

# A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

*This weekly sheet is brought to you by **Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman** of the **New West End United Synagogue** in conjunction with **Shapell's/Darché Noam***

## PARSHAT VAYEILECH

### DVAR TORAH: THE MOMENT BEFORE SEALING

A conventional view of Neilah is that it is simply the last chance to get atonement. It is the last chance to repent before the end of Yom Kippur, a spiritual deadline before the doors close. Neilah, according to this, is the time when we try our best to get our prayers inside while the doors are still open, even though we might have been procrastinating until now.

But Harav Bentzion Abba Shaul, זצ"ל, (1924-1998, Yerushalayim, in Birkat Tzion, p. 395), suggests that Neilah is more than just a last chance. Based on the text of the Neilah prayer and a passage in Midrash Tanchuma, he suggests that what happens at Neilah is qualitatively different than at any other time. During Neilah G-d relates to our judgment differently than He does at other times during the Yamim Noraim.

Jewish communities from all over the world – Ashkenazim, Sefardim, Yemenites, Italians – all share the following shift in the text of prayer during Neilah. Instead of praying, as we did during the rest of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, that G-d should inscribe us, כתבנו, in the Book of Life, at Neilah we now ask G-d to seal us, התמנו, in that Book. The conventional interpretation of this change is that only at the last moments of Yom Kippur will the judgment be sealed – meaning, finalized. But Rav Abba Shaul tells us to look at a passage in Midrash Tanchuma.

That passage (Midrash Tanchuma Shemot 18) describes the process of heavenly judgment in very graphic terms. The description there, suggests Rav Abba Shaul, includes the key to why and how Neilah is so powerful. The midrash describes the heavenly court scene: “והקב"ה נושא ונותן במשפט ואומר: היאך יצא משפט והקב"ה נוקם עמהן – The Holy One, blessed be He, is involved with the give and take of a case, asking, ‘How did so-and-so’s judgment come out?’ They answer, ‘It came out in such and such a way,’ and the Holy One, blessed be He, agrees with them.”

But then something surprising occurs in the heavenly court: “The Holy One, blessed be He, goes to a place that no others have permission to go, and He seals the judgment, והותם את הדין.” The Midrash then quotes and interprets a verse (Iyov 23:13): “He is one and who can respond to Him? Whatever He wants, He does.” G d, says the Midrash, knows every one of His creatures like no other does, so there is no one who can question His final judgment.

The moment before the sealing Hashem takes judgment solely into His own hands, after hearing the conclusions of the Heavenly court. This is Neilah. We have the opportunity to pray, plead, and petition G-d about our case knowing that the members of the Heavenly Court cannot go where the King is. G-d created us; He knows us; and He then judges us with the clarity and breadth that goes beyond His legal system. Rav Abba Shaul quotes Harav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, זצ"ל (1843–1926), who says that during Neilah we can even get atonement for desecrating the Divine Name, a sin usually only atoned through death (see Rambam Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:4). Neilah is not just the last moment, it is a unique moment.

## SOURCE GUIDE: WRITING WITH TEARS

Who wrote the last eight verses of the Torah – Moshe or Yehoshua? This week's Parshah implies that it was Moshe, for it tells us that Moshe wrote down the entire Torah – ostensibly including its last eight verses. Yet the last eight verses of the Torah record Moshe's death and what followed; those verses sound like they were written following Moshe's death by Yehoshua. This source guide quotes the Talmudic debate about this question. It focuses on the Maharal's explanation to the approach that Moshe wrote the last eight verses of the Torah "with tears," giving us a new insight into the experience of crying.

### A. The Last Eight Verses of the Complete Torah Scroll

In our Parshah, the Torah tells us that Moshe wrote the entire Torah, apparently including its last 8 verses:

<p><b>1. Devarim 31:24-26</b>                  (24) And it was when Moshe finished writing the words of this Torah on a scroll until their very end;                  (25) Moshe commanded the Levites, carriers of the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem, saying:                  (26) Take this Book of the Torah and place it at the side of the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem your G-d and it should be there for you as a witness.</p>	<p><b>דברים לא:כד-כו</b>                  (כד) וַיְהִי כְּכֹלֹת מֹשֶׁה לְכַתֵּב אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל סֵפֶר עַד תְּמֹמִם.                  (כה) וַיִּצַּו מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' לֵאמֹר.                  (כו) לְקַח אֶת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה וּשְׂמַתֶּם אֹתוֹ מֵצַד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' אֲלֵיכֶם וְהָיָה שָׁם בְּךָ לְעֵד.</p>
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Yet the last eight verses write of Moshe's death and mourning period. Did Moshe write them? They start with:

<p><b>2. Devarim 34:5-12</b>                  (5) Moshe the servant of Hashem died there in the Land of Moav at the mouth of G-d.                  (6) He buried him there in the valley in the Land of Moav opposite Pe'or; and no man knows his burial place even until this day.                  (7) And Moshe was a hundred and twenty years when he died; his eye had not dimmed, and he did not lose his vitality.                  (8) The Children of Israel cried over Moshe in the plains of Moav for thirty days. The days of crying out of mourning for Moshe were completed.</p>	<p><b>דברים לד:ה-יב</b>                  (ה) וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל פִּי ה'.                  (ו) וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּגִי בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב מוֹל בֵּית פְּעוֹר וְלֹא יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת קְבֻרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.                  (ז) וּמֹשֶׁה בֶּן מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמָתוֹ לֹא כִהְתָּה עֵינָיו וְלֹא נָס לְחָה.                  (ח) וַיִּבְכּוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יָמָי בְּכִי אֲבָל מֹשֶׁה.</p>
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Given the conflicting evidence, the Talmud records the following debate:

<p><b>3. Bava Batra 15a</b>                  For we learn: "Moshe the servant of Hashem died there" – Is it possible that Moshe was alive and yet wrote, "Moshe died there"? Rather, until here Moshe wrote, and from then on <b>Yehoshua</b> wrote. These are the words of Rabbi Yehudah, and some say Rabbi Nechemiah. Said Rabbi Shimon: Is it possible that concerning a Torah scroll missing even one letter it would have been written, "Take this scroll of the Torah"? Rather, until now the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke and Moshe spoke and wrote; from here and onward (the last eight verses of the Torah) the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke and <b>Moshe wrote with tears</b>. This is like what it says later on, "Baruch (son of Neriah, Yirmiyahu's disciple) said to them (King Yehoyakim's ministers), 'From his (Yirmiyahu's) mouth he called out to me all of these words and I wrote on the parchment with ink'" (Yirmiyahu 36:18).</p>	<p><b>בבא בתרא טו.</b>                  דתניא: "וימת שם משה עבד ה'." אפשר משה חי וכתב "וימת שם משה"? אלא, עד כאן כתב משה, מכאן ואילך כתב <b>יהושע</b>. דברי ר"י, ואמרי לה ר' נחמיה. אמר לו ר"ש: אפשר ס"ת חסר אות אחת וכתב "לקוח את ספר התורה הזה"? אלא, עד כאן הקב"ה אומר ומשה אומר וכותב, מכאן ואילך הקב"ה אומר ו<b>משה כותב בדמעה</b>. כמו שנאמר להלן "ויאמר להם ברוך מפיו יקרא אלי את כל הדברים האלה ואני כותב על הספר בדיו."</p>
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## B. Crying

Commentators differ about the meaning of “Moshe wrote with tears” (for instance, the Maharsha writes that Moshe actually used tears to write the last eight verses). Here is the Maharal’s novel interpretation, that sheds light on the phenomenon of crying – so much a part of the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe:

<p><b>4. Gur Aryeh on Devarim 34:5</b> But the explanation of “Moshe wrote with tears,” is that Moshe was crying over his own death. The use of the ב in the word בדמע is similar to how it is used in the expression, “הזורעים בדמעה – Those who sow with tears” (Tehillim 126:5, they cry as they sow – Moshe cried as he wrote). It is likely that when he mentioned his own death through the words “Moshe died” he was crying. Now the question “How did he write ‘Moshe died’ while he was still alive?” is no longer difficult. For Moshe crying over his death was the beginning of his death. This is the meaning of “Moshe died.”</p> <p><b>Chiddushei Aggadot on Bava Batra 15</b> For he was crying over his death; and that was the beginning of his death. Therefore it says “in tears,” for tears leave a man; and that is the beginning of the removal of the body. This involves the negating of his power and is therefore the beginning of his death, so the word “he died” is appropriate.</p>	<p><b>גור אריה על דברים לד:</b> אבל פירושו 'ומשה כותב בדמע', שהיה משה בוכה על מיתתו, והוא כמו "הזורעים בדמעה" (תהלים קכו, ה), דמסתמא כיון שהזכיר מיתתו "וימת משה", היה בוכה. והשתא לא קשיא איך כתב "וימת משה", הואיל והיה משה עדיין חי, שכיון שהיה בוכה על מיתתו, זהו התחלת המיתה, וזהו "וימת משה וגו'".</p> <p><b>חידושי אגדות על בבא בתרא טו</b> שהיה בוכה על מיתתו, וזהו התחלת מיתתו, כי לכך אמר בדמע שהדמעות יוצאים מן האדם והולכים, ודבר זה התחלת סלוק גוף, כי הם כליון כחו, ולכך הוא התחלת מיתתו, ושייך לומר וימת.</p>
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The Maharal (Harav Yehudah Loewe, זצ"ל, 1525-1609) associates crying with “ביטול המציאות, negating existence.” This works in two directions: crying is prompted by negating of existence; but when one cries there is also a miniature negating of existence. This is how, for instance, he explains (in his commentary on Bava Metzia 59a) the Gemara’s sharp words about causing another to cry through verbal abuse, אונאת דברים. Harmful speech negates its victim – makes him, so to speak, non-existent – and evokes crying. Even after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the gates of Heaven are not locked to those tears. They rise above standard prayer, for they are tears that express the mini-death of the one who cried.

The Maharal strives to uncover the essence of crying as it appears in the Aggadot of Chazal (as opposed to offering a physical description or psychological explanation of crying). But his approach is also in sync with our experience of crying. Crying, one senses, is more than just intensely felt emotion. Crying (perhaps even tears of joy) reflects a state of losing the self to something greater: “Moshe wrote with tears.”

### Further Learning

1. Harav Yehoshua Hartman, שליט"א, in footnote 629 in his Machon Yerushalayim edition of Be'er Hagolah 4:7, collects the Maharal’s comments about crying. Besides the passages above, he mentions Netivot Olam, Netiv Hatorah 4 and Netiv Hatzedek 3, Chiddushei Aggadot on Gittin 90b, and Gevurot Hashem 64.
2. The Vilna Gaon’s famous comments on the dispute about the last eight verses of the Torah appear on the last two pages of Aderet Eliahu, a collection of the Gaon’s comments on the Chumash.

## TEN DAYS OF AWE & REPENTANCE BY RABBI YITZCHAK HIRSHFELD

Rosh Hashanah has just ended. Yom Kippur is less than a week away. And we are in the midst of the very special days which connect them, the days to which Chazal applied the verse: “Seek Hashem when He may be found, call to Him when He is close” (Yeshayahu 55:6). These are Days of Repentance, and these are also Days of Judgment.

Repentance and Judgment, why do they always seem to go together? How closely are they connected to each other? What are these days? These ten days, all of them, are the “Beginning of the Year.” In the same way that a month has a Rosh (Chodesh, the head of the month) which is a full day and not a fraction of a day; a year, too, has a Rosh. This Rosh is comprised of a full ten days.

Beginnings. Let’s imagine a new administration, either Hillary or Donald, it doesn’t much matter. The first thing that happens is organizing, assigning people to new jobs, “who shall be made rich, and who shall be made poor, who will rise and who will fall.” And naturally, allies and supporters are rewarded for their loyalty, and those who bet on the wrong horse are consigned to the wilderness.

Of course, the נמשל is Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. As the year begins it is only fitting that each one of us pass exacting scrutiny to determine the degree that we are allies and supporters of the Great King of the Universe, and consequently to determine how “alive” (full of “life,” in all its connotations) we will be during the course of the coming year.

But the Judgment does not end on Rosh Hashanah. It stretches on for another full week, in which we can seek reconciliation and realign ourselves with the newly coronated King, and be rejudged accordingly.

But in Hashem’s world there is another dimension to the “Beginning of the Year.” It is the time for all His loyal citizens to come forward and ask that their previous indiscretions be forgiven. Let us get on with our newly assigned tasks and appointments, without all the baggage of our sins weighing us down. Let us be fully reconciled with our King, so that together we can build a better world, a world which reflects His ideal Kingdom. This is accomplished through saying, “I’m sorry for having undermined Your ideal, I promise not to do it again. Father, please cleanse me, please purify me.”

This is Yom Kippur, the last of the ten days which mark the “Beginning of the Year.” But the Reconciliation does not begin on Yom Kippur. It stretches over the full ten day period, from that first day when we began to declare our absolute fidelity to our Creator, which marked the first steps of Repentance and Reconciliation.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the beginning and the end of the “Beginning of the Year,” each with its unique quality. The days in between bring the דין (judgment) to רחמים (mercy), as the Ramban explains, from Rosh Hashanah יום הדין ברחמים (the Day of Judgment done with Mercy) to Yom Kippur יום הרחמים בדין (the Day of Mercy done with Judgment). The power and fright of Rosh Hashanah are softened by our Repentance. The Repentance and Reconciliation of Yom Kippur are enhanced by our having declared on Rosh Hashanah that we recognize and accept the authority and power of His Kingship.

שבת שלום ומבורך, וגמר חתימה טובה לכל בית ישראל

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*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v’Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples’ programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at [www.darchenoam.org](http://www.darchenoam.org) +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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