

“The Urgency of Life”
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Some people are planners and some are procrastinators. There are others who are both. They plan on procrastinating while some even procrastinate about planning. However, no matter the type of person you are, you have to admit there is a certain energy that comes with arriving at the deadline. I will let you in on a secret. Every year I start writing High Holiday sermons in May. I write one a month for the next three months and then I put them away for a month. I then return with a ruthless editing mindset in order to fine-tune the sermons. I write them feeling good about getting them done and I am the envy of many of my colleagues. I spend the months leading up to May collecting materials and setting it aside. I then set out writing and the sermons unfold organically almost writing themselves. Then I start to practice the week before the High Holidays and often I realize that what I have written is pure dreck. So I start over, usually entirely from scratch. Sometimes I keep the theme, but others times I don't even like the topic. So, I put pen to paper or open a new document in Word and begin again. The last few days before the High Holidays offer energy that generates a creative flow. The last minutes make us either rise to high achievement or fall to utter defeat. There is an excitement in that moment, there is a synergy of that activity. I wish I always had the right phrase on the tip of my tongue. I wish I could offer an oration that seems to come from my heart without having to worry about each and every word. Moses does that for the last 10 chapters and it seems effortless. We aren't treated to the unedited versions, the rough drafts – but I wish I could do what he did. After all, I am no Moses.

In a beautiful eulogy Elie Weisel writes of Moses, “Does Moses die unfulfilled, deprived of the opportunity to enter the Land?” His life is like those of many people, with soaring triumphs and bitter disappointments, public acclaim and private bitterness. But Moses dies physically healthy, ‘his vigor unabated,’ close to his God and honored by the people he shaped and led. “Moses is the most solitary and the most powerful hero in Biblical history. The immensity of his task and scope of his experience command our admiration, our reverence, our awe... His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, his triumphs and his disappointments, his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and his organizational genius, his complex relationship with God and God's people, his condemnations and his blessings, his bursts of anger, his silences, his efforts to reconcile the law with compassion, authority with integrity – no individual ever, anywhere, accomplished so much for so many people in so many domains. *Moshe Rabeinu*, our Master Moses, incomparable, unequaled. (*Etz Hayim* page 1211)

Who could possibly imitate that? Who could possibly imagine themselves the same as this great leader. The compilers of this prayer book, our sages, say, they do. Our rabbis imagine each of us can be like Moses. We can each do what he did, if we begin by saying what he said.

Please look with me at this week's portion on page 1185, *Etz Hayim*. As you make your way there, let me set the scene. Moses' time has run out. This is his last oration and his last speech. Since he will die a solitary death, with no one except Joshua around, this is the closest thing we will get to a death-bed proclamation. This is it. His last words to his people and in the urgency of that moment he says, “*Ki Shem adonai ekra Havu Godel L'eloheinu*,” “For the name of the

Lord I proclaim. Give glory to our God.” (Deuteronomy 32:3) But first and before we focus on what he says, let us realize that there is much he could have said but chose not to. He could have chosen to be resentful, but he doesn’t. He could have said, “I am angry at God for not letting me into the land of Israel.” But he doesn’t. He could have said, “I am upset about wasting a life in service of an ungrateful people.” But he doesn’t. He could have said, “Where is my family? Why aren’t they standing by my side in this last hour of life?” but he doesn’t. No, he says, “*Ki Shem adonai ekra Havu Godel L’eloheinu.*” “For the name of the Lord I proclaim. Give glory to our God. God is great and I was part of His plan. That is enough for me.”

Now look in your siddur to page 141 and as you make your way there, let me once again set the scene. At this point in the service we have taken the Torah from the Ark and we are ready to read. The Gabbai stands next to the Torah and calls out for someone to come forward to take the first aliyah. We have placed the Torah on the table and we are now ready to proclaim God’s word. The public witnesses the ongoing relationship between the Jewish people and the Almighty as it has been chronicled through Torah. Near the middle of the page the Gabbai quotes Moses, “*HaKol Havu Godel l’loheinu,*” essentially asking us to imitate Moses. He calls on all of us to put down our anger, aggression and antagonism and step forth into the gratitude of living a life fulfilled.

Reuven Hammer writes in *Or Hadash* “Let us all declare,” so, as preparations for the reading of the Torah commence, the assembled congregation is called upon to declare God’s greatness and to give honor and respect to God’s word, the Torah.” In that outlook we can channel Moses.

Like inspiration, we can internalize this moment and use it as a springboard for achieving a moment of Moses. This is Shabbat Shuva. If there was ever a moment to draw on that strength, that commitment, that genius ... this is it. Our rabbis, by placing Moses words in our mouths, are imploring us to realize that we can. Right at this moment we stand between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The season demands greatness, a greatness beyond what we thought we were capable of. Next Shabbat we will gather right here in this very location and speak the words, who will live and who will die? We will wonder if we are going to survive another year. If this season means anything to us, we will face our own mortality and ask, “Have we done enough? Has my life been enough?”

Rosh Hashanah’s message of Yom Harat Olam stands directly in contrast with Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment. Rosh Hashanah proclaims this is the day the world was created. Yom Kippur asks, “What if this is your last day?” Today, you stand between the beginning and the end. Hazal, in plucking this one verse from the Torah and placing it in our regular liturgy, says that this is where you are every day of the year, somewhere between the beginning and the end. And you can be Moses at least for a minute. We each get to be Moses for just a minute. Close your eyes and channel Moses.

When I began preaching, I would imitate other speakers. I would listen intently to those great orators of our generation and try to copy them. I would listen to Martin Luther King, Jr. and I would try to duplicate his rhythm and cadence. I would try to replicate others and reproduce their tone and modulation. I would close my eyes and raise my arms like they would. I would point a finger the way they did, I would bite my lower lip the way they did, and I would even try to use

their pronunciation of certain words. This helped me to find my own voice and I channeled them until I found it myself. I used their presentation until I found my own and eventually it came, my truth came out. The same is true of you. The prayer book is here as a guide. The words before you are the genius of generations and they are there to help you find your voice. The prayer book borrows from Torah and you borrow from the prayer book. Eventually your truth will come out. Eventually the statement you are going to make to the world will come out, but until then our sages, through Moses, are there to help you.