



Vital Endings • Parshat Vezot Haberacha

As we conclude the final Torah portion, we bid farewell to Moses, our protagonist for the past forty-two *parshiyot* and our exclusive voice of Deuteronomy. Moses lived a full life, with vigor and energy until his last days. “Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died,” the verse informs us, “yet his eyes were undimmed and his natural force unabated” (Deut. 34:7).

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm reflects on how, unlike classical literary or religious heroes who tended to receive funerals with pomp and circumstance, Moses’ death was private, quiet, and unclimactic. He died alone in the land of Moab, “And no one knows his burial place to this day” (Deut. 34:6). Rabbi Lamm suggests that “Moses needed no heroic *end*, since *all his life* was an exercise in heroic holiness.” In his sermonic cadence and with literary flourish, Rabbi Lamm continues, “Courage and valor were his everyday companions. Hardihood of spirit, fortitude of heart, firmness of back-bone, chivalry of character, and elasticity of patience were his daily equipment and experiences... He was too busy living to begin to die” (*Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages*).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a much-missed voice whose teachings have accompanied us on this year’s journey through “A Torah of Character,” suggests that the source of Moses’ unending energy is alluded to in the aforementioned verse. “I used to think that ‘his eyes were undimmed’ and ‘his natural force unabated’ were simply two descriptions,” he writes, “until it dawned on me

that the first was an explanation of the second. Why was his energy unabated? Because his eyes were undimmed” (“Staying Young,” *Covenant & Conversation*). It was Moses’ vision, ideals, passion, and commitment to moral values that fueled his vitality.

Following Rabbi Sacks’ lead but reading the verse in the opposite direction, we can suggest an alternate interpretation. Instead of the first clause explaining the second, perhaps it is the second which is explaining the first. Why were his eyes undimmed? Because his energy was unabated. Moses was able to counteract the normal physical deterioration that comes with old age because he had the exceptional character strength of vitality.

Vitality, one of the twenty-four-character strengths fundamental to positive psychology, is, according to Dr. Ryan Niemiec, one of two character strengths consistently associated with life satisfaction. It is also rare. It is one of the least endorsed in surveys from around the world. It is known as a “value-added strength,” meaning it is most manifest when enhancing another strength. For instance, we can enhance courage, kindness, or spirituality by infusing them with vitality. Similarly, *Orchot Tzadikim*, an anonymous 15th century spiritual-ethical guidebook stresses the importance of the religious version of this trait, *zerizut*, as the foundation of all other traits.

How do we generate the necessary energy to infuse enthusiasm into our endeavors? Two strategies suggested by Dr. Niemiec are physical exercise

and spending time in natural surroundings. Both elements play a crucial role in Moses' journey. The final chapter of the Torah begins "Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah that faces Jericho" (34:1). Rashi, quoting the Talmud sees an allusion to Moses' physical strength in this verse: "There were several levels leading from the plain to the summit, but Moses covered them in one step." As his journey concludes, the rabbis extract an otherwise entirely unnecessary accenting of Moses hiking skills and singular physical strength.

It is in fact this strength that is celebrated as the

last verse in the Torah: "and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel" (Deut. 34:12). Moses was able to generate the physical energy necessary to infuse zest and enthusiasm into his spiritual and moral leadership. His vitality enhanced his vision.

Soon we will celebrate the conclusion of the Torah cycle on the anniversary of one of the most horrific days in our storied history. May we respond with the call to emulate Moses and invest energy, zest, vigor, and vitality into confronting all the challenges and embracing all the opportunities that lie ahead in the new year.

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Character Challenge: In memory of all those we have lost since last Simchat Torah, in honor of our brave soldiers, and for the merit of the release of the hostages, let us dance with a little extra vitality this Simchat Torah.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "Never compromise your ideals. Never give in to defeat or despair. Never stop journeying merely because the way is long and hard. It always is. Moses' eyes were undimmed. He did not lose the vision that made him, as a young man, a fighter for justice. He did not become a cynic. He did not become embittered or sad, though he had sufficient reason to be. He knew there were things he would not live to achieve, so he taught the next generation how to achieve them. The result was that his natural energy was unabated. His body was old, but his mind and soul stayed young. Moses, mortal, achieved immortality, and so, by following in his footsteps, can we. The good we do lives on. The blessings we bring into the lives of others never die" ("*Staying Young,*" *Covenant & Conversation*).