THE DEATH OF MOSES

In the Torah reading cycle of the synagogue, which Yom Kippur interrupts, we are at the very end of the book of Deuteronomy, which of course is the end of the Torah. It is a remarkable portion because it includes in it the death of Moses who, after peering over into the Promised Land, dies by Divine kiss and is buried in an unmarked grave, buried by God, so it seems…

Moses the great revolutionary; Moses the law-giver; Moses, the right hand of God; Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lives is taken from the story, his story, our story, right at the moment when his mission would be fulfilled, his journey rightfully concluded.

It's a remarkable Torah portion because of the way Moses' life ends. Even more dramatic, epic (I would say),

is the way rabbinic tradition, especially the midrash tells the story…

So with a few edits for length I want to share with you the midrash on The Death of Moses.

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? He had it proclaimed at every gate of every firmament that Moses’ prayer be not accepted nor

brought up to His presence, because the decree concerning him had been sealed.

Moses's prayers literally 'storm heaven's gates'. Even so, Moses must go the way of all humans, all earthlings – he must die.

Still, as the sound of Moses' prayer to Him above grew even stronger, the Holy One summoned the ministering angels and commanded them: Go down in haste, bolt all the gates of every firmament–for Moses' prayer was like a sword, ripping and tearing, and nothing could stop it. In that instant, 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 joy. Yet now that Israel's arrival has come, You tell me, 'You shall not go over this Jordan' [Deut. 3:27]. Thus Your Torah, which asserts, 'In the same day thou shalt give him his wages' [Deut. 24:15], You manifestly turn into a fraud.

The Torah says you should pay a laborer his wages on the same day. Moses here is using God's Torah to argue against God's decree that Moses must die. In effect, Moses is saying, you must pay me my wages, you must give me my reward - entry into the Promised Land. What Moses is saying is that his death – we would read here, death in general – is not fair…

Is such the reward for forty years of labor that I labored until Israel became a holy people loyal to their faith?" The Holy One replied, "Nevertheless, such is the decree that has gone forth from My Presence!"

Fair or not, Moses must die…

Then Moses said, “Master of the universe, if I am not to enter the Land alive, let me enter dead, as the bones of Joseph are about to enter.” … ‘No’ is God’s reply… 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.”

Life, in the end, even more than seeing the Promised Land, Moses yearns for more life…

When Moses saw that his prayer was not heeded, he went to implore heaven and earth, saying: Entreat mercy on my behalf. They replied: Before entreating mercy for you, we should entreat mercy for ourselves, for it is said, “The heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment” (Isa. 51:6). He then went to implore the sun and the moon, and said: Entreat mercy in my behalf. But these replied: Before entreating mercy for you, we should entreat mercy for ourselves, for it is said, “The moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed” (Isa. 24:23).

Then he went to implore the stars and the planets, and said: Entreat mercy in my behalf. But these replied:

Before entreating mercy for you, we should entreat mercy for ourselves, for it is said, “All the host of heaven shall molder away” (Isa. 34:4).

Then he went to implore the mountains and the hills, and said: Entreat mercy in my behalf. But these also replied: Before entreating mercy for you, we should entreat mercy for ourselves, for it is said, “The mountains will depart, and the hills be removed” (Isa. 54:10).

In other words, Moses sought refuge and help from the elements, but they too die in their own way. Nothing material is permanent, everything that comes into being must also go out of being.

Then he went to implore the sea and cried: Entreat mercy in my behalf. The sea replied: Son of Amram, why is this day different from former days? Are you not the

same son of Amram who came to me with your rod, smote me, split me into twelve paths, when I could not withstand you because the Presence was proceeding at your right? What's happened to you now? As the sea reminded Moses of what he was able to do in his younger years, he cried out in anguish, "Oh that I were as in the months of old" (Job 29:2). [O sea], at the time I stood over you, I was a king in the world, but now, though I prostrate myself, no heed is given me.

You see here the Rabbis have a sense of humor, for a moment. It's payback time for the Sea, which Moses (with God's help) split so that the Israelites could cross over. There is a bit of humor here until we see Moses' reaction: remembering how powerful he was when he was younger and how powerless he is in confronting death.

The saga continues…

Moses says to God: Master of the universe, shall the feet that went up to the firmament, the face that confronted the Presence, the hands that received the Torah from Your hand–shall these now lick dust?

The Holy One replied: 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 begs for life 'pulling out all the stops' arguing that he is too special, his role too important to die like every

other men. God's response – no, each generation, in effect has its own Moses. Your time is over…

As Ecclesiastes says, "there is a time for everything under heaven…"

Moses then says, if I must die allow me first to be Joshua's disciple; and God allows him to try and see how it goes. Well you can guess what happens. Moses is miserable with envy.

Moses went over to Joshua and asked, "What did the God say to you?" Joshua replied, "When the Word of God was revealed 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 universe, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to You."

After Moses became reconciled to his dying, the Holy One spoke up, saying: ” ‘Who will rise up for Me in behalf of evildoers?’ [Ps. 94:16]. Who will rise up in Israel’s behalf at the time of My anger? Who will stand up for them during My children’s warfare [with enemies]? Who will entreat mercy in their behalf when they sin before Me?”

At that time Metratron, who you’ve never heard of but is an archangel in Judaism and known in Kabbalistic texts as the Recording Angel or the Chancellor of Heaven came and, sought to comfort God: Master of the universe, Moses during his life was Yours, and when dead he will still be Yours.

Now that Moses finally accepts his fate, it is God who mourns… Sometimes we long for the suffering to end

even if it means the death of those we love. We say to ourselves, “Death is better than a life of pain.” Yet, when they die, it still really hurts.

God then sends his angles to gather Moses up but one by one they refuse until God sends the Angle of Death.

Now Moses is afraid.

At death’s door, Moses bargains with God…

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.”

God finally has mercy on Moses. He may have to die like every other creature of flesh and blood, but he doesn't have to die in the same way.

"Fear not, I Myself will attend you and your burial." God responds

But, Moses is not done yet… So much still to do, so many tasks yet to be completed…

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 the Children of Israel,

“Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me.”

Here the Rabbis allow Moses to be our teacher – even Moses has regrets and yearns to be forgiven and fully accepted before he dies.

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.”

If only everyone could have such a deathbed seen… The Midrash which teaches us volumes on how to live is giving us now a few sentences on how to die.

Again a divine voice came forth: “The moment has come for you to depart from this world.” Moses replied,

“Blessed be His Name! May He live and endure forever and ever!” Then he said to the people, “I implore you, when you enter the Land, remember me and my bones, and say, ‘Alas for the son of Amram, who had run before us like a horse, yet his bones fell in the wilderness.’ ”

Again a divine voice came forth and said, “Within half a moment you are to depart from the world.”

Moses lifted both his arms, placed them over his heart, and called out to Israel, “Behold the end of flesh and blood.” Moses arose and washed his hands and feet, and thus became as pure as seraphim.

Then, from the highest heaven of heavens, the Holy One came down to take the soul of Moses, and with Him the three ministering angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Zagzagel. Michael laid out his bier, Gabriel spread a fine linen cloth

at his head, while Zagzagel spread it at his feet. Michael stood at one side and Gabriel at the other. Then the Holy One said to Moses, “Moses, close your eyes,” and he closed his eyes. “Put your arms over your breast,” and he put his arms over his breast. “Bring your legs together” and he brought his legs together. …

In that instant, the Holy One kissed Moses, and took his soul with that kiss.

At that, God wept along with the heavens, the earth, the ministering angels and all of Israel…

They wept for Moses and we weep for our dead. We weep, we remember, we long for more life, we struggle, we do battle even, yet we all must die, even Moses; it is the way of humanity, the price we pay for living…