



DEALING WITH “UNFINISHED BUSINESS”

Torah Reflections on *Parashat Mattot*

Numbers 30:2 - 32:42

21 Tammuz 5771 July 23, 2011

The book of Numbers is soon coming to a completion. In like manner, Moses' life is soon ending. Though he has yet to give his major closing orations which make up the book of Deuteronomy, in last week's portion Moses had been told that his days are drawing to a close (Num 27:12-13).

In this *parsha*, God reminds Moses there still is some unfinished community business with which he needs to deal. Moses' responsibility is to redress past wrongs committed by a local tribe. God says to Moses, “Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites, then you shall be gathered to your kin” (Num. 31:2). Moses immediately makes the necessary arrangements; a war party is set out to deal with the matter.

The rabbis take note that Moses acted with alacrity. “Rabbi Judah remarked, If Moses had wanted to live many more years, he could have lived, for God told him, ‘Avenge’ and after ‘you shall be gathered to your kin,’ thus making his death dependant upon the punishment of Midian” (*Midrash Numbers Rabbah* 22.2). The rabbis praise Moses; he immediately dealt with this unresolved matter instead of postponing it, even if procrastinating would have extended his own life.

By acting in this way Moses immediately follows God's request. Moses then can die, knowing that proper arrangements are in hand, he is not leaving behind unresolved questions for those who follow him. His response provides us an important life lesson. Recognize that time passes quickly, and for your sake, and for the sake of others, do not defer for a later moment matters that need addressing today.

In principle, we understand that all that exists necessarily must end, be this work assignments, vacations, or human lives. Yet, on some level, all of us are familiar with, and even more so, we are practitioners of the fine art of procrastination. We mean well, we intend to get around to this or that, but somehow, we just never get around to doing it.

For many people, illness, the end of a relationship, a major move, or closeness with mortality can bring a heightened attention to our most compelling “unfinished business” These can be important moments to reflect on actions we could or should take without delay. Depending where we are in our life journeys, there may be different subjects that call for our attention. Time is precious; let us reach out toward others and do what we can to reach some sort of meaningful resolution. If not now, when?

This might be a timely apology, or a moment to put aside angers and reconcile some past grievances. Unfinished business might mean creating an ethical will, wherein you share your values for those near and dear to you, or something as vital as setting in motion an Advance Directive. It might mean saying, “I am sorry,” and even more regretful that I did not say this

beforehand. Oftentimes it is saying to someone, “You are important to me, I value who you are, what you have been in my life, and I love you deeply.”

May we have the wisdom and courage to value our God-given lives so that we make good and wise use of the time that is before us.

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