Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

V'Zot HaBerachah

Moses' Final Blessing

This week's portion, V'zot Haberachah, is the final portion of the Torah and is read on Simchat Torah. It recounts Moses' final moments: he climbs Mount Nebo, sees the Promised Land from afar, and dies without entering it. Before his death, Moses delivers his final blessing to the Jewish people, addressing each tribe in turn:

דברים לג:א וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ:	**Deuteronomy 33:1** Now this is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Children of Israel before his death.

- **Why do you think Moses is called "the man of God" specifically at this moment—the only time the Torah uses this title for him?**
- **What might it reveal about a person that their final words are words of blessing?**

Many commentators wonder why Moses' final speech is specifically a blessing. Rashi, an influential medieval Torah and Talmud commentator, offers a simple answer:

רש"י על דברים לג:א לפני מותו. סָמוּךְ לְמִיתָתוֹ, שֶׁאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁו אֵימָתַי (שם):	**Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:1** Before his death: I.e., quite near to his death. "For" said he, "if not now, when?" (Sifrei Devarim 342:7).

- **Based on this source, how would you describe Moses' reasons for blessing the Jewish people at the end of his life?**
- **Have you ever taken an "if not now, when?" approach to something? If so, what did it lead you to do? If not, does that approach appeal to you?**

In his Torah commentary, the Or HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar, an

18th-century Moroccan Kabbalist and Talmudist, suggests that the placement of this blessing reflects less a choice made by Moses than the Torah's desire to make a statement about his character:

אור החיים על דברים לג:א וְנִרְאֶה שֶׁנִּתְכַּוֵּן הַכָּתוּב לְשַׁבֵּחַ אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים מַה גָּדְלוּ מַעֲשָׂיו. הִנֵּה בַּפָּרָשָׁה הַקּוֹדֶמֶת לָזֶה סָמוּךְ לְמַאֲמַר "וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה" מִלְּפָנֶיהָ, אָמַר הַכָּתוּב הֶחְלֵט הַגְּזֵרָה עַל מֹשֶׁה לָמוּת בְּאָמְרוֹ (דברים לב:מט) "עֲלֵה אֶל הַר הָעֲבָרִים וְגוֹ' וּמֵת וְגוֹ' עַל אֲשֶׁר" וְגוֹ', וְאִם כֵּן יֹאמַר הָאוֹמֵר כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ טִינָא הָיָה בְּלִבּוֹ עַל מִיתָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָיָה לוֹ סִבָּה עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אַחַר שֶׁרֹּב אַחֲרֵיהֶם כְּסוּס (מדרש תנחומא) גָּרְמוּ לוֹ מִיתָה בְּחוּץ לָאָרֶץ וּמְנָעוּהוּ מֵעָבוֹר לְאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִכְסְפָה וְגַם כָּלְתָה נַפְשׁוֹ לָהּ. וְטֶבַע אֱנוֹשׁ יַרְחִיק הַסּוֹבֵב רַע, וַהֲגַם שֶׁיָּדוּעַ הוּא הַצַּדִּיק לְסַבְלָן אַחַר הַיְכֹלֶת, זֶה יוֹעִיל שֶׁלֹּא לִשְׂנֹא אוֹתָם, אֲבָל קֶרֶבֶת הַלֵּב הִיא נִמְנַעַת עַל כָּל פָּנִים. לָזֶה בָּא דִּבֶּר ה' בְּתוֹרָתוֹ וְהֵעִיד עַל הַצַּדִּיק וְאָמַר כִּי מִלְּבַד שֶׁלֹּא שָׂנֵא אוֹתָם וְלֹא הִרְחִיקָם מִלִּבּוֹ, עוֹד לוֹ "זֹאת הַבְּרָכָה" וְגוֹ'.	**Or HaChaim on Deuteronomy 33:1** It appears therefore that the Torah's purpose was to accord praise to Moses, the man of God. Although he had been instructed by God in the previous paragraph to ascend Mount Ha-Avarim, Har Nevo, in order to die there, he did not harbour any negative thoughts in his heart concerning this although his premature death had been due in part to the Israelites' rebellious behavior at the time when he struck the rock. Ordinary people would not feel inclined to bless those who have caused them to die. Not so Moses. The Torah therefore records that Moses not only did not harbour any hatred but even went out of his way to bless these people.

- **Based on this source, why do you think the Or HaChaim understands Moses as being described here as "the man of God"?**
- **The Or HaChaim attributes a remarkable capacity for forgiveness to Moses. Can you think of a time when you were impressed by someone else's ability to forgive, whether they were forgiving you or someone else?**

The Sforno, a medieval Italian rabbi, biblical commentator, philosopher, halakhic authority, and physician, offers a different explanation. He suggests that Moses blesses the people at the end of his life because only then is he truly able to do so.

ספורנו על דברים לג:א וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ מֹשֶׁה. כְּשֶׁהֶרְאָהוּ הָאֵל יִתְבָּרַךְ אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ, כְּדֵי שֶׁיְּבָרֵךְ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּהּ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁהָיְתָה כַּוָּנָתוֹ בְּאָמְרוֹ "אֶעְבְּרָה נָּא	**Sforno on Deuteronomy 33:1** And this is the blessing that he blessed: after God had shown him the whole Land of Israel before he died, in order that he

וְאֶרְאֶה" (דברים ג:כה). וְכֵן כַּוָּנַת הָאֵל יִתְבָּרַךְ כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ "וּרְאֵה אֶת הָאָרֶץ" (במדבר כז:יב). זֹאת הִיא הַבְּרָכָה שֶׁבֵּרַךְ.	should be able to pronounce a blessing both over the land and over the people who were going to live in it. Both Moses' plea to see the land by crossing the river Jordan (Deut. 3:25), and God's purpose in granting him this part of his prayer (Numbers 27:12) were intended for this purpose, i.e., for him to bless the people after viewing the Land of Israel would inspire him to do so. Here we have the text of this blessing.

- **In what ways might seeing the Land of Israel have inspired Moses' blessing of the Jewish people?**
- **This source speaks to the power of seeing a place that matters deeply to you. Have you ever been moved by the sight of a particular landscape or place? How did it affect you?**

A more modern answer comes from the contemporary Israeli scholar Rabbanit Dr. Michal Tikochinsky, in her collection of Hebrew essays on the weekly Torah portion. This excerpt appears in an essay on Genesis discussing Isaac's blessings of Jacob and Esau. But the broader perspective it offers on the nature of blessing—and on why blessings are often given near the end of a person's life—can be applied beyond its immediate context in Genesis.

קראתי בכל לב, ויחי ה יצחק מברך את בניו לפני מותו. נדמה שהברכה היא החלופה של הציווי. היא מעין ברכת הדרך. היא רכה מציווי שכן היא אינה בגדר הודעה או תכתיב חיצוני. במובנים אחרים דווקא ברכה היא העמסה ותביעה. בברכה גנוזה גם האמונה ביכולת מקבל הברכה לממש אותה ולעמוד בציפיות של המברך. כמובן שבהתאם לתכני הברכה מתברר למתברך מה מצופה ממנו ומהן התקוות שהוא נתבע לממש.	**Karati Bekhol Lev, Vayechi 5** Isaac blesses his children before his death. It appears to me that a blessing is the opposite of a command, it is a type of parting benediction. It is softer than a command, for it is not considered a disclosure or edict. But in other ways, it is a blessing that is actually more of a burden and a demand. Hidden in a blessing is also the faith in the ability of the recipient of the blessing to actualize it and to live up to the expectations of the one blessing. It is understood that what is expected of him and the hopes that he is charged with fulfilling become clear to

	one being blessed, in accordance with the contents of the blessing.

- **Do you agree that "a blessing is the opposite of a command"? Why or why not?**
- **Isaac blesses his children, while Moses blesses the people of Israel. How might that difference affect the way we understand the ideas in this source?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. The sources on this sheet offer several explanations for why Moses' final words to the Jewish people take the form of a blessing. Which explanation resonated most with you, and why?
2. Based on these sources and your prior knowledge, how would you characterize a blessing? What distinguishes it from a command, a wish, or a prediction?
3. People often talk about the importance of first impressions, but final impressions can matter just as much. Think of someone who played an important role in your life. How has your last interaction with that person shaped the way you remember them?
4. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on V'Zot HaBerachah, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge V'Zot HaBerachah page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can look at Sefaria's V'Zot HaBerachah topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Blessings, Death, and Moses.

Moses' blessing here is often compared to Jacob's blessing of his sons at the end of Genesis. After reading through this week's portion, you might enjoy comparing and contrasting Moses' and Jacob's parting words. Jacob's blessing can be found on Sefaria at this link.

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