

Echoes of Eden

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Ending, and Beginning Again

This week, we read the closing verses of the Torah:

There never arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe, who knew God face to face. (No one else could produce) the signs and miracles that God sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all of his land, or any of the mighty acts and great sights that Moshe displayed before the eyes of all Israel. (Devarim 34:10-12)

The focus seems to be a “sendoff” for Moshe, stressing his greatness and stature as a prophet and servant of God. However, the underlying message should not be missed: It was Moshe who brought the Torah down from heaven, and therefore his status as prophet is intertwined with the status of the Torah itself.

Interestingly enough, Rashi associates this final phrase of the Torah with one of the more unorthodox episodes in Moshe’s tenure as the leader of the Israelites. According to Rashi’s understanding of these final verses, Moshe is to be remembered for posterity for what he did “before all of Israel.” And what is it that Moshe did in such a public and unforgettable way? Surely, there are many possible answers, many possible candidates for the most public and unforgettable proof of Moshe’s unique stature as Israel’s greatest prophet. And yet, according to Rashi, this verse is referring specifically to what Moshe did in front of the “eyes of all of Israel” at the foot of Mount Sinai, and not at its apex: Moshe is remembered for breaking the Tablets of the Covenant upon which God Himself had carved the words of the Torah. Is Moshe, then, to be remembered for all time not as the “law giver” but for being, in an excruciatingly literal sense, the “breaker” of the law? And is this

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There is a rabbinic teaching that may shed light on the underlying message. The Midrash teaches that before God created our world, He “created worlds and destroyed them.” This is a remarkably brazen teaching: Surely, the all-powerful and all-knowing God could have created a world that was to His liking the first

time around. God has no need for trial-and-error creation, and the Midrash is not to be understood as implying any shortcoming on God’s part. Instead, this Midrash contains a profound principle of Jewish philosophy concerning the imperfection inherent in human nature.

The human condition is paradoxical: We are created in the image of God, yet we are, in fact, perfectly imperfect. Man makes mistakes. It is our ability to make choices and err, our ability to recover equilibrium and to learn from our mistakes, that defines us. This, and not merely opposable thumbs, is what sets us apart from the other creatures in our world. Our sages transmitted, through the Midrash, the importance of failed attempts that are used as the building blocks of future success.

Rashi’s commentary on the final verses of the Torah expresses the same idea: Moshe ascended Mount Sinai and achieved the highest spiritual level of any human being in history, but he is to be remembered for his response to the failure of his people: He smashed the Tablets, and started again. He worked his way back up the mountain, literally and figuratively, from ground zero. Rather than eradicating the evidence of failure, the shattered Tablets were housed and guarded in the very same Holy Ark as the second set of Tablets that Moshe brought down to the people. Our eventual success is thus seen as an outgrowth of our previous failures. This is surely an important parting

message: the conclusion of the Torah is intertwined with its beginning. We complete the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and seamlessly begin anew. We start again. We do not allow past failures to discourage us; we continue to seek to understand and fulfill the lessons contained in the Torah, continue to strive to perfect ourselves and our world, even though we have fallen short of the goal before. Just as God did not “despair” of creating humankind despite its failures, just as God “started over”, so Moshe is to be remembered for all time as the prophet who smashed the Tablets of the Covenant – but did not despair. He started again, undiscouraged, and led the people to a new beginning.

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A perfect God gave a perfect Torah to imperfect man; the result is the imperfection that is “built in” to the very core of the human condition. Yet this imperfect result is not a cross that we bear, an indelible “mark of Cain” or an inescapable and insurmountable state of guilt and inadequacy. The lesson of the final verses of the Torah, like the lesson of the Midrash that paints the backdrop of our world, is that imperfect man is given free will, and when we fall short, when we fail to perfect the world or ourselves, we must start over again. When we reach the end of

the Torah, we begin again from Bereishit. This is not a sign of failure but an expression of human nature: We are a work in progress.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/09/vezot-habracha-simchat-torah.html>