

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חירות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## LIFE AFTER REPENTANCE

(Revised from 2014)

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Rabbi Eliezer says: Repent one day before your death.  
(Avot 1:2)

Why not earlier? Perhaps there is virtue in looking forward rather than backward, so long as there is a prospective view, and so long as in the end one accepts responsibility for the past.

A beraita (Shabbat 153a) reads Rabbi Eliezer very differently, however,

Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him: Does a person know on what day he will die?

He said to them: All the more so, let him repent today lest he die tomorrow, and it will end up that all his days he is penitent.

Here the ideal is to look backward continually, and Rabbi Eliezer speaks of repenting only on the day before death as a concession, or perhaps merely as a rhetorical device.

We can borrow from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and say that Rabbi Eliezer's statement on its own generates a religiosity that seeks to achieve a destiny, while the dialogue with his students generates a religiosity that seeks to avoid fate. Repenting every day means always looking backward, unless one can find a way to repent toward rather than repent from.

The close of Sefer Devarim apparently provides an in-depth look at Mosheh Rabbeinu on what he knows will be his last day alive. Moreover, Mosheh is told explicitly that his death will be caused by a past sin (32:5):

And die on the mount toward which you are climbing, and be gathered to your people  
as Aharon your brother died at Hor HaHar, and was gathered to this people  
as a consequence of your having badly used Me amidst the Children of Israel  
at the Waters of Merivat Kadesh, in the wilderness Tzin  
as a consequence of not having sanctified me amidst the Children of Israel

His last day should therefore have much to teach us about end-of-life repentance. But recreating Mosheh's calendar for

that day turns out to be a surprisingly complicated enterprise, and the end result may not accord with Rabbi Eliezer.

Let's start from the very end. The last twelve verses of the Torah describe Mosheh climbing Mount Nevo. Hashem shows him the promised land but reminds him yet again that he will never reach it.

Hashem said to him:

This is the land regarding which I swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, saying "to your seed I will give it";

I have shown it to your eyes, but thereward you must not cross."

The last thing Hashem says to Mosheh is a statement – perhaps a command – that he will not reach Israel. This seems cruel, and utterly out of keeping with the immediately following descriptions of Mosheh as "the servant of G-d" and the apogee of prophecy. Perhaps it is a response to Mosheh repenting – still not good enough, or the decree stands regardless – but the simpler read is that no such repentance occurred.

The last words ascribed to Mosheh in the Torah comprise the "blessing" that takes up all of Chapter 33. I don't pretend to understand the chapter entirely, but it seems clearly to end on a triumphalist note, with Israel trampling the high places of her enemies. Here again I find no reference to repentance.

I suggest, however, that these are not actually Mosheh's last words. The end of Chapter 32 is Hashem's order to Mosheh to climb Mount Nevo and die, and the beginning of Chapter 34 is Mosheh perfectly fulfilling those instructions. The blessing of *וזאת הברכה* is introduced grammatically as an insertion, rather than as part of a flowing narrative; "*And this is the blessing that Mosheh (bad) blessed the Children of Israel before his death*", rather than 'Mosheh (subsequently) blessed the Children of Israel'.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that the Children of Israel were present when G-d ordered Mosheh to climb Nevo, or when he climbed it.

The Torah's narrative is often not in chronological order, and most commentators agree that the Torah does not necessarily acknowledge flashbacks or foreshadowings explicitly. In other words, the Torah is often written so as to create the initial illusion of a chronological narrative that falls apart on close analysis. My suggestion is that the blessing is inserted here to demonstrate that Mosheh's overall relationship to Bnei Yisroel was that of blesser, even though his actual final words to them were otherwise.

What then were Mosheh's actual last words to Bnai Yisroel? Devarim 32:45-7 tell us:

Mosheh finished speaking all these words to all Israel.

He said:

Give your hearts to all the words which I am making a testimony for you today which you will command them to guard and keep all the words of this Torah.

Because it is not an empty thing from you, rather it is your life and via this thing you will have extended days on the ground which you are crossing the Jordan toward, to inherit it.

These last words emphasize that Mosheh did not allow his disappointment at being excluded from the Land to diminish his concern for his people's long-term survival there, nor his enthusiasm for their success. They do not make any explicit reference to repentance for the sin at Merivah.

But these words are only the coda – they come when Mosheh “finished speaking all of these words to all Israel”. What was the actual speech?

I suggest that 32:45 is the closure of an envelope structure beginning at 31:1:

Mosheh went. He spoke these words to all the Children of Israel.

The problem is that a great deal happens in that envelope, much of which is clearly not part of a Mosaic speech. *Haaqinu* is recited, and it or another poem is taught, and written down, by both Mosheh and Yehoshua. At least one full Torah scroll is written, perhaps several. Yehoshua is blessed and charged – repeatedly – and so are some or all members of the Tribe of Levi. G-d tell Mosheh that his death is near, and both Hashem and Mosheh declare that the Jews will sin badly in the future. The Torah actually seems to be doing its best to confuse the chronology.

Why would that be?

Perhaps to avoid making it obvious that Mosheh Rabbeinu does not spend his last day repenting his sin. It might even

be said that he spends the day repeating it. Here for example is 31:27:

For I know your rebelliousness, and your stiff neck –  
Indeed, so long as I have been living among you, you have been rebellious with Hashem –  
so certainly after my death

This seems to strongly echo "שמעו נא המורים" “Hear ye O rebels” from the waters of Merivah (Bamidbar 32:10).

And yet – if I am right, the Torah still makes it possible for us to realize that Mosheh is not repenting, and therefore we must be able to learn something positive from that as well. Here's my suggestion.

Continual repentance may be a fine way to live an individual life, but it is no recipe for leadership. Leaders who focus on making up for the past rather than preparing for the future end up fighting the last war. They generate more and more decisions to repent for.

On the other hand, leaders who fail to acknowledge their errors – who are incapable of genuine reflection and change - will inevitably repeat those errors. The Torah properly protects the honor of the incomparable prophet and servant of Hashem, but leaves us the clue, in Hashem's last words to him, that the sin of Merivah was still fundamentally unrepented.

Our calendar's solution is to set aside Ten Days of Repentance, plus the occasional fast scattered through the year. The rest of the year repentance is just one among many mitzvot. Unless and until we have no future, the purpose of facing the past is to enable us to better face the future. Having just finished the Ten Days, the future is now: and if not now, when?

*Shabbat shalom!*

*The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.*