



## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

# Today's Torah

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**Shabbat Parashat Mattot-Mas'ey**

**August 3, 2019 – 2 Av 5779**



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### Day Before You Die

Torah Reading: Numbers 30:2 - 36:13

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 2:4 - 28, 3:4

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In the first of this week's double portion, Matot-Mas'ey one verse catches my attention:

*"Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites **after which you will be gathered to your kin.**"* (Numbers 31:2) Once Moses completes this task, he will die.

Given where this appears in the narrative, it doesn't seem so unusual. As we approach the end of the Book of Numbers, our ancestors are poised to enter the land of Israel. Knowing as we do that Moses will not enter the land, it is not surprising that we begin hearing about his death. At the same time, it is a bit curious that in the next verse, Moses takes immediate steps to rally the troops from all twelve tribes to fulfill the Divine command to seek vengeance against Midian, working on what is to be his last task.

According to the rabbinic commentary, *Sifre*, Moses did understand that once he completed this final act, his life would indeed end. Wouldn't it be natural to expect that he would hesitate

and do whatever necessary to delay his death, even if just for a little while? In fact, in the words of Rabbi Yehuda: "Had Moses desired, he could have lived many more years, for the Holy One blessed be He told him 'avenge' and 'afterward you shall be gathered.'" (Midrash Rabbah 22:2) In other words, maybe he could have staved off death? Yet, with no hesitation and with what appears to be eager participation, he jumps into the task, beckoning members of the tribes.

Some want us to think that this is proof that Moses understood his role as a public leader and put national welfare over his own such that he understood his own death was important for ongoing communal continuity. In other words, had he delayed his own demise, it would have caused the Children of Israel to linger in the desert even longer. Consequently, he takes off on his final mission, knowing that it means his death would be imminent.

As I read this verse today, I am reminded of another essential lesson. Even as we live our life, fulfilling our life's work and divine mission, consciousness of (and even discussion of) death need not be taboo. For many talking about death holds superstition that the very mention will make it happen. Yet, the one thing of which we can all be assured is that our end will come and no one of us is immortal. In the words of Socrates "To fear death... is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils."

It is true – we don't know what happens when we die. After all, no one has ever come back to tell us of the experience. And, we want as much time on this earth with our loved ones as we can possibly get. Certainly, our tradition teaches us *u'vecharta b'chaim* - in the face of life and death, choose life. But, the many stories we have of people who know they are dying spending their last days sharing their wishes, planning their own memorial, saying final goodbyes, coming to peace with their demise, and drawing together family and friends remind us that there can be intrinsic holiness in dying and we are the agents in experiencing that holiness for others and for ourselves.

Contrast, if you will, this type of experience of loss to one that is more unexpected after an accident or unanticipated illness. In addition to the trauma and confusion of the unexpected, decisions that have to be made and many feel cheated by not having had an opportunity to say goodbye, to express love, and/or to know what the loved one wanted in the final chapter.

The second century apocryphal writer, Ben Sira, reminds us of the fact that "we are all destined to die. We share it with all who have ever lived and all who will ever be." We have no control over when it will come, or how it will come, but we do have the choice of whether we will have found ways to address our own end with our loved ones. So, as I read this verse this year, I am reminded anew of the need for advance planning, stating our end of life wishes, having the important conversations of love and reconciliation that open us to another aspect of holiness even as we continue to participate with joy and gusto in fulfilling our divine mission. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom

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