

The Second Mountain (Vayelech 5778)

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

What do you do when you have achieved it all, when you have risen to whatever career heights fate or providence has in store for you? What do you do as age lengthens its shadow, the sun sinks, and the body is no longer as resilient or the mind as sharp as it once was?

That has become a major problem as life expectancy has increased in most parts of the world. There has been nothing quite like it in history. In America, in 1900, average life expectancy was around 41 years, in Europe 42.5. Today in Britain, for men it is 79, for women 83. Much of that has to do with a huge reduction in infant mortality. Nonetheless, the sheer pace in the rise in longevity – every decade since 1900, life expectancy has risen by about three years – remains remarkable. What will keep you young in spirit even if the body does not always keep pace?

The biblical case study is Moses, of whom we are told that even at the end of his life, “his eye was undimmed and his natural energy unabated.” At the opening of today’s parsha he says, “I am now a hundred and twenty years old. I can no longer come and go, and the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’” Rashi points out that the “I can no longer” does not mean that he lacked the strength. It means that he no longer had permission. The moment had come when he had to hand on the role of leader to his successor and disciple, Joshua. He himself stayed full of vigour, as the passion of his speeches in the book of Devarim, delivered in the last month of his life, testify.

To understand what Moses epitomises at the end of his life, two closely related concepts are helpful. The first is Erik Erikson’s idea of generativity, the seventh of his eight life stages. Relatively late in life, he argues, many people’s perspective changes. They begin thinking about legacy, about what will outlive them. Their focus often shifts from self to others. They may devote more time to family, or community, or care or voluntary work. Some mentor young people who are following in their career path. They make commitments to others. They ask themselves, how can I contribute to the world? What trace will I leave on those who will live on after me? What, in the world, is better because of me?

The second and related idea is David Brook’s concept of the second mountain. Speaking to people over 70, he found that early in their lives they had identified the mountain they were going to climb. They had specific aspirations about family and career. They had a vision of the self they wanted to become. By age 70, some had achieved it and were happy. Others had achieved it only to find it not entirely satisfying. Yet others had been knocked off the mountain by misfortune.

At a certain age, though, many identified a second mountain they wanted to climb. This mountain was not about achieving but about giving. It was less about external accomplishment (success, fame) than about internal accomplishment. It was spiritual, moral; it was about devoting yourself to a cause or giving back to the community. It is often, he says, a yearning for righteousness, an inner voice that says, “I want to do something

really good with my life.” This second peak, associated with later life, may well prove more significant to our sense of self-worth than the ego-driven ascent of the first mountain.

The case of Moses sets all this in dramatic perspective. What do you do if you have already achieved what no human being had ever done before or would ever do in the future? Moses had spoken to God face to face. He had become His faithful servant. He had led his people from slavery to freedom, put up with their complaints, endured their rebellions and prayed for – and achieved – their forgiveness in the eyes of God. He had been the agent through which God had performed His miracles and delivered His word. What else is left to do after such a life?

His closest friends and allies, his sister Miriam and brother Aaron, had already died. He knew that the decree had been sealed that he would not cross the Jordan and lead the people on the last stage of their journey. He would not set foot in the Promised Land. Unlike Aaron, whose children inherited his priesthood to eternity, Moses had to live with the fact that neither of his sons, Gershom and Eliezer, would become his successor. That role would go to his assistant and faithful servant Joshua. These were, surely, huge disappointments to set alongside the momentous achievements.

So, as Moses faced his own life’s end, what was there left to do? The book of Devarim contains and constitutes the answer. As it says in its opening chapter: “In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the Israelites ... On the east bank of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses began expounding this law ...” No longer the liberator and miracle-worker, Moses became Rabbenu, “our teacher,” the man who taught Torah to the next generation.

The way he does so in Devarim is stunning. No longer, as before, does he simply articulate the law. He explains the theology behind the law. He speaks about the love of God for Israel and the love Israel should show to God. He speaks with equal power about the past and the future, reviewing the wilderness years and anticipating the challenges ahead.

Above all, coming at the subject from every conceivable direction, he warns the young people who will enter and inherit the land, that the real challenge will not be failure but success; not slavery but freedom; not the bread of affliction but the temptations of affluence. Remember, he says again and again; listen to the voice of God; rejoice in what He has given you. These are the key verbs of the book, and they remain the most powerful immune-system ever developed against the decadence-and-decline that has affected every civilisation since the dawn of time.

That last month in Moses’ life, which culminates in today’s parsha as he finally hands over the reins of leadership to Joshua, is one of the supreme instances in Tanakh of generativity: speaking not to your contemporaries but to those who will live on after you. It was Moses’ second mountain.

And perhaps the very things that seemed, at first sight, to have been disappointments, turned out in the end to have played their part in shaping this last chapter in that great life. The fact that he knew he would not

accompany the people into the land, and that he would not be succeeded by his sons, meant that he had to turn into a teacher of the next generation. He had to hand on to them his insights into the future. He had to make the people his disciples – and we have all been his disciples ever since.

All of this suggests a powerful and potentially life changing message for all of us. Whatever our life has been thus far, there is another chapter to be written, focused on being a blessing to others, sharing whatever gifts we have with those who have less, handing on our values across the generations, using our experience to help others come through difficult times of their own, doing something that has little to do with personal ambition and much to do with wanting to leave some legacy of kindness that made life better for at least someone on earth.

Hence the life-changing idea: Whatever your achievements, there is always a second mountain to climb, and it may turn out to be your greatest legacy to the future.