain. It was always here and now. Right here and right now-- feel the greater oneness of God. Don't go in. Don't go out. Don't go. Just be.... What happened?

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