

# TIMELESS TORAH

## VEZOT HABRACHA: THE STORY WE STILL HAVE TO WRITE

There is an old story about a man from Chelm who wanted to make sure that he would always know who he was. So he tied a red thread around his toe whenever he entered the bathhouse. One day, the thread came loose and eventually wrapped itself around the toe of the man in the next cubicle. Our Chelmer hero looked across, saw the red thread and panicked. He ran over to the other man and shouted, 'I know who you are, but who am I?'

His was a very Chelm-like solution to a very real problem. We sometimes assume that our identity is established by what we attach ourselves to. But knowing where we belong is not quite the same as knowing who we are. This question takes us to the very end of the Torah. For most of the Torah, Moshe is the speaker. Then, suddenly, we read about Moshe himself: 'Moshe, the servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moav... Moshe was 120 years old when he died; his eye had not dimmed, and his vigour had not left him.' The Torah records the mourning for Moshe, the appointment of Yehoshua and finally tells us: 'There never again arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe, whom Hashem knew face to face' (Devarim 34:5–12).

Who wrote these final verses? The Gemara in Bava Batra (15a) records a famous dispute. One opinion says that Yehoshua wrote them, because Moshe could not have written about his own death. Another says that Moshe wrote the entire Torah. Until this point, he wrote in the ordinary way. For these final verses, however, he wrote *b'dema*, with tears.

### The Next Chapter

Why do these verses belong at the end of the

Torah altogether? They could have been the opening of the Book of Yehoshua. Their inclusion in the Torah highlights the fact that his death marks the end of Moshe's role, but not the end of the story. The people continue and the Torah is passed on.

In a cryptic phrase, the above Gemara adds that *yachid korei otam*, one person reads these eight verses. The Mordechai, R. Mordechai ben Hillel (d. 1298), understands *yachid* as *meyuchad*, referring to the special individual who is honoured with completing the Torah, whom we refer to today as the Chatan Torah. Yet perhaps there is another layer of meaning in this word. *Yachid* means an individual. Moshe has completed his part. Now another individual must take it up.

This idea is particularly appropriate for Simchat Torah. We stand at the end of the Torah, but we are not simply commemorating something that happened long ago. The key question is what happens next. Moshe's story can be complete without the story of the Torah being complete. In this sense, his task is never finished because individuals in another generation are always ready to continue it.

### Source of Light

A similar idea appears in another Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tissa 37) about Moshe. When he came down from Mount Sinai, the Torah tells us that 'the skin of his face became radiant'. Where did that light come from? Three explanations are given. One opinion says that it came from the cave, the place where Moshe encountered Hashem after He forgave the people for the sin of the Golden Calf. Another says that the two Tablets were six *tefachim*



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(handbreadths) in height. Moshe held the lower two *tefachim* and the Divine Presence held the upper two. The light came from the space in-between. A third says that it came from the ink left on Moshe's quill after he had written the Torah.

Rabbi JJ Schachter understands each explanation as providing a different perspective on enabling the light of the Torah to enter our lives. According to the first explanation, Moshe entered the cave and emerged with light. There is a message here about the need to go deeper into ourselves. The Torah asks us to stop, think and to look again at who we are and how we are living. Sometimes light can only be created when we take the time to look honestly at where we are.

The second explanation is different. It places the light in the space between Moshe and the Divine Presence. The Torah is learnt through what we receive. A teacher, a study partner, a parent or a friend can show us something we would not have seen on our own. We listen and learn so much from each other. Sometimes the conversation itself is what allows the light of learning to shine.

### The Ink That Never Ends

The final explanation presents the idea that even after Moshe had written the Torah, some ink remained on his quill. This fits with the Torah's description of Moshe at the end of his life: 'His eye had not dimmed, and his vigour had not left him'. Moshe had stood at Sinai, communicated with Hashem and led the Jewish people through the wilderness. Yet there was still more to give.

The remaining ink suggests that completing one stage does not mean that there is nothing left. We can reach a point where we think we know enough, or that serious learning belongs to the next generation. Moshe's example points in the other direction.

This brings us back to the final eight *pesukim*. Moshe's story ends, but the Torah does not. Yehoshua is appointed and the people move forward. That is exactly what happens on Simchat Torah. We finish *Vezot Haberachah* and almost immediately begin *Bereishit*. We turn back to the beginning and start again.

Perhaps these final verses leave us with a simple question. What will we pass on? What will we take with us into the year ahead? What remains for us to write?

Moshe's greatness was in what he received and what he passed on. According to the Seforno (d. 1550), the very last words in the Torah, 'before the eyes of all of Israel', specifically refers to the fact that they witnessed the radiance of light shining from his face. Based on the Midrashic understanding, that light teaches the three key elements to living a life of Torah: to look honestly at ourselves, learn through our relationships with others, and recognise that there is always more to achieve.

The Torah closes Moshe's story with the image of a person who had completed his task, but whose quill still had ink on it. Today, we reach the end of *Vezot Haberachah* and, moments later, open *Bereishit*. The page turns. And the quill is placed in our hands once again.

### NEXT WEEK: BEREISHIT

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