

Pinchas Sermon 5778

Woody Allen once said “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve it through not dying.” We read two separate accounts this week about death’s effects, one in the realm of inheritance; the other in the area of communal leadership. Taken together, they teach us about how death continues to impact the living in terms of their sustenance, their status and the paths they will tread in the future.

In the first, the five daughters of Zelophehad make a plea to Moses that their ancestral lands should not pass to others simply because their father died without sons. They argue that they should have the right to inherit their late father’s portion in the land of Canaan, and thus keep that land in the family. Moses, unsure of how to respond, takes the matter before God, who affirms the righteousness of the daughters’ claim. From that point on, daughters would inherit land in the absence of male heirs. It was a new conception of the status of women in Jewish culture, and if it did not put them on an equal footing with men in the realm of inheritance, it certainly advanced their interests. But truth be told, God seems more interested in the status of the land vis a vis the tribes than in women’s rights here. If these five women were to marry outside their clan, their father’s land would shift to another clan, or even outside the larger tribe. That is probably why the Torah goes through their genealogy when first mentioning the case. Having a share in the land of Canaan was not only a personal stake; it meant holding onto something that the larger group - the clan, the tribe - had an interest in.

In the second account, Moses describes the qualities of the man who will succeed him in leading the people after Moses’ death. He says to God: “Let the Lord, the source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before

them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." The first thing we notice about this passage is that Moses fully accepts his fate. He will die in the wilderness, east of the Jordan, on God's command. Having achieved so much in life, most of it after the age of 80, before Pharaoh in Egypt and among his own people in the wilderness, Moses will not enter the Promised Land. Having accepted this, Moses is able to turn his attention to a matter more pressing to him than his own individual fate: the fate of the whole people and its leadership after he is gone. Advising God about the traits that a new leader should have, Moses uses two telling images, one of war and one of peace. He tells God that his successor should be someone who 'goes out before' the people and comes in before them. That language describes a leader in battle, and that is certainly the kind of leader that Joshua will be when he takes Moses' place as leader. Notably, that is not a role that Moses himself played. Moses never went into battle. But Moses also tells God that the new leader should be like a shepherd, taking the people out and bringing them in. That pastoral image is one of peace, of a leader who prods and protects the people the way a shepherd directs a flock. It is no accident that Moses uses that image; we cannot forget that when God first spoke to Moses at the burning bush, Moses was a shepherd. We can read the passage as saying that, unlike himself, the new leader should be a warrior who leads the people into the battles that they know are coming in the conquest of the land. At the same time, Moses wants that leader to also be able to lead in times of peace, with the attributes of leadership that a shepherd brings to bear, attributes that Moses did have. It is not incidental that many years later the greatest king of Israel, David, was both a shepherd and a warrior, the very leadership qualities that Moses calls for in the parshah.

There is also a way to read Moses' words that the people not be left without a shepherd as a final plea on his own behalf. That image of a shepherd is of course drawn from his experience; he uses a metaphor that comes naturally to him. But it is not only a metaphor. Moses *is* the people's shepherd, and as he looks ahead to their future without him, we can easily imagine him feeling sadness, regret and apprehension. As hard as this journey has been, what he might be saying to God is "I don't want it to end." "Don't let the people go on without a shepherd" can be understood as Moses' last, faint and indirect plea to let him live.

That plea is directed to God, but the emotion behind it is universal. It is a way to rationalize the desire to go on living. Only those in deep suffering desire death. For most people, life is so precious that we will bargain for a few more weeks, months or years using every tool we have, mustering any excuse imaginable. "I just want to see my child get married," "I just want to make it to my granddaughter's bat mitzvah," "We will be married for sixty years." We are greedy for life, and for good reason. Death is the end of our story, and we don't want to reach the last page.

I often have conversations with members or their parents about impending deaths. When someone reaches an advanced age, or has a life-threatening illness, it is natural to begin to look ahead, to what will become of their families, money and possessions when they are gone. It is never an easy for someone who has far less of a future than a past, but by talking through these issues, each of us can find some solace in knowing that we have helped to shape our family's future before our own passing. By settling inheritance issues - like the daughters of Zelophehad - we affirm the status of each of our children as sharing in our family's fortunes. By ensuring a home for our objects, we pass down pieces of own history. By sharing our hopes and dreams for

them we help to guide them to safety and happiness in a future we will not share. In all these ways we attain some small measure of immortality.

Moses tried to do the same. “Please,” he says to God, “don’t let me be forgotten. Make sure the people have a shepherd to lead them.” He won’t go on, but if he is assured that a new shepherd will take his place, Moses can say goodbye to life with a heart at peace. We should learn from his example, and look beyond our own time on earth. Estate planning is a big part of that, but so is taking the time to speak to families about what we would like done after we pass from the scene. What will become of our things? Will estate matters be worked out ahead of time, to affirm everyone’s identity as a valued member of the family? What kind of life, including a Jewish life, do we hope they will continue to have years hence? We should not be shy about these things. Even knowing that our families will ultimately make their own decisions, we should not hesitate to share our own vision for their future.

The daughters of Zelphehad argued for their property rights. Moses prayed that the next leader would be both brave and understanding. To the extent we can, we must try to shape this world, including how that world will be even when we no longer walk it. None of us can escape the end of our stories, but we can each write the afterward before we reach that end.

Shabbat shalom