

## Pre-Yizkor Sermon, Shemini Atzeret

Despite the gaiety and joy which attaches to this Shmini-Atzeret-Simchat Torah period, the pathetic figure of Moses dominated the theme of this holiday. In ZOS HA'BRACHAH, the last Sidra of the Torah which we read during this holiday, we meet up with Moses as he prepares to die. And Moses, despite the loftiness of his prophecy, the heights of his spirit and the nobleness of his whole life, is essentially a warm and profoundly human being. He wanted to live. He found it difficult to reconcile himself with G-d's notice that he would die here, overlooking the Land of Israel, and that he would not live to set foot in it. And how he begged G-d for a just a bit more life, for just that bit of NACHAS to be able to feel this Promised Land under the soles of his feet! If not ~~de~~ alive, let them take my ashes there. If not as Leader, let me enter as an ordinary Jew. And G-d says, No, my son, V'SHAMAH LO TA'AVOR, you cannot enter it, nether as Leader, nor alive, nor even dead. (Sifri, Yalkut Shimoni). And then the pathos and beauty of this scene are made even greater as our Rabbis picture Moses, acting under Divine command, writing the last words of the Torah, and writing, not with ink but with his own tears, the words VA'YAMASS SHAM MOSHEH, And Moses died there - there, on the eastern bank of the Jordan, and buried there, there on the eastern bank of the Jordan, and not in the beloved, Promised Land.

Now our Rabbis, when reading and studying this portion which we have just described, made some very interesting remarks which are somewhat astonishing. DARSH REB SAMLAH, TORAH T'CHILASSAH G'MILLAS CHASSADIM V'SOFAH G'MILLAS CHASSADIM; T'CHALASSAH, DI'CHSIV VA'YAAS HA'SHEM ELOKIM LA'ADAM U'LE'ISHTO KASNOSS OR VA'YALBISHEM, VE'SOFAH DI'CHSIV VA'YIKBAR OSSO BA'GAYE. (Sotah 14). The Torah begins with an act of kindness and charity on the part of G-d and ends with the same, The beginning act of Divine generosity is where G-d makes clothing for Adam and Eve, and dresses them, after their sin. And the final act of Divine benevolence is when He buries Moses in a valley in Moab.

What a strange thing to say! One can understand that G-d's act of giving clothing to primordial Man was an act of kindness. It meant warmth and protection from disease and the elements. It gave Adam and Eve the dignity of human beings. It set them apart and over the animals. It inculcated in them a sense of morality. It served as a psychological buffer. The beginning of the Torah does bespeak Divine charitableness.

But why does G-d regard His taking of Moses' life as G'MILLAS CHASSADIM? By what stretch of the imagination can we regard VA'YIKBAR OSSO BA'GAYE as generosity? Is it not tragic enough when this strong and solitary figure who had flaunted kings and moved mountains is reduced to begging for only another few days of life, or for a favorable plot in which to be buried? Is it not heart-breaking when a Moses has to plead, "G-d Almighty, have I not given enough of my sweat and blood and toil and heart to this people? Have I not suffered from their rebelliousness, from their terrible ingratitude, from their pettiness? Wasn't it you who insisted that I accept the burden of leadership? Isn't 40 years long enough to labor in fashioning a stable nation out of a motley crew of disgruntled slave-tribes? Will you now deprive me of this singular nachas of seeing these children follow me into the Land for which we strove thru plague-ridden Egypt, thru the burning desert, thru all conceivable difficulty? O G-d, kill me now, if you will, but at least let them take my body and lay it in yonder ground, let me at least find this satisfaction after death!" And G-d says, NO, but VA'YIKBAR OSSO BA'GAYE. Is THAT a "favor", a G'MILLAS CHASSADIM?

I can imagine if a medieval church, or even some modern Church, had written that story of Moses and made him their hero. Moses would have disappeared in a puff, lifted bodily into Heaven by Angelic hands, greeted by a parade of Saints, while only a glowing halo remained to mark the earthly spot.

I can imagine if the story had been written for Mohammedans. We would have found Moses charging the Gates of Paradise, while astride a proud Arab steed, and in a final victorious flourish, he would have forced open the gates to eternal joy.

I can imagine if the story had been written by a Greek tragedian. There would have been a grand, dramatic, tragic, smashing climax, in which, in the presence of all

the gods, Moses duels with Stan, and after piercin his black heart takes the bloody knife, and in a fit of tragic remorse, thrusts it into his own heart.

In other words, we might have expected a heroic ending, a dramatic climax, some overbearing act of bravery, by which Moses closes his life-story.

Instead, Moses just lies down and dies. For after Moses has accepted the "Ivine Judgement, the Midrash relates, G-d orders Moses to lie down, and Moses lies down. G-d lovingly tells him to fold his hands across his chest, and Moses, quietly and gently, does so. Close your eyes, Moses; and Moses closes his eyes. And then, G-d softly kisses Moses, withdraws his holy soul from him, and Moses is dead. No one is there to witness it. There is no audience and no obituary. Until this day, we know he died on the plains of Moab, in a valley between some small mountains. But ~~no~~noone knows just where. A simple, plain, ordinary death. No noise, no fanfare, no expensive coffins, no black ribbons, no unveilings - nothing at all. And after only 30 days, the Torah emphasizes, VA'YITMU YEMEI BECHI EIVEL MOSHEH, the mourning-period for him in Israel was ended. It is all over and done with.

And that, friends, our Rabbis called G'MILLAS CHASSADIM, an example of G-d's goodness.

And, indeed, it most certainly was an act of charitableness by G-d. The G'MILLAS CHASSADIM consisted of the very simplicity of his demise. Why? Because Moses needed no heroic act to signify a heroic end, since all his life was an exercise in heroic holiness. His quiet, uneventful death only served to highlight, and emphasize by contrast, the heroic quality of all his life. Courage and valour were his every-day 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 needed no closing act, no grand finale, no tragedy or heroics or histrionics, for no Death could have been as great as was his life. <sup>or as impressive as his teaching</sup> When a man is remembered for one act, then he has lived only a moment. But when a man is remembered for a life-time, then he is immortal, and has lived life in its fullest, longest and deepest expression. No wonder LO CHAHASSAH EINO VE'LO NASS LEICHO, his eye was not dim and his natural force not abated.

He was too busy living to begin to die.

Moses realized, at the end, that a life well-lived needs no special act of daring or bravery or even fulfillment. And therefore, as the Aggadah relates, Moses ascended the CHAMESH\*ESREH MAALOS, the 15 steps to Mt. Nebo, in P'SIAH ACHAS, in one step. He appreciated G-d's goodness in giving him a great, full, creative life, a life that was sufficient without a heroic death, a life that stood out in all its fullness and holiness by contrast with the utter simplicity of his passing away. Indeed, that was the G'MILLAS CHASSADIM.

I wish we Americans, with our penchant for dramatic flourish and impulsive acts of bravery, would take this to heart. We American Jews, like other Americans, have come to admire the one-two punch, whether in boxing or in war or study or religion. We give our whole-hearted approval to the kind of goodness expressed in an applause-ridden grand finale, but are somewhat bored by the steadiness of slow development, the well-grounded quality of gradual <sup>achievement</sup> ~~development~~, the sure but constant application of great principles which alone can carve out a Ten Commandments kind of life.

Remember the dark years of World War II? Which American Jew was not prepared to give his life to defend his people and defeat the inhuman, diabolical enemy? We were truly idealists, and great ones. But it was a one-act kind of heroism. We have seen Germany grow and prosper since those horrible years. And we keep silent, we have not got the strength to keep up a sustained fight against evil. So much so, that if a Rabbi speaks out against this pampering of ex-Nazis, he is regarded as a brave young man. How unfortunate that such should be the case!

Or, let us go back one generation. Now that we are celebrating the Tercentenary, we keep on reading history books which vividly describe the plight of our immigrant parents. Think of how they devoted life-times - every living moment - to our advancement and progress. No great sacrifices, no sudden flashes of bravery and sacrifice - but a sustained life-long devotion of labor in sweat-shops and penny-saving in cold-water tenements, to

enable us to spend leisure-years in high-schools and on rolling college-campuses. They loved us, their children, in a manner truly heroic, for it was sustained, though it lacked the eclat and flash.

But how about us? Any parent would respond in the affirmative if asked if he or she would give their lives for a child. Certainly. But how many would give as many as two Saturday nights a month? We pay, as accumulated through the year, hundreds for baby sitters. Valorous indeed. But how many would stay home more often, and give a child the feeling of being with a parent. We are ready to apend thousands for special education for them. But how many will help a child patiently with his home-work, or study a "parsha chumash ve'rashi" with him? Perhaps if we would follow the example of our less-sophisticated immigrant parents, and dispense with the bravery and the bravado, and act like Jews, like a Moses, we would be giving our youngsters the true GMILLAS CHASSADIM.

And what is religion for so many of us if not something we can expect to get all at once, only one day a week, or three days a year. We make the supreme sacrifice of staying away from the store and the golf-links on these sacred days, but we neglect the day-to-day application that alone can give man true blessing. We expect to get, from one sermon or two lectures or three nights in an adult education course, all the Jewish Philosophy, Law, Ethics and History that have taken three thousand years to create. But we are bored by the prospect of applied study, every day, by purselves. And yet only that way can we get ourselves the greatest GMILLAS CHESSED.

Of course, when we speak in favor of undramatic and simple living which is constant in its goodness and application of virtue, we do not mean to cast aspersions upon the martyrs of ages gone by, or of our own age. There are thousands, nay millions, of Jews who have given their lives for KIDDUSH HA'SHEM, in holy martyrdom, and they have helped preserve our people with the supreme sacrifice. But we must remember this: the Jewish martyr, throughout history, has given more than death; he has given all his life. Martyrdom for the Jew was not an impulsive, sudden inspiration. You had to train for it from infancy. You had to prepare for it and study for it. Only thus was it martyrdom, not bravado.



(following abducted from JHL):

Recall the story of that genius of Torah, Rabbi Akiva, who, in the second century of the common era, when Rome ruled over Palestine, defied the decrees of the cruel oppressors and continued to teach TALMUD TORAH BA'RABIM, to teach Torah in public. The great teacher was warned to desist or else he would pay with his life. His closest disciples begged him to desist, but he refused, and continued to teach, and he explained to his students: KOL YAMAI HITZTA'ARTI AL PASUK ZEH \*- VE'AHAVTA ...BE'CHOL NAFSH'CHA, AFILU NOTEL ES NAFSH'CHA, MASAI YAVO LE'YADI VA'AKAYMENU, V'ACHSHAV SHE'BA LE'YADI LO AKAYMENU? (translate).

It was just this sort of discussion that passed between the Great Rabbi Akiva and his beloved pupils. "Rebbe," they cried to him, "don't you know that you are of more value to us alive than dead? Are, then, you the type who shows bravery in great dramatic fashion? How does this kind of showy heroism come to you? We want you alive!" And then their sainted teacher answered, "My children, you are gravely mistaken. I am not now embarking on a single act of sacrifice! I am not being impulsive about it! KOL YAMAI HITZTA'ARTI! All my life have I pained and suffered, all my life have I worked and strived and dreamt of this moment. My life was a living martyrdom, my life was a series of great sacrifices! There is absolutely nothing impulsive about this, my final act. It is only the culmination forced upon me. When as a 40-year old ignorant shepherd I married Rachel against her father's wishes, it was a preparation for martyrdom. When she lovingly consented right thereafter to release me for 14 yrs. of study, that was a sacrifice. When I came to the great academies in Jerusalem and found myself sitting in one class with five-year olds learning ALEPH-BEIS, that was sacrifice. When I returned to my wife and then tore myself away again for so many years, that was a sort of martyrdom. When I espoused the cause of Bar-Kochba against Rome, and against the better judgement of every one of my colleagues, that wasn't bravado, it was a slow and painful martyrdom. KOL YAMI!" And so the great teacher brought an entire life-time of martyrdom to an end with the declaration of the Shma, SHMA...ECHAD.

All life must be marked by greatness. All life must be devoted. We must lead heroic lives, and not be satisfied with heroic acts, with heroic deaths. That is the Jewish

way: the drama is evident throughout the play, and not confined to the last act. That is Jewish bravery, the bravery of life, not the bravery of death. That is Jewish courage, and that is Jewish heroism.

In concluding, let me leave one word of comfort and consolation for those here this morning who agree with the thesis we expressed, but who are wondering if this kind of life isn't just a bit too difficult. Certainly it's more difficult. A life of heroism is far more difficult to achieve than one act of courage. But, and this is the redeeming thought, most of the difficulty is imagined and not real. You can learn to live with it and even enjoy it like nothing else.

I leave you with this one Chassidic tale, which you may interpret for yourselves, apropos of what we have been saying. One Simchs Torah, in the synagogue of the venerable Master the Rizhiner Rebbe, the dancing was proceeding in full strength and vigor. And then the old Rebbe himself, bent and weighed down by the years, entered the circle and took hold of a Torah and began to dance. One of his Hassidim noticed that that particular Torah was a very heavy one, and so he said, REBBE LEBBEN, isn't the Torah too heavy for you?

And the old sage, without a moment's hesitation, answered, AZ MEN HALT SHOYN DIE TORAH, IZ ZIE GARNISHT AZOY SHVER \* - - once you hold the Torah, you find that it is not quite so heavy .....