

Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Yisrael. (31:1)

The *Midrash Tanchuma* states: *Ein va'yelech ela lashon tochachah*. “The word *vayelech* means rebuke.” Apparently, Moshe *Rabbeinu* went to all of the tribes to bid them farewell. His farewell was couched in reproach, in which he informed the people of their shortcomings. Where in the *pasuk* is this indicated? It seems that all Moshe told them was that he had reached the age of 120 years old, that he was no longer able to “go out and come in”, and that he was not going to enter into *Eretz Yisrael*. In other words, Moshe was *gezegening zich*, bidding farewell, to the nation that he had shepherded for forty years. Intimating that he had completed his purpose in life and that now it was time to “move on” hardly constitutes a rebuke.

The *Rishonim*, early commentators, offer their individual interpretations of Moshe’s *vayelech*. *Ibn Ezra* writes that Moshe went to each tribe to notify the people of his impending death. He encouraged them not to worry, since Yehoshua immediately stepped into his shoes, allowing for a seamless succession to the nation’s leadership. *Ramban* says that Moshe assuaged their depression concerning his upcoming demise, “After all,” he said, “I am old. There is really very little you could benefit from me.” Apparently, Moshe understood the emotional upheaval which would transpire with his passing. He wanted to make it a little easier for them. Clearly, neither of these expositions reflects a farewell based upon rebuke. What is the *Midrash* implying?

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, explains that there is essentially no greater form of rebuke than notifying people of one’s mortality. When the people saw that their quintessential leader, the man who spoke “face to face” with the Almighty, was going to die – what should they have said? When one confronts his own mortality, he is humbled, as well as frightened. If that is not rebuke – what is?

Confronting mortality, facing the reality that death is an inevitable aspect of human existence, is very difficult. Today, for the most part, death is sanitized. It takes place away from the daily stream of life. Thus, people begin to think that death happens to others – never to themselves. If someone dies, it is the result of a mistake, a missed diagnosis, the wrong therapy, an accident. The reality of death is something from which most of us shy away. It is so much easier to continue living in a dream world.

When one comes face to face with the greatest leader of the Jewish nation, when this great leader comes to one’s tent and bids him farewell, because he too is going to die, it is the moment of truth; it is the moment of *tochachah*. Suddenly, one begins to realize that what is happening to Moshe can also – and will – happen to him – someday. Not today – not tomorrow – but one thing is for certain – it will happen – someday. He had better prepare himself to be ready for that day, expunge the *aveiros*, sins, do more *mitzvos*. It is no different than packing for a long trip. Take what you need. Leave what will hinder you on the trip.

The *Midrash Tanchuma* to *Parashas Va’eschanan* states the following. (I cite it due to its time

sensitivity, considering that this is the last *Shabbos* of the year.) “*Moshe Rabbeinu*, who just yesterday ascended to the Heaven like an eagle, now asks to cross the Jordan River – and is refused. Yesterday, the Heavenly Angels trembled before him, while today, he claims to be frightened by the effects of Heavenly anger. Yesterday, he spoke like a rich man – (with self-confidence); today, he speaks like one who is the victim of abject poverty, begging Hashem to allow him to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.” Moshe sought to teach *Klal Yisrael* a most important lesson. He chose his last few moments of life, the most valuable moments of his existence, to teach the nation what it means to be mortal. Let them realize what is the end of all men. The Heavenly emmisaries came and told him, “You only have half a moment left (time is almost up)”. Moshe placed his two hands over his heart and declared, “Look at what is the end of all men.”

When *Klal Yisrael* saw this emotional scene before their eyes, when the people came to grips with the notion that death visits everyone – even Moshe, did they need any other rebuke? What rebuke would be more effective than seeing *Moshe Rabbeinu* tell them that all life comes to an end?

Rav Zaitchik concludes with an inspiring observation: The Torah in *Sefer Devarim* 14:1 says, “You are children to Hashem, your G-d; you shall not cut yourselves.” *Lo sisgodedu*, is commonly translated as, “Do not cut yourselves.” Our special relationship with Hashem should preclude any notion of following the abominable practices of pagans who cut their skin as a sign of mourning. The Jew should not be so terrified of death that he cuts himself out of a sense of grief. We know that the essence of a Jew is his *neshamah*, soul, and that the body is a mere physical container. The soul lives on; thus, while grief should be expressed, it should not be in such a manner that gives rise to the concept that mortal life has permanence or that death puts an end to everything.

In an alternative interpretation, *Chazal* (*Yevamos* 13b) say this means *lo saaseh lachem agudos agudos*, “Do not make for yourselves groups/groups.” Do not divide yourselves into different groups, cliques, where membership in an individual group is based on some specific form of exclusivity or choseness. *Klal Yisrael* is all one family – not fractured into small elite groups. What relationship exists between elitist groups and excessive mourning for the dead? Elitism is repulsive, how is it linked to death? Rav Zaitchik explains that, when people confront the reality and aftermath of death, when they see the deceased and the entire burial process, they immediately forget their anger. They suddenly realize that there are more important things in life than “mine” and “yours,” and anger and dispute. They come to terms with the stark reality: “We all end up in the same place. What do we have to argue about?”