

What will you do when you come to realize that you, like all of us, won't fulfill all of your life's goals? Let's face it: we will all leave our mark on this world, but we will all have, at the end of our days, some degree of unfinished business. And that sense of incompleteness can be a source of deep pain and regret.

No Biblical character personifies unfinished business more than Moshe. He was commissioned to lead the People out of slavery in Egypt, to worship God at a designated mountain, to be their teacher par excellence, and to bring them into the Promised Land. Three out of four may seem to be a Hall of Fame-worthy batting average, but to Moshe, it's a grave disappointment. As he recounts his leadership career in *Sefer Devarim*, he returns to that pain, and how he did all he could to reverse God's decree that he would not cross the Jordan, that he would not reach his much-anticipated final destination.

"Vaet-hanan el Adonai...e-e'brah-na ve-er-eh et ha-aretz hatovah—I pleaded with the LORD...Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 3:23, 25). But God rejects his plea one more time, telling Moshe to prepare Yehoshua to be his successor.

While the Torah is brief about this appeals process and rejection, the rabbinic tradition expanded the story with dramatic twists and turns, starring celestial witnesses, angelic triangulation, and a Moshe whose tactics are at times desperate. A comprehensive version of the story appears in *Sefer Ha-aggadah*, The Book of Legends. The legend has so many twists and turns; I'll highlight the best of them.

When Moshe realized that the decree of his death had been sealed, he drew a small circle around himself (sound familiar?) and said, "Master of the Universe—I will not budge from here until You void that decree." He also wrapped himself in sackcloth, poured ashes over himself, and began to pray intensely. So intensely, in fact, that Heaven and Earth—all of Creation, really—were shaken, to the point that they wondered if God intended to destroy them and remake Creation! But a Heavenly Voice came out and reassured them that this was only about Moshe.

What did the Holy One do? God knew that Moshe was a powerful davener, so He had it proclaimed at every heavenly gate that Moshe's prayer not be accepted, or even be allowed to be forwarded to God, because the decree had been sealed. But as Moshe's prayer grew stronger and stronger, the Holy One summoned His Ministering Angels and instructed them to bolt all of the Heavenly Gates shut. Apparently, Moshe's prayer was like a sword—ripping and tearing away at every obstacle.

In what way was Moshe's prayer so sharp? He said: "Master of the Universe—it is known before You the trouble and pain I suffered on account of Israel, until they came to believe in You, until I inculcated in them Torah and Mitzvot. I said to myself: Just as I've witnessed their woe, so may I witness their joy. You told me, 'You shall not cross this Jordan' (Deuteronomy 3:26); but the very same book says (24:15), 'You shall give [the laborer] his pay that same day.' You're turning that book into a fraud! Is this my reward for 40 years of labor?"

God replied, "This is My decree."

Moshe tried another approach: "If I can't enter the Land alive, let me enter dead, as the bones of Yosef are about to enter."

God replied, "When Yosef arrived in Egypt, he did not deny his identity as a Hebrew. You, when you came to Midian, did not (Yitro's daughters took him for an Egyptian, and Moshe didn't correct them)." In other words, you're no Yosef, so your request is denied.

Then Moshe said: "If you will not let me in, allow me to remain alive as an animal, so I can eat of the grass of the Land and drink of its waters, and enjoy all its goodness."

God replied (Deuteronomy 3:26), "Enough! Speak no more to Me of this matter."

But Moshe would not stop speaking of this matter. "Then let me be a bird, so I can fly over the Land and nest in it."

Again, God answered, "Enough!"

When Moshe saw that his prayer was not changing God's mind, he turned to Heaven and Earth, pleading with them, "Ask for mercy on my behalf." They said, "Before asking for mercy for you, we should ask for mercy for ourselves!" Moshe then went to the sun and moon, the stars and planets, the mountains and hills, with the same request, but they, too, replied that they would sooner ask for mercy for their own concerns.

His last-ditch attempt with an element of Creation was with the Sea, who answered him: "Son of Amram, how is this day different from former days? Are you not the same Son of Amram who came to me with your rod, struck me, splitting me into 12 paths, and I could not withstand you, for God's presence was at your side? What's happened to you now, that you are turning to me for help?" As the sea reminded him of what he was able to do in his younger days, Moshe cried out in anguish over what he could no longer accomplish.

Finally, Moshe went to the angel of the Presence, and said, "Ask for mercy on my behalf, that I not die." And the angel replied, "Moshe my master—of what avail is this effort? I have already heard from behind the curtain above that your prayer in this matter will not be heard."

At this point, Moshe wept so bitterly that God actually got angry, so angry that Moshe had to remind God of God's own attributes of mercy: "*Adonai Adonai El Rahum veHanun...*" until God's anger was assuaged. But God then gave Moshe one small crack in the door, an offer that might be hard to refuse.

"Moshe, I have sworn two oaths. One concerned Israel: after they did that deed (memory of the Golden Calf was so painful God couldn't even mention it), I swore that I would destroy them utterly. My other oath was that you would die before entering the land. I set aside the first oath when you entreated Me with "*Selah-na*—Please pardon the Peoples' transgression." Now, you ask Me to set aside My oath with "*E'ebrah-na*—let me cross over." You're grabbing the well's rope at both ends, no? If you wish to have *e'ebrah-na* fulfilled, you need to let go of *selah-na*; or if you want to have *selah-na* fulfilled, you need to nullify your *e'ebrah-na* request."

When Moshe Rabbenu heard this, he said: "Let Moshe and a thousand like him perish, but let not a fingernail of one person in Israel be hurt."

Only then did Moshe finally come to terms with reality, that the decree that he was to die without entering the Promised Land was not negotiable. Only then did he begin to prepare a successor to lead, and a People to be led, after him.

Every time I study this midrash, I wind up drained emotionally. The legend is moving, and audacious, and heartbreaking. But in stopping at this point, it's inspiring. It's as if, at the end of his life, seeing his sacred work incomplete, Moshe wrote something to be published on the day of his funeral. He knew that there would be more than enough sadness surrounding that event, so he wanted us to be left with words of hope. What does Moshe bequeath to us, as the rabbis would have it in this Aggadah? I see three gifts of wisdom and inspiration in this story:

Firstly, that sometimes we need to realize that we're not worthy and not entitled to a favorable response, but that shouldn't stop us from seeking God's mercy. That's the power of prayer.

Second, that even if we can't achieve our goals in full, it is our obligation to inspire others to pick up the baton after our leg of the race is done, because the goals are so worthy. That's the power of conviction to speak up for our goals.

Third, and finally, that when we bargain for our own needs to be met, we are diminished; but when we see ourselves as small parts of something much larger and more profound, we can see not unfinished business, but great achievement and opportunity.

In the final published words of the late civil rights hero, Congressman John Lewis, **"Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring."**

Or, in the words of *Pirkei Avot*, the Torah that emanated from Moshe's legacy, *"Lo a'lekha hamelakhah ligmor, velo atah ben-horin lehibatel mimenu*—it is not incumbent on you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Shabbat Shalom!