

Crossroads in Life
Yom Kippur 2007
Edgware and District Reform Congregation

How do we learn to cope with the most difficult decisions we will have to make, how do we learn to choose properly at the critical crossroads of our lives? Psychologists tell us that one way is through *models* – parents, older siblings, a teacher to whom we grew particularly attached, a rabbi whom we especially admire. Our tradition also provides us with models, the greatest of whom is a man who is central to our Torah reading tomorrow, and whose presence dominates the weekly Torah portion for some 9 months every year. I refer, of course, to Moses. The crossroads in his life can instruct us in our own.

The first such turning point or crossroad is implied by the verse that introduces the mature career of Moses: **וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל** **אָחִיו וַיִּרְא בְּסִבְלוֹתָם**, It came to pass that Moses grew up, and he went out to his brothers, and looked into their sufferings (Exod. 1:11). Let us try to unpack this verse by filling in something of its silences, what the Biblical narrator left unsaid. Moses was, of course, raised as an Egyptian prince. Growing up in the royal palace, he was certainly given the finest education money could buy, exposed to all the glories of Egyptian civilisation, with its age-old history and its sophisticated literature, its outstanding architecture and its impressive art. He was certainly in line for a brilliant career.

Yet apparently he felt that despite the undeniable grandeur of the civilisation in which he was immersed, something was not quite right. On some deep level that perhaps he could not at first fully articulate, he was aware of

human beings suffering beyond the palace walls. And despite all the differences between him and them—the differences in class and education and world-view—he was conscious of some fundamental bond, conscious that they were “his brothers.” And so he left behind the luxuries of the court, the privileges and opportunities that could have made his life so much easier, he “went out to his brothers, and he looked into their sufferings.”

How did a person growing up in the midst of such privilege, subjected to such an elitest education, manage to retain a sense of identification with the weak, the oppressed, the abandoned, the enslaved? More than this, the capacity not only to empathise and feel bad, but to stand up and act in their defence, even at risk of his own position? We cannot know for sure; the answer is shrouded in one of those tantalizing silences of the Bible.

But whatever the explanation, the critical importance of this decision for our own lives cannot be denied. Some children grow up in a privileged environment, and their horizons remain bounded by their own social class. As adults they act as if the only important things are designer dresses and £500 suits, travel to exotic resorts, entertaining the right guests and being invited to the right parties. They change the channel or turn the page to avoid any confrontation with misery or suffering; their homes and their lives are fully insulated from the pains of the world outside. And there are others, sometimes of similar background, who make a different choice, who never lose sight of the common bond between themselves and less fortunate human beings.

There is no need to provide examples of this second category. One might think of the courageous Gentiles during the Holocaust period—Raoul Wallenberg the Swedish diplomat in Budapest and Aristide de Sousa Mendes the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux and Sempo Sugihara the Japanese Vice-Consul in Kovno, and many other Germans and Poles, French and Italians, some of whose names we do not even know, all of whom at considerable personal risk in those perilous times, went out to *look into the sufferings of their brothers*, their fellow human beings, and decided to do what they could to help them. Would we have had their courage?

Even in our more normal times, this choice is a crossroad for us as well. Will we allow the privileges we enjoy to make us forget the human anguish outside our walls—in Darfur and Zimbabwe and Iraq, yes and closer to home: able men and women consumed by the humiliation of joblessness, families forced to choose between adequate food and heat, children battered and hungry, elderly terrified and alone? Or will we remember that these human beings are truly our brothers? Will we “look into their sufferings” and open our hearts and extend our hands to share in their distress? The model of Moses can help us as we decide.

A second crossroad comes for Moses as leader of the Israelites. A Levite named Korah, spokesman for a coalition of malcontents, openly challenges Moses and Aaron. He speaks forcefully, cogently: “Why do you and your brother Aaron set yourselves up as rulers over this people, the assembly of the Lord?” [According to the rabbinic tradition, Korah made some very telling points about the hardships often caused by the observance of the Torah laws.] Then at the end of Korah’s speech, 5 Hebrew words, frighteningly

powerful in their simplicity: **וישמע משה ויפל על פניו** , “Moses heard this, and he fell upon his face” (Num. 16: 4). For a moment he appears to us in a state of collapse, incapable of responding or acting at all.

The rabbis explained that this was the last in a succession of problems that broke his spirit. First, the scandal of the Golden Calf, when Moses learned that the people who had heard God’s at Sinai quickly forgot the commitment they had made and were dancing in revelry around a graven image. Then the people’s outrageous complaint about the monotonous food in the wilderness, their demand that he provide them with meat. And then the reaction to the report of the scouts, the Israelites turning against Moses as if he had betrayed them, actually proposing that they return to Egypt and slavery. The open revolt led by Korah and his cohorts was the culmination of these blows; together they sapped his strength, and we see him for a moment despondent, flat on this face, as if he cannot go on any further.

At that moment, lying on the ground, perhaps it occurred to Moses to say, “I’ve had it with them! What do I need this for? Let them choose Korah or any leader they want; I QUIT!” But the very next verse presents a strikingly different image. Moses is on his feet, speaking forcefully, once again in command. It soon becomes apparent that he will prevail over the potential insurrection. The Bible does not explain why Moses rejected the temptation to give up the struggle, how he decided that he had to continue the fight. But we can imagine the answer. Moses must have realized, first, that he had responsibilities, that people were depending upon him to continue, that if he turned away from his task all might be lost. And second, he must have realized that he was not alone, that he could count on the support of others, that

God would continue to give him inner strength. And so he overcame his temporary paralysis and rose to meet the challenge even stronger than before.

There are many who reach this crossroad like Moses, who know at first hand the feeling of being flattened by a trick punch from fate. The family of Rhys Jones, in one moment robbed of their outgoing, fun-loving son by a brutal burst of gun shot apparently intended for someone else. The families of two Israeli couples, who had just celebrated their wedding ceremonies and were flying to Thailand for their honey-moon: killed this past week in a plane crash which some survived but others did not. Who can blame the surviving loved ones if they were to say, with a character in *King Lear*, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they crush us for their sport,” if they were to conclude that life is grossly unfair, a succession of cruel malicious tricks intended to break us like a twig in a storm.

And of course, more common experiences can have this affect as well. A person loses the only job for which he is trained and sees few prospects of a new one; a parent’s increasing senility is becoming an all-consuming burden; a child seems to be getting increasingly out of control, deeper and deeper in trouble; the loved one who is an inseparable part of your life is suffering terribly from cancer and the doctors can offer no hope. These life experiences can potentially break a person. You cannot plan for them, you cannot know in advance how you will cope with them.

But here too the figure of Moses can serve as a model. It is always possible to allow the hardship to overwhelm us, to embitter us, to poison us with rage, to make us give up in cynical despair. But we can also remember

- that we have responsibilities, that there are others who need us and goals we can still accomplish;
- remember that we are not alone, that we have loved ones and friends who will stand by us if only we do not turn them away
- that God, who may not intervene to save a couple from an airplane crash because they have just been married, can provide unsuspected resources of courage and strength if only we do not shut Him out of our lives.

Then, like Moses, we can be back on our feet, acting to cope with the challenge, making of our setbacks not stumbling blocks but stepping stones to greater achievement and growth.

The third and final great crossroad in Moses' life comes near the time of his death. Years before, he had heard the words that must have filled him with immeasurable sorrow. Because of a failing described by the Torah only as a vague sin of omission—that on one occasion he had not sanctified God in the presence of the Israelites—he was told that he would not be permitted to bring the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses did not accept this decree passively. We are told that he prayed and implored God to change His mind and grant permission for him to fulfil his dream by leading the people into the land of their destiny. But this prayer received a firm and negative response: *לא תעבור את הירדן הזה* , “You shall not cross this Jordan” (Dt 3:27).

Even Moses, then, was powerless to change his ultimate fate. Yet I say that this too was a crossroad, that he still had decisions to make. He could have said, “Look God, I think you have given me a rotten deal. For 40 years I have followed Your instructions and put up with this petulant people, and then because of one small slip You deny me the right to finish what I began. And when I appeal, You tell me, in effect, to shut up. I don’t think that’s fair. You get Yourself another leader if You can.”

Or he could have said to himself, “If I can’t lead the people into the Promised Land, I’ll make sure they will miss me. Why should my successor get all the glory? I won’t lift a finger to help him; he’ll probably fail, and the people will wish I was still around.” Or he could have continued his protest against God right to the very end, refusing to obey God’s instruction to climb the mountain for a distant view, attempting to lead the people across the Jordan himself against God’s wish.

All of these options were possible, and all of them were rejected. Despite what must have seemed like an unfair decision, Moses continues to trust in God’s wisdom and love. He does everything possible to prepare his successor Joshua, to strengthen Joshua’s position in the sight of the people and to build up his morale with private encouragement and counsel. He urges the people to remain faithful to his ideals and God’s teachings after he is gone. And then he climbs alone to the mountaintop for his rendezvous with Eternity, accepting his end with the confidence that others will continue his work, facing death with quiet dignity and inner peace.

Each one of us, like Moses, will have to recognize some day that there are dreams we will not see fulfilled, goals we will not reach. We begin life

all potential; as small children there is no limit to what we might some day accomplish. Gradually the reality of our limitations is imposed. At some point in my childhood, it was the realization that I would never be a major league baseball player; a bit later that I would never be President of the United States. The articles and books I write will not be best-sellers and will not revolutionize human thought. Even as Principal of the Leo Baeck College, I will not bring about a great awakening of Jewish religious consciousness, transforming the lives of the masses of our people. The truth is that I am not even the good, ethical, thoughtful, caring person I would like to be.

Sometimes we displace these dreams onto our children. What we failed to achieve, perhaps they will. But usually we go through the same process with them; they may accomplish things we did not, but rarely do they achieve everything a parent will dream. Eventually we reach the stage where we must recognize that our lives will come to an end and even some of the more modest, more realistic goals we set for ourselves will remain unfulfilled.

How do we respond to this recognition? Do we become angry at God because we were not as talented or as fortunate as others? Do we lash out in resentment at those who are now younger, more promising, more accomplished than we? Do we abandon worthwhile causes because we have not been able to leave our personal imprint upon them, because others have taken our places and we are no longer needed the way we once may have been? Or can we accept ourselves, take pride in what we have been able to accomplish, and temper the frustration at our shortcomings with the knowledge that we have done much of what we could, and that others will carry forward the values toward which we aspire.

Yom Kippur helps us prepare for this final crossroad.

- It makes us confront our own limitations;
- it impels us to see how far we have fallen short of the person we could have been;
- it inspires us to try to do better than we have done in the past.

But it tells us something else as well: that with all our failings and weaknesses, with all our unfulfilled dreams and our disappointed hopes, each one of us in our unique individuality is cherished by God, who wants us to be the very best we can be, but accepts our humble contrition over what we did not accomplish. In this sense, Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for the day when each one of us will meet our Maker and render account for our lives.

Moses is such a powerful model, because for all his greatness, Moses was human, as we are human. The crossroads he encountered are the choices we too must make:

- Whether or not to open our hearts to the suffering of human beings beyond our walls;
- Whether or not to allow reversals and disappointments to paralyse and overwhelm us;
- Whether or not to accept our own limitations and eventually our own mortality with dignity and peace.

Let our decisions at these crossroads, beginning today, be such that when we too are told to ascend to the mountaintop, we may be prepared to meet our Maker with serenity.