

# **Neurology & Pain Management**

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The tears of Moses: reading with Rabbi Nachman and the Lost Princess

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In the tale of the Lost Princess Rabbi Nachman has the viceroy fast asleep for seventy years as the princess passes by in her carriage.

She stopped next to him. She descended and sat by him, recognizing who he was. She shook him strongly, but he failed to wake up. And she started to bemoan, "How many immense efforts and travails he has undergone, these many years, in order to free me, and because of one day that he could have freed me, and lost it..," and she cried a great deal about this, saying "There is great pity for him and for me, that I am here so very long, and cannot leave." After that, she took her scarf off of her head, and wrote upon it with her tears, and laid it by him. And she rose and boarded her carriage, and rode away.

Afterwards, he [the viceroy –] awoke, and asked the servant, "Where am I in the world?" So he [the servant –] told him the whole story - that many soldiers had passed there, and that there had been a carriage, and a woman who wept over him and cried out that there is great pity on him and on her. In the midst of this, he [the viceroy –] looked around and saw that there was a scarf lying next to him. So he asked, "Where did this come from?" The servant explained that she had written upon it with her tears. So he took it and held it up against the sun, and began to see the letters, and he read all that was written there - all her mourning and crying as previously mentioned, and that she is no longer in the said castle, and that he should look for a mountain of gold and a castle of pearls, "There you shall find me!"

The text is written with tears. The text is written on her scarf (teichel)  
The text can only be deciphered by holding it up to the light of the sun. There is another text the Rabbis of the Midrash tell us was also written with tears, the last 8 verses of the Bible:

In these verses the Torah speaks of the death and burial of Moses. If Moses was the transcriber of the text how could he have written about his own demise? The rabbis discuss this very issue.

The Torah comes to its completion with the following verses:

*So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-Peor; but no man knows his grave till this day. And Moses was 120 years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; and the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended. And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him; and the people of Israel listened to him, and did as the Lord commanded Moses. And there has not arisen since in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. In all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land. And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great and awesome deeds which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. (Deut. 34:5 to 34:12)*

If the entire Torah is believed to have been dictated by God to Moses. These last eight verses pose a challenge to that position.

The Talmud offers a number of explanations:

The Master has said: "Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and the last eight verses of the Pentateuch. This statement is in agreement with the authority who says that eight verses in the Torah were written by Joshua, as it has been taught: *So Moses the servant of the Lord died there*. Now is it possible that Moses being dead could have written the words, 'Moses died there'? The truth is, however, that up to this point Moses wrote, from this point Joshua wrote. This is the opinion of Rabbi Judah, or, according to others, of Rabbi Nehemiah." [But] Rabbi Shimon said to him: "Can the scroll of the law be short of one word? ... No; what we must say is that up to this point the Holy One, blessed be He, dictated and Moses

repeated and wrote, and from this point God dictated and Moses wrote with tears."

(Baba Basra 15a)

We see that the question of "authorship" is debated in the Talmud. We must recognize that according to both opinions the source of the words of the Torah is certainly God. The point of disagreement is: Was it Moses or Joshua who was the conduit through which the word of God flowed in these last 8 verse.

The Talmud then continues to discuss the relative sanctity of the last verses transcribed by Joshua versus the previous books by Moses from a legal standpoint:<sup>1</sup>

Which of these two authorities is followed in the rule that ... "the last eight verses of the Torah must be read by one person alone?" It follows Rabbi Judah and not Rabbi Shimon. I may even say, however, that it follows Rabbi Shimon, [who would say that] since they differ [from the rest of the Torah] in one way, they differ in another."

There is a debate regarding the proper understanding of these words, which go to the core of our question. If the last eight verses of the Torah are to be read by one person, when the Torah is read in the synagogue, what sets them apart?

Maimonides' opinion is of particular interest:

The eight verses at the end of the Torah are permitted to be read with less than ten (without a minyan or proper quorum). Even though the entire Torah is from Moses based on the word of the Almighty, since these verses give the indication that they were written after the death of Moses, their status is changed and it is permissible for one person to read them.

(Mishna Torah, Laws of Prayer, 13:6)

Maimonides is unequivocal that the words of the Torah originate from God and were dictated to Moses. Nonetheless, because these verses give the impression

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this material is taken from an essay by Rabbi Ari Kahn "Explorations"

of having been written after the demise of Moses, their status is changed inasmuch as they can be read without a minyan.

The Talmud continues:

Rabbi Shimon said to him: "Can the scroll of the law be short of one word? ... No; what we must say is that up to this point the Holy One, blessed be He, dictated and Moses repeated and wrote, and from this point God dictated and Moses wrote with tears."

(Baba Bathra 15a)

What does it mean when it says "Moses wrote with tears"? The simple understanding would be that Moses wrote these verses while weeping. Moses, the faithful servant of God, takes dictation for the final time, is overcome by emotion and weeps. According to this understanding, it is unclear why the tears of Moses should change the status of these verses.

However the Ritva (and Yad Rama) explains that when the Talmud says that Moses wrote with tears, it means tears literally -- in contradistinction to ink. These comments of the Ritva would indeed explain why different status was given to these verses which were, on the one hand, written by the hand of Moses but, on the other hand, without ink.<sup>2</sup> Based on the explanation of the Ritva, we can reinterpret the words of Rashi that, indeed, Joshua wrote these words and, indeed, Moses wrote these words. Moses wrote them with tears based on the word of God; and then Joshua wrote these words with ink.<sup>3</sup>

The Vilna Gaon understands *dama*, the word which we translate as "tears" to be pronounced in a slightly different manner -- as *dema*, which would mean "confusion." This implies that these verses were written by Moses, but without Moses understanding the meaning of the words he was writing. (See Kol Eliyahu, v'zot Habracha 133.) The Ketev Vikabalah, basing his opinion on the teaching of the Vilna Gaon, suggests that Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Shimon are not arguing, as we suggested above.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the halakhic status of invisible ink, see Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Halperin, Responsa Maaseh Choshev, Vol. II, Sec. 14; see, in general on this topic, Rabbi Yitzchak Mirsky, Hegyonei Halacha, Vol. II, p. 100-108

<sup>3</sup> See also Mahrasha, Baba Bathra 15a

This teaching of the Vilna Gaon reminds us of the idea popularized by Nachmanides in his introduction to the Torah where he describes the primordial Torah which preexisted creation, and which was written with white fire and black fire. This Torah is said to contain a string of letters which composed the Divine Name. So the Zohar teaches:

For the Torah, as we have been taught, consists entirely of His Holy Name; in fact, every word written therein consists of and contains that Holy Name. Therefore, one must beware of erring in regard to this name and misrepresenting it. He who is false to the Supernal King will not be allowed to enter the King's Palace and will be driven away from the world to come.

Zohar Shemoth, II: 87a

The source of the white and black fire may likewise be found in the Zohar:

Said Rabbi Isaac: "The Torah was manifested in a black fire which was superimposed upon a white fire, signifying that by means of the Torah the 'Right Hand' clasped the 'Left Hand' that the two might be fused, as it is written: *from his right hand a fiery law to them.* (Deut. 33:2).

Zohar, Shemoth, II:84a

But back to the tears because that is what caught my attention. We may say that, like the Ritva, the words were written with a transparent ink. Only later did Joshua come and write them in ink. Do we really believe that the tears represented merely the feeling and anguish Moses experienced as he wrote these final words of his life? His whole life had been selfless so would we expect a display of self-pity now in the very last moments of his life? Surely not! I feel that Moses was actually leaving his last will and testament for the people of Israel. Here in these last few verses he would and must take his leave. He would leave us at the entrance to the Promised Land, so too when it came to his last message he must surely be telling us the most important transmission of his life. After all the four sermons of Deuteronomy and the Song of Haazinu (chapter 32) and the blessings to the tribes, comes these last few verses.

The great Talmudist and Chassidic thinker of the nineteenth century Reb Zadok Hakone of Lublin makes an alarming statement in his

Machshavot Charutz. In a paradoxical statement quoting his master the Holy Izhbitser Rebbe he states: (p44a)

“And so have I received, that the world in its entirety is a book that God, blessed be He, made and the Torah is a commentary on that book”

For Reb Zadok the world is a cosmic text, which means you and I and every human being is also a text, discreet and unique. The Torah, then becomes a commentary on the world (reminding us of the midrash that the Torah was a blueprint for the creation of the world) meaning the world is inaccessible and does not make sense unless it is deciphered by the Torah. I myself remain a closed text a hieroglyph that needs a commentary to decipher. The Torah, he claims, is that very commentary.

Maybe Moses our teacher was saying the very same thing, that by leaving the last 8 verses transparent written only with tears and not ink, he was instructing Joshua and derivatively us as well, to fill in the ink and the words with our own lives and struggles, to make sense of our lives by struggling with the very text that might make meaning out of it.

These last 8 verses represent his deepest Torah, the torah that forces us to write our own biography and write ourselves into the text of the Torah itself. Am Yisrael and God and the Torah were one after all (Zohar). His instruction to us was “suffer well!” like me! Write your own torah right here at the end, I cannot lead you further down this road, you must do the work, only you can live your own spiritual biography and suffer your own suffering. Only you can write the words that will end the Torah and make sense of it for you. That is the deepest secret I have to give you.

And at the end is the gap that lasts an eternity, just white space with no black ink at all, a chasm of nothingness that can only be bridged by rolling the scroll back to the very beginning and starting over all over again. The gap between the end and the beginning takes as long as it takes to roll the scroll and as long as it takes to get the courage to begin yet again.

So when I read the story of the Lost Princess and her suffering (and thus the shechinah and Mother Rachel in exile, and my own soul) I am comforted by her message written with her tears on the scarf... "Dear viceroy she laments, I too am sorry you are disoriented (remember he wakes up repeatedly asking his servant after each slip "where am I in the world!") but at least let me tell you where I am going so you can find me" The comfort of the trace, there is no despair, she can be found, we can reach the depths of our soul, once again. All we need to do is become willing once again to try.

I am comforted by Rebbe Nachman's story and how it ties in (for me) with the midrash of the tears of Moses. He was suggesting, I believe, that only with tears can we make room for spiritual development, only with tears can we rewrite a new chapter in the spiritual biography of our people, and only with tears can we allow the next generation not to be stifled by the weight of the black ink and the previous canon and millennia of commentary that often disallows our young and inexperienced voices. It is precisely the holding of the scarf to the sunlight that we detect a message for us, only by taking the torn tattered "shmatters" of our broken lives and holding up to the light of the tzaddik may we have room to express ourselves, our pain, our lives, and thus be healed.