

Date: 19 Elul 5786 (September 1, 2026)

Torah Portion: Vayelech

Topic: Righteous Regrets

It is written in Devarim 31:14, **“YHWH said to Moshe, ‘Behold, your days are drawing near to die.’”** These words introduce one of the most solemn moments in the Torah. Moshe, who had led Yisrael for forty years, stood at the threshold of death. He had spoken with YHWH, received the Torah, interceded for the people, and faithfully carried the burden of the nation through the wilderness. Yet even Moshe was reminded that human life has an appointed boundary. His days, like the days of every person, would eventually come to their completion.

The Midrash relates that R’ Shimon once encountered the Angel of Death and saw that the angel appeared angry. R’ Shimon asked him, “Who are you, and why are you so angry?” The Angel replied that he was angered by the presumptuous conversations of human beings. People speak confidently about what they intend to accomplish months or years in the future, even though no one knows when his life will end. The angel pointed to a man who had said, “I shall age some of this wine for my son’s wedding.” Yet, unknown to the father, his son would be taken from this world within thirty days.

The lesson is not that planning for the future is wrong. Torah itself requires foresight, preparation, planting, building, teaching children, and providing for future generations. The problem lies in the assumption that tomorrow belongs to us. A person may make plans, but he cannot guarantee that he will live to carry them out. Human beings possess responsibility for the present, but sovereignty over the future belongs to YHWH.

R’ Shimon then asked the Angel of Death, “Show me my time to die.” The angel replied, “I do not have dominion over you, or over those who are righteous like you, for sometimes the Kadosh Baruch Hu desires more of your good deeds and grants you additional life.” As it is written, **“The fear of YHWH increases days”** (Prov. 10:27). The righteous therefore view additional years not merely as additional time to live, but as additional opportunities to serve. Life is precious because every remaining day contains possibilities for repentance, Torah, mitzvot, kindness, prayer, and the sanctification of YHWH’s Name.

This raises an important question. The Talmud (Moed Katan 25b) teaches that the departure of a righteous soul is precious before Elohim. Why, then, does the Midrash describe the death of the righteous as difficult for the Kadosh Baruch Hu?

Shaarei Simchah explains that the difficulty is not because the righteous person loses the reward awaiting him. On the contrary, the righteous soul enters into a greater spiritual reality. The difficulty lies in the anguish of the righteous person who must leave the **world of action**. Only in this life can a person repent, choose obedience, perform mitzvot, overcome temptation, give charity, show kindness, study Torah, and transform ordinary actions into acts of holiness. Once life has ended, the opportunity to acquire merit through action has also ended.

This is precisely the tension expressed by the Mishnah: **“One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come; and one hour of spiritual bliss in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world”** (Pirkei Avot 4:17). The World to Come surpasses this world in spiritual delight, but this world possesses something the World to Come does not—the opportunity to choose and to do. There the soul receives; here the soul builds. There it enjoys the fruit; here the seed is planted.

This helps us understand why Moshe pleaded with YHWH to allow him to enter the Land of Yisrael. The Sages ask whether Moshe desired to enter merely to eat its fruit and enjoy its goodness. Certainly not. Rather, Moshe said, in effect, **“Many mitzvot were commanded to Yisrael that can be fulfilled only in the Land. Let me enter so that they may be fulfilled through me”** (Sotah 14a). His longing for additional life was therefore not simply a desire to postpone death. It was a desire for additional obedience. Moshe wanted more time because more time meant more opportunities to fulfill the will of YHWH.

A similar idea is beautifully illustrated in the final moments of the Vilna Gaon. It is related that as his death approached, he grasped his tzitzit and wept. He reflected on how difficult it was to leave this world, where for a small amount of money a person could obtain tzitzit and, through a relatively simple mitzvah, fulfill the commandment of Elohim. In the

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World of Souls, no matter how greatly one might desire such an opportunity, it could no longer be obtained. His tears were not rooted merely in fear of death, but in his appreciation of life. He understood the enormous spiritual value hidden within an ordinary day.

Shaarei Simchah therefore explains that, from the perspective of the reward awaiting the righteous, it would not be difficult for Hashem to gather the righteous soul. Rather, it is described as difficult because YHWH knows the anguish of the righteous person who must surrender his opportunity to continue serving Him. YHWH identifies Himself with that sorrow, as it is written, **“I am with him in distress”** (Tehillim 91:15). The One who gives life also understands how precious life becomes when it is devoted to Him.

The words spoken to Moshe—**“Behold, your days are drawing near to die”**—therefore teach more than the inevitability of death. They teach the value of the days that remain. Awareness of mortality is not intended to produce despair, but urgency. We do not know how many years, months, or even days have been allotted to us. Therefore, the question is not merely, *How long will I live?* but rather, *What will I do with the life YHWH has given me?*

A righteous person does not treasure life simply because he fears leaving this world. He treasures life because every day is an opportunity that eternity cannot replace. A mitzvah neglected today cannot always be performed tomorrow. An apology postponed may never be spoken. An act of kindness delayed may lose its opportunity. Torah left unstudied remains unlearned, and repentance continually postponed assumes possession of a tomorrow that has never been promised.

Thus, the awareness that our days are numbered should make each day more precious. Moshe's approaching death reminds us that even the greatest life eventually reaches its boundary. Yet until that boundary arrives, there remains Torah to learn, mitzvot to fulfill, wrongs to repair, kindness to extend, and holiness to pursue. **The value of life is therefore measured not merely by the number of our days, but by what we do with the days YHWH places into our hands.**

Shalom.