



The Long Goodbye

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When Moshe gathers the generation of the desert together to enter them into the covenant once again, he knows that it is his last chance to teach the people how to live according to the Torah—and, crucially, how to live without him.

According to Rashi, in fact, it is literally the last possible day:

רש"י דברים כט:ט

כנסם משה לפני הקב"ה ביום מותו להכניסם בבְּרִית:

Rashi on Devarim 29:9

Moshe assembled them in the presence of the Holy One on the day of his death, in order to enter them into the covenant.

Knowing that he has only hours to live, Moshe takes the opportunity to renew the covenant their ancestors entered into at Sinai. This is exactly what we would expect from Moshe: to his final moments, he is faithful servant of God and the people. Before he leaves them forever, he



wants to take one final opportunity to remind them of their duties to God and to His commandments.

But Moshe's decision to renew the covenant on the day of his death is not only an indicator of his determination to leave the people in as solid a commitment with God as possible before he dies. It is tied to the fact that soon, the people will no longer have Moshe with them—and, more pointedly, how they reacted the last time they thought that was the case.

Close to forty years before, the people experienced a period of Moshe's absence, one that plunged them into despair and led them to abandon the covenant:

שמות לב:א

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ
לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי זֶה מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ:

Shemot 32:1

When the people saw that Moshe was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moshe—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

Now, as Moshe prepares to leave the people once again—this time for good—he tries to prepare them to avoid the catastrophe of the golden calf. He needs to find a way to leave them with the tools they will need to remain loyal to God, the covenant, and the Torah without him.

To do that, Moshe leaves the people with a coded map, one that tells him how to find him after he is gone:



דברים ל:יב-יג

¹²לא בשמים הוא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשנה: ¹³ולא מעבר לים הוא לאמר מי יעבר לנו אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשנה:

Devarim 30:12-13

¹²“It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’”

“Do not long for me,” we might imagine Moshe saying, “do not think that when I die Torah dies with me.

“Do not do what your parents did when I left them for so short a time—do not assume you need another me to ascend to heaven as I did, to bring down the Torah once more. And do not be afraid to cross the water without me. Do not think that you are leaving the Torah here with me on this side of the Jordan. I have given you, in this speech, all I have left to tell you. You will cross the water, and I will stay here—but the Torah goes with you.”

¹⁴כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבך לעשתו:

¹⁴Because the thing is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

“I went, and I returned,” says Moshe, “but it is yours now. I will be gone, but the Torah will remain.



Sefer Devarim notes almost at its end that no one knows where Moshe's grave is to be found.¹ Parashat Nitzavim is the last lesson Moshe taught during his life, but the location of his grave is a lesson he teaches even after his death. "You will not know where my grave is," we imagine him saying. "That is because you will not find me where my bones are buried. When you need me, when you miss me, read my words. Remember what I taught you, and teach it to your children.

"This is my last promise to you: that if you take these words, and read them, and live them, you will find me again.

"Not across the sea and not in the heavens.

"But right there, wherever you are: in your reflection in the mirror, and in your children's faces around you. In your mouths and hearts, and in theirs. That is where I will be."

Moshe uses his last moments and his gravesite to teach the people what he thinks will be their main challenge: how to live without him. And the truth is, promises Moshe, that we will never really be without him, but we will find him in new ways, in the Torah itself.

And it is that promise that will make it possible—with tears, and sadness, and pain, but with strength and confidence as well—to say goodbye.

¹ Devarim 34:6.

