

## **His Task Was Done** **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

ה"ה

### *Parshat Pinhas*

We read of many of our great spiritual masters – and this is true in virtually every religious tradition throughout the world – that their lives were but preparation for their transition to the next life. “I have lived all my life,” many of them have told us, “only in order to learn how to die.”

And stories are told of the deaths of many masters, even those who have not explicitly offered such a statement. We learn lessons from their deaths as much as from their lives. And ever so many of our masters and teachers have told us that they must live until they accomplish whatever their purpose is in this lifetime.

*The story is told that Rebbe Avraham of Sochachov, the student (and, later, the son-in-law) of Rebbe Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, was ill and had arrived at the gates of death. His father ran to the rebbe to ask him to pray for his son. While asking, the father said, “My son is a great man, a rabbi and teacher of Israel, with merits beyond counting, so please pray that he might be healed.”*

*Rebbe Menahem Mendel, upon hearing the father’s words, said, “I know Rebbe Avraham has a long way to go until he becomes a truly spiritual man. I see something lacking in his prayers, his lessons, and his behavior with other people.”*

*The father was shocked, for his intentions were to awaken Heavenly Mercy for his son at this time of judgment in order to save him, and the rebbe seemed to be prosecuting his son. How could he do this at a time when his son was on his sickbed?*

*When he came home, however, the father found that his son’s condition had begun to improve and that he was on his way to a full recovery. When his son had recovered fully, his father asked him to explain the rebbe’s strange behavior.*

*“Don’t you understand the depth of my teacher’s intentions?” replied his son. “From your words of praise for me, it sounded as though I had already completed my spiritual work in this world and therefore that I had finished my job.*

*“The rebbe feared that when the Angel of Death heard your words he would be able to come before the Creator and say, ‘See; Rebbe Avraham has already finished his work, so I can take him from this world.’*

*“So the rebbe immediately answered that I still have a lot of work remaining in this world, for my prayers, my lessons, and my behavior towards other people are not what they should be. Since there is still work in this world for me to do, I must stay. His words overcame your words, and from that very moment I progressed until I was completely healed.”*

This week, we read (Numbers 27:13) the announcement of Moses’ passing from this life, and we cannot but wonder what it was that concluded Moses’ work in this world. What

act did Moses need to perform in order to complete his work and become able to go on to the next life? The text gives us an answer.

Immediately preceding the Divine Announcement of Moses' imminent passing, the text tells us of the plea of the daughters of Tzelof'had and of the resolution of that plea. Tzelof'had had five daughters and no sons. Custom of the time dictated that only sons could inherit land, but Tzelof'had's daughters asked that they be given an inheritance, since otherwise – there being no sons – their father's family line would die out. Moses – for all his great spiritual attainments, he was, after all, a man of his time – took their case to G\*d, for he was unwilling to take so radical a step (enabling daughters to inherit) on his own. Or, perhaps, he realized that the enabling decree would not be accepted by the people if they perceived it as coming merely from Moses, but that it stood a good chance of acceptance if it carried G\*d's endorsement.

Whatever the reason, Moses brought the women's case to G\*d, and G\*d, without the slightest hesitation (although we separate the plea and the response when we read the Torah by placing between them the break between the third and fourth sections of the reading), directs that they be enabled to inherit.

And we then read (Numbers 27:11b-13), **This was the Law decreed for Israel, which the Eternal commanded through Moses. Then the Eternal said to Moses, "Ascend Mount Avarim, so that thou mayest glimpse the land which I am giving to the Israelites. Thou shalt see it, and then thou shalt be gathered to thy people, just as was thy brother Aaron."** There is no separation between Moses' giving the Israelites the law regarding the daughters of Tzelof'had, that daughters can inherit the land just as sons can, and Moses' preparing for his passing from this life.

What a glorious career Moses has had! He led the Israelites out of Mitzrayim. He led them through the desert. He brought the Torah down from Sinai for them. He was the conduit through whom G\*d instructed them. But, by its juxtaposition of these two tales, the Torah tells us that Moses' crowning achievement was none of these. The last thing Moses does before going to be gathered to his people is to lay the foundation for women's rights, a more radical concept in its time even than monotheism. Affirming that the daughters of Tzelof'had can inherit their father's estate is the act which completes Moses' task on earth; it is for this that he was created, and all that has come before is mere prologue and preparation.

To the realization and fulfillment of Moses' task may we all soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.