

5781 - Deuteronomy 33-34 – V'zot HaBerachah (This is the Blessing)

*Our Cycling Path*¹

A while ago, my family went biking in a secluded area along a picturesque nature path. The path was a few miles long, and if you completed it you made a full circle and ended up back at its beginning.

The route had small hills throughout. We loved cycling down those hills; it was effortless and enjoyable, the pull of gravity doing all the work for us.

Uphill, though, was a different story altogether. That's when the going got tough. We needed to use all our muscle strength to cycle forward. But we soon learned that if we used the momentum from the easy ride down to propel us at least part of the way up, it made the ride easier. It also helped to keep in mind that after our strenuous effort, we would soon be rewarded with something easier—maybe even a fun ride downhill.

Life is full of these hills, big and small. Sometimes we're cycling on easy street, enjoying the free ride. More often, it feels like we're exerting too much energy and moving forward far too slowly.

But no matter how short or long the rides up or down, the pattern is pretty much cyclical; hills melt into valleys, and then swell into hills again.

When we celebrate the joyous holiday of Simchat Torah, we finish the yearly cycle of Torah readings. The Torah is divided into portions; every Shabbat we read one, sometimes two, portions, to complete the entire Torah. To celebrate our completion of the cycle, we joyously dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah in circles that go round and round, reflecting the circles and cycle of life itself.

However, the last Torah reading, Vezot Haberachah, doesn't have its own Shabbat on which it is read. Instead, we read it on the holiday of Simchat Torah, while on the Shabbat following Simchat Torah we will begin again with the first Torah portion of Bereishit.

Perhaps the point is that there should never be a closing Shabbat in which the Torah is concluded. Rather, the readings are continual, always ongoing, beginning immediately afresh, never taking a break and never ending.

Simchat Torah marks the climax of a three-week period of holidays ranging from awe-inspiring to joyous. As a bridge between the holiday season and the rest of the mundane year, it is the most joyous of holidays, even more than Sukkot, the season of rejoicing.

Perhaps its message to us is that life can be full of cyclical ups and downs, but at all times we need to remember to keep moving forward. And only through our continual movement forward, riding the hills and the valleys, will we find the greatest joys, in the on-going cyclical path of life.

1. *Life is full of these hills, big and small.*

a. The “Ten Trials” of Abraham—Maimonides lists them² as follows:

- 1) G-d tells him to leave his homeland to be a stranger in the land of Canaan (Gen 12:1).
- 2) Immediately after his arrival in the Promised Land, he encounters a famine (Gen 12:10).
- 3) The Egyptians seize his beloved wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh (Gen 12:15).
- 4) Abraham faces incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings (Gen 14:14).
- 5) He marries Hagar after not being able to have children with Sarah (Gen 16:3).
- 6) G-d tells him to circumcise himself at an advanced age (Gen 17:24).
- 7) The king of Gerar captures Sarah, intending to take her for himself (Gen 20:2).
- 8) G-d tells him to send Hagar away after having a child with her (Gen 21:12).
- 9) His son, Ishmael, becomes estranged.
- 10) G-d tells him to sacrifice his dear son Isaac upon an altar (Gen 22:2).

b. The life of Joseph:

- 1) Joseph lost his mother at an early age (Gen.35:16-19).
- 2) He was “favored” by his father (Gen.37:3-4) but hated by his brothers (Gen.37:4-8, 18-28).
- 3) He was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery (Gen.37).
- 4) He was challenged by Potifar's wife to compromise his morals (39:7-12)—then he was unjustly accused and punished (Gen.39:13-20).
- 5) He was imprisoned for thirteen years during which his plea for assistance was forgotten by someone he helped (Gen.40:23).
- 6) When Joseph is finally released from prison, he is used of the LORD to “save” Egypt and his family (Gen 50:20).

¹ Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (Chabad.org), pp. 307-309.

² https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1324268/jewish/What-Were-Abrahams-10-Tests.htm

c. The life of Moses:

- 1) Moses was born at a time when the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt (Exo 1:8-14).
- 2) When he was 40 years old, Moses sought to see his "calling" to deliver to his people from Egypt fulfilled—only to be rejected. He flees and takes refuge in Midian (Acts 7:23-29).
- 3) When he is 80 years old, God directs him to deliver his people, but by that time, he no longer feels qualified and objects (Exo 3:11).
- 4) Moses does lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, but he is frequently criticized, and his leadership is frequently challenged (Exo 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Num 12:1; 14:2; 16:2; 16:41; 21:5; 26:9).
- 5) He dies when he is 120 years old. He does not make it into the Promised Land with his people—he dies in the wilderness (Deu 32:48-52).

d. The life of David:

- 1) King Saul became jealous of David's success. David was forced to flee and live the life of an outlaw until Saul's death (1Sam 19:11; 21:11,19-25:1).
- 2) David committed adultery with Bathsheba who became pregnant (2Sam 11:4-11:5).
- 3) David arranged the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah (2Sam 11:17).
- 4) David confessed and repented his sin and God forgave him, but Bathsheba's child died (2Sam 12:10,13,19).
- 5) David failed to discipline his sons. His son Amnon committed the sin of rape and incest; he was murdered by David's son Absalom (2Sam 13:14-29).
- 6) David's son Absalom led a rebellion in an attempt to usurp David's throne (2Sam 16-17).
- 7) David's "beloved son" Absalom was murdered, and David's throne was restored. It was a bitter victory for a heart-broken father (2Sam 18:14,15).

e. The life of Paul:

1) 2Corinthians 6:1-10

¹As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ²For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. ³We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴Rather,

as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; **in troubles, hardships and distresses**; ⁵**in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger**; ⁶in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸through glory and **dishonor, bad report and good report**; genuine, yet **regarded as impostors**; ⁹known, yet **regarded as unknown; dying**, and yet we live on; **beaten**, and yet not killed; ¹⁰**sorrowful**, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; **having nothing**, and yet possessing everything.

2) 2Corinthians 11:21-29

²¹... Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²²Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ² Are they servants of Messiah? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. **I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.** ²⁴**Five times I received ... the forty lashes minus one.** ²⁵**Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,** ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been **in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.** ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have **often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.** ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the *k'hilot*. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

2. *Perhaps the point is that there should never be a closing Shabbat in which the Torah is concluded. Rather, the readings are continual, always ongoing, beginning immediately afresh, never taking a break and never ending.*

a. Avot 1:4

Yose ben Yoezer³ ... says: Let your house be a meeting place for Torah scholars; you shall become dusty in the dust of their feet; and you shall drink their words thirstily.

³ Jose ben Joezer was a rabbi of the early Maccabean period, a disciple of Antigonus of Soko. He belonged to a priestly family.

1) *you shall become dusty in the dust of their feet ...*

a) Be in close proximity to Torah scholars and follow in their footsteps. Figuratively, one who follows at the heels of another become soiled from the dust raised by the first person's feet. Alternatively, one should make himself a student of Torah scholars, **literally sitting at their feet, in the dust**. In Mishnaic times it was customary for students to sit at their teacher's feet (*Rav*).⁵

b) Deuteronomy 33:3

³Surely it is you who love the people; all the holy ones are in your hand. **At your feet they all bow down**, and from you receive instruction ...

c) Luke 10:39

³⁹(Martha) had a sister called Mary, **who sat at the Lord's feet** listening to what he said.

d) Acts 22:3

³⁴I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. **Under Gamaliel** (גַּמְלִיֵּל לְרַגְלֵי—*l'ra-glei Gamliel* [lit., "**at the feet of Gamliel**"]) I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers ...

e) Matthew 4:18-20

¹⁸As Yeshua was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

¹⁹"Come, **follow me**," Yeshua said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ²⁰At once they left their nets and followed him.

2) *and you shall drink in their words thirstily.*

a) Isaiah 55:1-3

¹"**Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters**; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³**Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live ...**

b) John 7:37-39

³⁷On the last and greatest day of the festival, Yeshua stood and said in a loud voice, "**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink**." ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (Isa 58:11).

³⁹By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Yeshua had not yet been glorified.

b. Avot 2:6

(Hillel) used to say: ... a bashful person cannot learn ...

1) *a bashful person cannot learn ...*

a) Although shyness, especially as an aspect of modesty, is considered generally to be a desirable personal quality, this was not considered to extend to the realm of knowledge and wisdom where it was viewed as a liability. In the world of study and learning, a person who refrains from asking questions of his teacher because of shyness, humility, or fear of ridicule will always remain uncertain about matters that could have been clarified to him.⁶

b) Berachot (Blessings) 63b

Whoever abases himself for words of Torah⁽³²⁾ will in the end be exalted, but if one muzzles himself, his hand will be upon his mouth.⁽³³⁾

(32) I.e., is not ashamed to ask questions which may at first sound foolish.

(33) He will be unable to answer questions put to him.

c) 1Peter 3:15

¹⁵... **Always be prepared to give an answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect ...**

c. Avot 4:1

*Ben Zoma*⁷ says: *Who is wise? He who learns from every person, as it is said: From all my teachers I grew wise (Psalms 119:99)*⁸ ...

1) *Who is wise? He who learns from every person ...*

4 Abba Arikha (175–247) was a Jewish Talmudist who was born and lived in Babylonia, known as an Amora (commentator on the Oral Law) of the 3rd-century who established the systematic study of the rabbinic traditions, which, using the *Mishnah* as text, led to the compilation of the *Talmud*. He is commonly known simply as **Rav**.

5 Rabbi Moshe Lieber, Ed., *The Pirkei Avos Treasury*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), p. 20.

6 Martin Sicker, *The Moral Maxims of the Sages of Israel: Pirkei Avot*, (iUniverse Inc.), p. 106.

7 Simeon ben Zoma was a **Tanna** of the first third of the 2nd-century CE. His name is used without the title "Rabbi" because, like **Ben Azzai**, he died at a young age, remaining in the grade of "pupil" and never received *semikhah* (*Rabbinical ordination*).

8 The translation of the biblical verse given here and in most editions of *Avot* serves the evident intent of the sage **but does not accurately reflect the context of the verse or its proper translation**.

1) Ta'anit (Fast-Days) 7b

R. Nahman b. Isaac⁴⁷ said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to a tree, as it is said, It is a tree of life to them that grasp it? This is to teach you. just as a small tree may set on fire a bigger tree so too it is with scholars, **the younger sharpen the minds of the older**. This will be in agreement with what R. Hanina said: I have learnt much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, **but from my disciples more than from them all**.

2) Romans 12:3

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: **Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment**, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

3) James 3:13-18

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But **if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth ...** ¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

4) Lessons from a Thief⁹

Learning can come from any corner for the right seeker. Rabbi Zusha¹⁰ was passing through a new town when it grew dark. Those were the good ol' days when people didn't have to call and text and what not before seeing someone. So, he knocked on a door hoping to spend the night there. A somewhat unkempt man opened the door, heard the rabbi out, took a good look at him, and said, "You are a holy man so I can't turn down your request, but I must tell you in advance that I'm not an honorable man. Staying overnight here might bring you disrepute."

Zusha, however, ignored the man's warning and stayed not just one night but seven. He figured out very quickly that the man was a thief, but he treated the rabbi kindly. So much so that when Zusha was leaving, he thanked the man profusely

and blessed him abundantly. "I've learned a great deal from you," the rabbi said to him.

"A rabbi learning from a crook like me?" The man exclaimed. "This inspires me to mend my ways and earn an honest living."

Rabbi Zusha, when questioned by his pupils later, summed up the lessons he learned from the thief in seven points:

1. What he did, he kept to himself.
 2. He was willing to take risks to attain his goal.
 3. He did not discriminate between important and unimportant or major and minor things but took equally exacting care of each and every detail.
 4. He invested great effort in his vocation.
 5. He was swift.
 6. He was always optimistic.
 7. No matter how many times he failed, he tried-trying again.
- Whatever it is that you do, do as if your life depends on it. Why settle for anything less than excellence when you have enough talent and tenacity to aim for it?

⁹ <https://os.me/quick-bites/lessons-from-a-thief/>

¹⁰ Rabbi Meshulam Zusha of Anipoli (1718-1800). Reb Zusha was an Orthodox rabbi and an early Hasidic luminary and well-known tzaddik.