

Vayalech

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There are so many elements to this parasha, and I imagine everyone here zeros in on a different one in the same way that we Jews are known to have varying opinions. This is where I landed...

Moses here is in checklist mode. He's packing up, closing out, making sure all those last minute items are done- because like many of us feel every day, despite Moses being Moses he still has so many dang things to do on this his last day of 120 years that he's still running around.

Writing the Torah

Having it put in to the ark, no on THAT side of the tablets

Handing the responsibility of the Jewish people over to Joshua-
no biggie

Receives the news that the Jews will betray god- yikes.

Has to write a song- this is unfair, he's not Dolly Parton.

Like many of you I often think back when life seemed simpler- even without cell phones (let alone smart phones) plans had to be less complicated because once you left your house that was it. But this is a reminder to me that every generation feels the weight, neutral of available technology whether that be parting seas or iphones, of the immense burden that the job is never finished and the day is never long enough

This is also especially poignant as the end here (though not in this

parasha) marks Moses death, not his retirement, not his chance to kick up his sandals in the promised land of Israel. Moses has no reprieve other than knowing he's done and that Gd will protect the Jews and it's not much of a reprieve because he is also informed that the Jews will turn their backs on Gd. I don't think Moses is anyone's cautionary tale of a workaholic but for a moment, the idea that Moses can't even take this chance to survey his life and take a breath stresses me out.

I suffer from the never ending to-do list, both mental and real. Work, parenting, old house, sports, attempting to make a better/easier life for those around me, research my drash, you name it, it is swimming in a pool of swirling neurons in my head. There is always a new issue to take up mental and emotional space. I know that the job is never done, we just run out of time.

Can we not give Moses a break because we regard him as tireless? As free from kvetching? I understand that the Torah lacks whimsy - other than being swallowed by a whale (because that is comedy gold) and I think I understand the distance that the Torah has given us from these actors: Moses, Jacob, Avraham- we're not supposed to relate to them- our final parasha of the year even tell us this "No prophet has risen since in Israel like Moses"

Moses is different, but as we know from his death, Moses is still human. Moses's most human might be when a few parachute back he loses his temper AND his passport stamp to the promised land when he strikes the rock for water.

It is not lost on me that this is Shabbat Shuvah, a time when our prayers and reflections are heightened. Shuvah, to return. The Jews will stray, but today we are reminded of their chance to return. We can return, we can take a deep breath and reset and reprioritize, both our never-ending to-do lists and spiritually. Our return is perhaps both to Gd, to sanity, to peace. But Moses cannot.

With Vayalech, Rabbi Sacks calls upon David Brook's concept of a second mountain: where people who have achieved so much in their life, look to climb a different more personally satisfying mountain in their later years. For Moses this is perhaps too literal. But also allegorical, Moses knows that the Jews will misbehave but he attempts to leave them with so many tools, reminders and heartfelt creeds to help allay his concern/guilt and annoyance. I carried you all out of Egypt for this??

I don't know what my second mountain is, or will be. I imagine many of you do or have thought about it. And some of us are still schlepping up our first mountain, or mole hill. But the idea that there is always more that CAN be done might be what gets me through these times, in my life, and in our current world. That even if I feel exhausted and powerless, despite the need for big, structural change, even small incremental change- which is often the best we can do- is still movement. We cannot be Moses, we're not supposed to be Moses, but I think this parasha shows us that we are always capable of moving things forward. Even

when forward means returning. Even at 120.

So I leave you with one more thing to do today. Time and the “to-do list” is what strikes me so much about this parasha. As we stand in the midst of the days of awe, on the Shabbat that reminds us to return, with no option for gaining more time, but with lots of spiritual work to do: how will you move forward? What is the most important thing on your spiritual, or religious to do list? Does it involve others? Is it all on your shoulders?