

Life Is a Journey

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*Birth is a beginning
And Death a destination.
But life is a journey
A going – a growing
From stage to stage.*

These words, by Rabbi Alvin Fine, often add meaning to funeral services. The poem, in that context, encourages us not to focus so heavily on the death we have come together to mourn, but rather on the journey through life that we have gathered to celebrate.

As the Book of Numbers comes to its end, the last portion is called *Mas'ei*, meaning “journeys.” The Hebrew name of the Book isn’t Numbers, but rather *B’midbar*, in the wilderness, where the Israelites spend forty years. This portion’s opening verses, which we just heard, seek to summarize the journey; but they do so drily, listing only the place names. Rabbi Fine’s poem better describes the Book of Numbers, which details the victories and the calamities marking those forty years.

The poetry speak to us powerfully, true as they are to our own lives. Let’s examine sections of the poem, considering our own journeys and those of our biblical forbears.

*From childhood to maturity
And youth to age.
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom.*

King David begins not only his life but also his rule as a child, whatever his chronological age. He kills the giant enemy Goliath with a slingshot, a child’s toy. Foolishly, even wickedly, he takes what he wants, the beautiful woman he sees bathing on the roof next door. Never mind that Bathsheva is married to a soldier off fighting David’s own wars. David’s youthful indiscretions have consequences.

His first wife, Michal, dismisses him for dancing lasciviously in the presence of the Holy Ark. God doesn't consider him fit to build the Holy Temple.

The biblical reader, though, is blessed to know David beyond his adolescent behavior. The rabbis speculate that he authors the Psalms, coming to see that he is protected not by a slingshot but by the hands of God. David develops his musical talent, singing Psalms of praise. Ultimately, as his sons battle for the throne in his old age, David listens to sound advice and assures succession by his wise son, Solomon. Before his death, David instructs Solomon to rule with wisdom, Torah always at his side.

The rabbis teach, "The greater the man, the greater his impulses." Most of us, whatever our gender, are not David, driven to gain dominion over provinces or intimate partners. Still, all are afflicted with temptation. The rabbis ask, "Who is strong?" Answering, "Those who conquer their own impulses." Whether drawn to cheating on our taxes or on our partners, predisposed to addiction or to laziness, our lives' journeys, if we are successful, include a process of maturation. Note that the poem hedges, "And then perhaps to wisdom." Perhaps. Not everybody gets there. Life is a journey, and not an easy one.

*From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness –
And often, back again.
From health to sickness
And back, we pray, to health again.*

This stanza turns us to Miriam, whose vacillation between strength and weakness begins early in life and continues to the very end. Consider the way the rabbis describe Moses's birth. Torah says that a man and a woman marry; she gets pregnant; and Moses is born. But how can that be the sequence of events, given that Miriam and Aaron are older? The rabbis teach that Amram, the father, wants to shield his own family from Pharaoh's decree that every baby boy be killed; so he divorces his wife as the ultimate form of birth control. In that moment of crushing weakness, the rabbis imagine that Miriam finds a strong voice, chastising her father for a decree worse than Pharaoh's: The King of Egypt seeks to prevent a future generation of boys, while Amram isn't making a next generation of girls possible either. Miriam is successful; Amram remarries Yocheved, and Moses is conceived and born.

Later, Miriam lifts her voice strongly to praise God at the shores of the sea; but she is weakened as Torah mostly credits Moses and the men with her words. Near the end of her life, Miriam is stricken with a dreaded skin disease, and is healed in response to Moses's prayer.

Like Miriam, we may find our voices in a moment of our greatest weakness or at times of triumph. Just when we think we are at our strongest, circumstances may thrust us into powerlessness. And then, again, we may find our footing. We may be stricken with illness, and we may find healing. No life's journey is untouched by weakness – of status, of will, of physical or emotional fortitude. Our human bodies are susceptible to frailties, whether inconvenient or life-threatening. Our lives include varying experiences, not typically in a constantly upward vector toward strength and health or toward illness and death. Life is indeed a journey.

*From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding –
From fear to faith.*

Jacob, Israel, from whom our people gets our very name, exemplifies these verses. Offense – consider Jacob's tricking his father into giving him the blessing intended for Esau; or Laban's deceiving Jacob by presenting Leah instead of Rachel as his bride under a thick veil. Jacob's loneliness is palpable, fleeing his parents' home, running for his life, a stone for a pillow as he lays down for the night. And no greater biblical grief exceeds Jacob's, when told that his beloved favorite, Joseph, has been killed by a wild beast.

Still, Jacob perseveres. He reunites with Esau in a warm embrace. He finds love in Rachel's arms. His grief turns to joy when he is reunited with Joseph decades later.

On Jacob's deathbed, the rabbis teach us, he is afraid. Dying in Egypt, Jacob doubts that the faith of Israel can survive in this strange land. His sons reassure him, *Shema Yisrael!* "Listen up, Dad, Adonai is our God; Adonai is one." With that, Jacob pronounces his undying faith in his last words, *Baruch Shem kevod . . .* "Well, then, God's glorious name will be revered, forever and ever."

We, too, are offended; and we struggle to forgive. We affront others, and we seek atonement. In our loneliest moments, we are shocked to find that we are loved. In our time of pain, we are unexpectedly healed by compassion. Our grief may not be assuaged by understanding, for life's blows are often too harsh and too random. Faith may be our best response.

*From defeat to defeat to defeat –
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey,
Stage by stage –
A sacred pilgrimage.*

This stanza takes us to Moses and back to *Bemidbar*, to the Book of Numbers, the wilderness and its journeys. What, after all, is the high point of Moses's life? Leaving Egypt? Crossing the sea? If so, three-fifths of the Torah would be anti-climactic. Numbers includes some low notes for Moses. During those forty years of wandering, he defies God's instruction to speak to the rock, that it might yield its water, angrily striking the boulder instead.

At Torah's end, Moses will die atop Mount Nebo, topographically a high place. Does Moses find victory, as he watches his people enter the Promised Land, under the leadership of his successor? Or does he bemoan his fate, dying without crossing the Jordan to taste the milk and honey? That's a question of perspective; Moses's view is not provided.

How do we view our own lives? Do we see success only in worldly victory? Or do we rejoice in learning from our failures? Do we see the victory in having made the journey?

If we will savor that journey, in all of its variegated steps, then our lives can be a blessing. From defeat to rejoicing, from agony to ecstasy, and often back again, let our lives, like Moses's sojourn through the wilderness, be a sacred pilgrimage.

Amen.