

## **And Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moav, by the mouth of Hashem. (34:5)**

The underlying profundity of this *pasuk* is compelling. The greatest accolade that Moshe *Rabbeinu* earned for himself is *eved Hashem*, servant of Hashem. As a servant's will is supplanted by the will of his master to the point that a servant does not have his own will, so, too, was it with Moshe. Actually, this should be the paradigm for all Jews to emulate – lived for the *ratzon Hashem*, the will of G-d. Hashem's will, which was Moshe's will, should also be ours.

Concerning Moshe's passing from this world "by the mouth of Hashem," the *Talmud Moed Katan* 28a explains that this means that Moshe died by *misas neshikah*, death by a kiss from G-d, which means directly through Hashem, without the intercession of the *Malach Hamaves*, Angel of Death. Alternatively, it means that the soul becomes united with the holiness of the *Shechinah*, Divine Presence. In the *Talmud Brachos* 8a, *Chazal* liken this most desirable form of death as painless, like pulling a hair from milk, that is, the soul leaves the mortal body without resistance.

In *Resisei Laylah*, **Horav Tzadok HaKohen, zl**, explains this phenomenon in a practical manner. When a person pursues worldly, physical pleasures, he establishes a bond between himself/his soul and the pleasures of this material/physical world. Thus, a soul that is closely bonded with physical pleasure will find it very difficult to extricate itself from this physical life. Indeed, *Chazal* describe death for those who have totally attached themselves to physicality as pulling embedded thistles from a sheep's wool. For those *tzaddikim*, righteous Jews, like Moshe *Rabbeinu*, Aharon *HaKohen* and Miriam *HaNeviah*, whose flawless souls maintained their purity throughout their mortal journey, no effort, no regret and no pain are associated with leaving. After all, their soul is finally being reunited with its Source.

Do we really know who is a *tzaddik*? Clearly, there are those who have lived a pristine life devoted to Torah, *mitzvos* and the performance of good deeds. There are others who actively conceal so much of their good; and yet others who are too busy with themselves to notice the selflessness of others. Be that as it may, there are many very good people in the world. Ultimately, the definition of good is left for Heaven to determine. Hashem has the last word. This idea is alluded to by what appears to be an ambiguous passage in the *Talmud Moed Katan* 25b.

"*Rav Ashi* said to the *sapdan*, eulogist, 'On that day (when I will die) what will you say (about me)?' *Bar Kippok* (who was the eulogist) replied, 'I will say the following: If upon cedar trees a flame has fallen, what shall the hyssops of the wall do? If a Leviathan was lifted from the sea with (nothing more than) a fish hook, what shall the small fish do? If into a rushing stream dryness descended, what shall the stagnant pond waters do?'" Basically, the *sapdan* was intimating that, if the Angel of Death had power over the high and mighty, if he was able to overcome the flow of righteous deeds coming forth from the *tzaddik*, what should the common folk say?

Let us now put this passage into perspective. *Rav Ashi*, together with *Ravina*, were the redactors of the *Talmud*. They are the final word concerning *Talmudic* law. What concern could an individual of such exemplary achievement have regarding what the eulogist would say?

**Horav Mordechai Eliyahu, zl**, quotes the *Talmud Brachos* 62a, where *Chazal* say that people who eulogize the deceased are taught to take great care concerning the plaudits they deliver about the deceased. If they are somewhat complimentary, it is permissible. If, however, they get carried away and overstep their bounds with accolades (that are not realistic or true), they will have to answer to Heaven, and so will the soul of the deceased. It makes sense that they should not exaggerate, and if they do, they should have to answer for it, but why should the soul of the deceased suffer as a result of the eulogist's overactive imagination?

The *Rishon LeTzion* explains that the words expressed during a eulogy invariably serve as the barometer of the abilities and achievements of the deceased. If mortals say that an individual was incredibly brilliant or consummately diligent in his Torah studies, the question in Heaven will be: If this is "true," how is it that you did not accomplish more and greater things than you did? The esteem in which others hold us can sometimes work to our detriment, if their comments suggest that we were destined for greatness. This is what *Rav Ashi*, the great *Amora*, feared. What did the eulogist think of him, so that he could now strive to achieve more? While he was clear about his own abilities, how people related to him was important to him. Did they think that he was greater than he really was? Were they getting carried away in their esteem?

Concerning Moshe *Rabbeinu*, there was no question. He had reached the apex of spiritual achievement. To do so, he devoted all of himself to Hashem, so that he became the consummate *eved*, servant, the highest accolade one can earn. His passing was unique in the sense that his holy soul, which had descended to this world to be implanted in his body, was returned untarnished, in its pristine self, as it was originally dispatched by Hashem. This is demonstrated by Moshe meriting *misas neshikah*, Hashem's affectionate kiss of death.

Such a death is reserved for those who live such a special life as our quintessential teacher and leader. I recently read about the last few hours of **Horav Meir Shapiro, zl**. It is worth sharing with those who have never heard of it – and to those who have, it is well-worth repeating. The founder of the *Daf HaYomi*, page a day of *Talmud* project, passed away shortly after *Succos*, on the seventh day of *Cheshvon*. A few hours before his passing, he motioned to his wife to draw closer to his bed. The *Rosh Yeshivah* could no longer speak. So, with trembling hands, he wrote, "Why are you weeping? Now there will be real joy."

The *Rosh Yeshivah* then gestured to his *talmidim*, students, who waited anxiously for some word concerning their *Rebbe's* deteriorating condition. He wrote once again, "You should all drink a *l'chaim* (to life)." Immediately, whiskey and cake were brought in and dispersed among all those who merited to be there for this most sublime moment. *Brachos*, blessings, were recited, and then each student stood before the *Rebbe* and shook his hand. *Rav Meir* warmly held each student's

hand for a moment, while he looked deeply into each individual student's eyes.

After each student had the opportunity to bid his *Rebbe* farewell, it became obvious that *Rav Meir* was struggling to speak. Finally, with great pain, he formed the words, *Becha batchu Avoseinu*, "Our fathers trusted in You." The students understood that their *Rebbe* wanted them to begin singing the melody that he had composed to these words.

As the students sang, they began to dance – and they danced as they had never before danced. Tears rolled down their cheeks – their hearts breaking – but, nevertheless, they continued to dance around their *Rebbe's* bed. While they were dancing, hundreds of other students stood in the next room reciting *Tehillim*.

With every passing second, the situation worsened. All those in attendance understood that their beloved *Rosh Yeshivah* was fighting his final battle – and he was losing. In just a few moments, his holy *neshamah* would be reunited with its Maker. The students were broken; their *Rebbe* meant so much to them. How could he be taken from them at such a young age?

Perhaps this was the emotion that coursed through the minds of the onlookers. Not so *Rav Meir*, who upon detecting the student's muffled sobs, motioned for one of them to come closer. *Nor mit simchah*, "Only with joy," he whispered.

He understood the profundity of the moment – and like *Moshe Rabbeinu* – he had no regrets. He was ready to serve Hashem – in Heaven. *Rav Meir Shapiro* died with the words, *Nor mit simchah* on his lips. These were his last words. For forty-six years, he lived with joy. He died as he had lived – with joy on his lips.

Death is inevitable. How we confront the inevitable depends on how we have lived.