

## Midrash on The Death of Moses

*See, then, that I, I am S/He; there is no God beside me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal; none can deliver from My hand. (Deuteronomy 32:39)*

The Blessed Holy One said to Moses: "Moses, whose son are you?" He replied: "Son of Amram."

"And Amram is the son of whom?" He replied: "Son of Kehat."

Said the Blessed Holy One: "Are any of them still alive?" He replied: "All have died."

Said to him the Blessed Holy One: "And you want to live!?"

He replied, "Master of the Universe, the first person stole and ate against your will, and you sentenced him to death, but I – did I ever steal anything from you?! You wrote about me "*My servant Moshe, most trustworthy in my house*" – how, then, can I die?"

Said God: "Are you greater than Avraham, whom I tested with ten trials?"

He replied: "Avraham fathered Yishmael, whose descendents enslaved your children."

Said God: "Are you greater than Yitzhak?"

He replied: "Yitzhak fathered one who will destroy your house, and his sons will kill your sons."

Said to him the Blessed Holy One: "Did I order you to kill the Egyptian?!" Replied Moses: "You killed all the firstborn of Egypt, yet I am to die because of a single Egyptian?!"

Said to him the Blessed Holy One: "Are you comparable to me, killing and giving life? Can you give life as I do?"

*That very day Adonai spoke to Moses: Ascend these heights of Avarim to Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan...You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin...(Deut. 32:48-50)*

When Moses realized that the decree [of death] had been sealed against him, he drew a small circle around himself, stood in it, and said, "Master of the universe, I will not budge from here until You void that decree." At the same time, he donned sackcloth--indeed, wrapped himself in it--strewed ashes upon himself, and persisted in prayer and supplications before the Holy One, until heaven and earth--indeed, all things made during the six days of creation--were shaken...What did the Holy One do then? S/He had it proclaimed at every gate of every firmament that Moses' prayer be not accepted nor brought up to God's presence, because the decree concerning him had been sealed...

...Moses said to the Holy One, "Master of the universe, known and revealed to You is the trouble and pain I suffered on account of Israel, until they came to believe in Your Name. How much pain I suffered because of them, until I inculcated among them the Torah and its precepts! I said to myself: As I witnessed their woe, so will I be allowed to witness their good fortune. Yet now that Israel's good fortune has come, You tell me, '*You shall not go over this Jordan*' (Deut. 3:27). Thus Your Torah, which asserts, '*In the same day you shall give him his hire*' (Deut. 24:15), You manifestly turn into fraud. Is such the reward for forty years of labor that I labored until Israel became a holy people?" The Holy One replied, "Nevertheless, such is the decree that has gone forth from My Presence!"

Then Moses said, "Master of the universe, if You will not let me enter the Land of Israel, allow me to remain [alive] like the beasts of the field, who eat grass, drink water, and thus savor the world--let me be like one of these." At that, God replied, "Enough. Speak no more to Me of this matter" (Deut. 3:26). But Moses spoke up again, "Master of the universe, if not [like a beast of the field], then let me become like a bird that flies daily in every direction to gather its food and in the evening returns to its nest--let me be like one of these." The Holy One replied again, "Enough."

Then the Holy One said to Moses: "Moses, I have sworn two oaths: one concerning Israel--after they did that deed (the spies episode)--that I would destroy them from the world; and the other that you are to die and not enter the Land. The oath I had sworn concerning Israel, I set aside at your plea when you entreated Me, "*Pardon, I pray to You*" (Num. 14:19); and now you entreat once again that I set aside My oath to comply with your plea "*Let me go over, I pray to You*" (Deut. 3:25). You seize the well's rope at both ends--do you not? If you wish to have the second one fulfilled, you must nullify the first." When Moses our teacher heard this, he said: "Master of the universe, let Moses and a thousand like him perish, but let not a fingernail of one person in Israel be hurt."

....Said the Holy One: "Such was My thought [from the very beginning], and such must be the way of the world: each generation is to have its own interpreters of Scripture, each generation is to have its own providers, each generation is to have its own leaders. Until now it had been your portion to serve Me, but now your disciple Joshua's portion to serve has come. "

Moses said to the Holy One: Master of the universe, if I must die [to vacate my post] for Joshua, let me be his disciple [in my remaining hours]. The Holy One replied: If that is what you wish to do, go and do it. So Moses rose early to be at Joshua's doorway, where Joshua sat and interpreted Scripture. [In order to hide his identity] Moses stooped and put his hand over his heart [thus covering his face with the crook of his arm]...In the meantime, when people came to Moses' doorway to study Torah and asked, "Where is our teacher Moses?" they were told, "He rose early and went to Joshua's doorway." They went and found him at Joshua's doorway--Joshua seated and Moses standing. They said to Joshua: What has come over you, that you allow our teacher Moses to stand while you sit? When Joshua's eyes were again clear and he recognized Moses, he rent his garments, cried out, and wept: My master, my master! My father, my father!

Then the people said to Moses, "Moses our teacher, teach us Torah." He replied, "I no longer have the authority." They: "We will not leave you." Then a divine voice came forth and commanded the people, "Be willing to learn from Joshua." With that, the people submitted to the command to sit and learn from Joshua's mouth... When they went out, Moses walked at Joshua's left, and as they entered the Tent of Meeting, the pillar of cloud came down and formed a partition between the two. After the cloud departed, Moses went over to Joshua and asked, "What did the Word say to you?" Joshua replied, "When the Word used to reveal itself to you, did I know what it said to you?" In that instant, Moses cried out in anguish and said, "Rather a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy. Master of universes, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to You."

A divine voice came forth and said, "The time has come for you to depart from the world." Moses pleaded with the Holy One, "Master of the universe, for my sake, remember the day when You revealed Yourself to me at the bush; for my sake, remember the time when I stood on Mount Sinai forty days and forty nights. I beg You, do not hand me over to the angel of death." Again a divine voice came forth and said, "Fear not, I Myself will attend you and your burial."

Moses pleaded, "Then wait until I bless Israel. On account of the warnings and reprimands I heaped upon them, they never found any ease with me." Then he began to bless each tribe separately, but when he saw that time was running short, he included all the tribes in a single blessing. Then he said to Israel, "Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me." They replied, "Our master, our lord, you are forgiven." In their turn they said to him, "Moses our teacher, we troubled you even more, we made your burden so heavy. Please forgive us." Moses replied, "You are forgiven."

*(From Midrash Petirat Moshe, quoted in New Studies in the Book of Shemot by Nechama Leibowitz, and from Sefer Ha'aggadah/The Book of Legends, ed. Chayim Nachman Bialik, excerpted and adapted)*