

The End of Dr. Moses

EMMET HIRSCH

GENRE

After forty minutes on the toilet, Dr. Joe Moses leaned left and wiped his ass, gingerly. The rectal tumor that smoldered in his rear end twenty-four hours a day and that flared into agony with every bowel movement had done its work. In the aftermath, Moses felt as though his body were burning from the bottom up. The pain of moving his bowels was pure torture, but at least it transiently relieved the intestinal obstruction caused by his tumor, the misery of which was as much a pain in the ass as the pain in his ass. He had responded to the alternating spasms of constipation and diarrhea by medicating himself with Miralax and Immodium, resulting in yet more diarrhea and constipation. All of this had produced a perverted rhythm that was the opposite of circadian: whatever the hour of day or night, it was time for Dr. Moses to be tormented by his bowels.

The irony of his condition was not lost upon Dr. Moses. For the previous forty years he had been a colorectal surgeon. Like his mentors before him, he had exerted his iron will on operating room staff, hospital administrators, office nurses, patients and colleagues, persuading himself that his bullying was necessary for the benefit of the sick. Were it not for his uncompromising work ethic, his insistence on precision, his boldness and discipline in the OR, his refusal to back down even in the most dire of cases, how could his patients have hoped to survive? He had presided over his household using a similar vice-grip of principles, and the emotional asphyxiation had led his wife to divorce him and his children to move as far away from him as possible, one to the East Coast, the other to the West.

This is some kind of karmic joke, thought Moses. An anal-retentive colorectal surgeon widely regarded as an ass, now spends 90 percent of his conscious moments either wishing for a bowel movement, dreading a bowel movement, having a bowel movement, or recuperating from a bowel movement. Moses' personal physician and life-long office partner, Dr. Eliphaz,

had broken the news to him in the same way Dr. Moses himself had done with hundreds of patients— who, just like Moses, had known the awful truth before their doom had been uttered. Dr. Eliphaz, a surgeon whose tyranny over his own dominion often surpassed Moses', had laid out the grim future with characteristic bluntness. This time it had been Joe Moses sitting in the straight-backed chair in front of the surgeon's mahogany desk while Eliphaz reviewed the path report, the recommended treatment, and the prognosis with chemotherapy (eight months) and without chemotherapy (two months). The funny thing was there was nothing about medical school, residency, a surgical oncology fellowship and four decades of practice that prepared you for the blow. Despite his expertise and foreknowledge, the words, "inoperable rectal cancer, metastatic to the liver and lung" had hit him like a bowling ball in the beitzim.

He had recovered his equanimity quickly, however, and while still sitting in the straight-backed chair had made it clear that he had no intention of squandering his final days on the toxic effects of chemotherapy. He would keep his hair, his mental acuity and his dignity, thank you very much. He informed Dr. Eliphaz that in the time remaining to him he would resign from the professional staff, get his affairs in order, and engage in the cultural and culinary pursuits that his life as a busy surgeon had prohibited.

That plan was foiled. Within a week, the mass effects of his tumor had made it impossible for him to stray more than fifteen paces from a lavatory. But as if that weren't ominous enough, he had begun hallucinating. On his recent trip to the bathroom he had seen his mother—dead for twenty years—making gribenes in the kitchen. He had smelled the onions crackling in the schmaltz, had heard her grunt as she sliced the chicken skins. Moses knew what this meant: he surely had a temporal lobe brain metastasis and could no longer trust any of his senses. Could a massive hemorrhagic stroke be far in the future? He hoped not. That wouldn't be a bad way to go.

Joe Moses looked at his watch. Five minutes to four. His guest would arrive any minute.

Rising from the toilet, he washed his hands and staggered to the foyer of his three-bedroom condominium on the fortieth floor of Lake Point Tower. He unlocked the front door, left it ajar, and lurched toward the den, passing the floor-to-ceiling views of the manly Chicago skyline of which he had always been so proud. He lowered himself onto the divan, on his left side. This was the only position, other than standing, in which his pain dipped below a four on the ten-point Visual Analog Scale the nurses in his own goddam office had tried to pull on him. "Pain is the fifth vital sign,"

declared a poster in the waiting room. Moses had always hated that poster. For pain to assume equal stature with temperature, pulse, respiratory rate and blood pressure as an indicator of patient well-being was an affront to centuries of wisdom and tradition, and a legitimization of helplessness. He much preferred the slogan he had seen in a feature article in *The Chicago Tribune* on the US Marine Corp: "Pain is weakness leaving the body." After a lifetime of telling his patients that the power of pain to control them was entirely in their heads, Moses would grant no leniency even to himself now that his own pain afflicted him with a previously unimaginable debility. He would suck it up as he had told everyone else to do.

He closed his eyes. Where had the time had gone? He had made his funeral arrangements immediately after leaving Eliphaz's office, the bad news still rattling in his head like a loose screw. But the Joe Moses who had made those arrangements one week previously seemed so qualitatively different from the man he had since become, that he wondered whether the memory had come secondhand, like something he had seen in a documentary film. He had met with Seymour Jacobson, the owner and proprietor of Chicagoland Jewish Burials, a stooped beanpole of a man with a goiter and an inexhaustible supply of death and dying jokes. It had taken Dr. Moses five minutes to decide on a pine casket and a no-nonsense ritual interment in the Moses family plot in the Mount Nebo section of the Jewish cemetery in Arlington Heights.

That's ironic, he had mused. There was a time in my life when I was so turned off by Judaism that I wouldn't be caught dead in a Jewish cemetery. Even Moses wasn't sure why a kosher burial was suddenly important to him. His children wouldn't visit his gravesite in a million years. His ex-wife had sold her plot before the ink had dried on their divorce papers. Moses would be spending Eternity next to a total stranger named Kleinmann, whose headstone bore the inscription, "He was kind of a mensch."

After leaving the funeral home, Moses had perused the "Rent-a-Rabbi" brochures for someone to preside over the burial. He had pulled a faded sheet from the rack advertising the services of Rabbi Eliyahu ben David, under whose pixelated photo featuring a wide-brimmed hat, thin face, faint smile, and scraggly beard, was the message that the needful would be done for a "donation of your choice to the charity of your choice." Moses had been surprised to see that the Rabbi accepted inquiries by text message only, and he sent off a crisp one: "Want u to bury me," it read, followed by Moses' restricted phone number. About ten seconds later his cell phone had begun vibrating.

The Rabbi had insisted on a meeting to get to know him and to study a tractate of Talmud together. “Listen, Rabbi,” Moses had protested over the phone, “I don’t believe in God, and I don’t need to cram for the final, if you know what I mean.”

“Ha ha, ha ha,” rebutted the Rabbi. It was a thin, reedy, sing-songy sound, and somehow was uttered with a heavy Brooklyn accent. “That’s a good one. Let me put you on speaker-phone so that I can enter our appointment in my Outlook calendar.” Moses had heard some rustling and then the Rabbi’s tinny voice through the speaker. “Nu, when are you available?”

“Rabbi ben David,” Moses had growled, “I don’t need and haven’t the time for a Talmud lesson! All I want is a quick, kosher funeral. I will not be here for long.”

The Rabbi responded with the same cheeriness as before. “Yes, I know what you mean. You must have a lot of things you wish to accomplish in the time remaining to you. I will be at your condominium—“ Moses heard the Rabbi pressing buttons on his smartphone, and only later did it occur to him that he had neither told the Rabbi that he lived in a condominium nor given him the address— “at four o’clock in the afternoon, one week from today, im yirtzeh haShem.”

Dr. Moses was unaccustomed to having his wishes ignored. He was about to excoriate the Rabbi as he might have done to a scrub tech who had handed him the Metzenbaums instead of the Mayo scissors, but held back. All right, all right. A four o’clock meeting with the Rabbi the following Tuesday would still leave him time for the evening performance at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. He sighed. “Okay. I’ll see you next Tuesday at four.”

“Im yirtzeh haShem.”

Moses had hung up. He had no intention of giving the Rabbi the satisfaction of letting him know that he understood the phrase, which he hadn’t heard since his school days and which means, “If God wills it.” He was similarly disinclined to reveal to the Rabbi that until the age of seventeen, when he had turned his back on the Hyde Park yeshiva once and for all to devote his life to science and medicine, he had been considered its most brilliant student in five decades. His instructors at the yeshiva had nearly gone into mourning at the loss of his phenomenal memory and analytical mind to the secular world.

And now, seven days after the conversation with Rabbi ben David, his plans unfulfilled, his pre-purchased tickets unused, his life a previously

unimagined ordeal, Joe Moses lay on his left side on the divan and awaited his guest, his eyes shut, his pain level at a four.

He must have dozed off, for when he opened his eyes he saw that the Rabbi had let himself in through the open front door and stood beside him at the foot of the divan, facing toward the east and away from the city. Moses had to blink a few times to clear his vision; initially the Rabbi seemed as pixelated in person as he had appeared in his photograph. He was dressed in a long black cassock bound at the waist with a black cloth belt, a white shirt and no tie, a black fedora on his head. He was very thin, and he rocked on the balls of his feet, forward and back and side to side, giving little bows with each excursion, his eyes closed, his lips silently moving, his brow furrowed, a pleading smile on his face. As Moses stirred, the Rabbi took three steps back, opened his eyes and sat in the chair at the foot of the divan. “Sholom Aleichem,” he said, his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. He smoothed down his thin black mustache and beard with his left hand.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then the Rabbi reached up and pulled off his fedora, uncovering a black yarmulke that lay over black, cropped hair. Moses almost laughed out loud wondering what kind of headgear would be under the yarmulke, and what under that, like a Chassidic Cat in the Hat. “Aleichem sholom, Rabbi,” he said, giving the traditional response. Moses lowered his legs onto the floor and sat up carefully, trying to suppress the searing pain that this movement generated in his rear end. “Can I get you something? Some tea?”

“No tea, please. But if you have some bottled water that would be good.”

Moses nodded, embarrassed and annoyed. He had forgotten that the Rabbi would not eat or drink from any of his dishes because they weren’t kosher, even for a simple cup of tea. He shuffled to the kitchen and pulled two bottles of Perrier out of the refrigerator. Placing them on the small round table in the breakfast nook, he eased himself onto the cushion he had purchased at Walgreen’s, an orange donut with which a patient might suspend their hemorrhoid or episiotomy stitches—or, in Moses’ case, a malignant rectal tumor—in open space while sitting. The Rabbi, who had carried his briefcase with him to the kitchen, pulled out of it a large book and sat in the chair next to him. He laid the volume on the far end of the table. Moses could see its title written in Hebrew letters from where he sat: *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sabbath*.

Moses rolled his eyes and groaned inwardly. He knew the text. It contained a mind-numbing discussion of the thirty-nine categories of melocha

(a word whose meaning could not be expressed simply in English but was often translated as “work”) that were forbidden on the Sabbath. Hazore’ah (he who sows), hachoshresh (he who plows), hakotzer (he who reaps). . . the categories came back to him with unbidden ease, and Moses felt the old anger well up in him again. His left temple started to throb. What a spectacular, fucking waste of time!

The Rabbi cast a sideways glance at Moses and slowly withdrew his glasses from his pocket. Placing the stems over his ears, he opened his bottle of Perrier, and without drinking from it set it on the far end of the table. “Good!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands together and rocking back and forth in his chair. “As you know, my friend, the Ancients tell us that creation of the world would have been justified for the sake of just one person studying Torah. The learning of our Laws is equivalent to all the other commandments.” He leaned across the table and drew the gold-leafed volume toward himself. Moses noted that it appeared brand new; the binding cracked as the Rabbi opened it to a seemingly random place, and without asking Moses whether he understood Aramaic, the Rabbi began to read in his sing-song, high-pitched voice, “Tanu rabbanan: hayu lefanav minei ochlin. . .”

Translated, it meant, “The Sages taught: if several types of food were before him, one selects and eats, selects and puts aside. And one should not select. And if he selected, he is liable for a sin-offering. . .” The dense, nearly incomprehensible text would go on for pages and pages. Moses remembered it all by heart. This was the tractate in which the Talmudic sages debated *ad nauseam* about which forms of activity violated the prohibition against “selecting” on the Sabbath, without bothering to explain what was so objectionable about selecting on the Sabbath in the first place. In the section that had led Moses to storm out of the yeshiva never to return, the rabbis determined, after a long discussion, that on the Sabbath it is permissible to select a desired item from a mixture of food types in order to eat it immediately, but it is not permissible to set aside undesired food in order to eat what is left behind. The recitation by Rabbi ben David of these first few words, in the same lilting chant his teachers had used so long ago, set off a Pavlovian kind of something in Joe Moses. The left side of his head was throbbing.

What irritated Moses wasn’t so much that the Rabbi felt entitled to force a dying man to study Talmud in exchange for performing a funeral. No, what really incensed him was that the Jewish people as a whole had squandered two thousand years on texts such as these, and on commentaries on the texts, and on commentaries on commentaries on the text, and on commentaries on commentaries on commentaries on the text, which was

an expansion and commentary on the goddam Bible in the first place. The Talmud alone, the most important but only one part of an immense body of work that had accumulated over time, was usually printed in more than six thousand pages. It would take several lifetimes of devoted learning to master it all, and for what? It had no practical use in the real world. Moses had no doubt that among the scholars who had written the Talmud and studied it over the centuries, there were geniuses of the first order. How many Einsteins, Freuds, Marxes (either Karls or Grouchos), Spinozas, Bohrs, Kafkas and Sondheims had wasted their talents on such minutiae over the millennia rather than serving humanity in some useful fashion? The lost opportunities shamed and disgusted him.

“Oh, come on, Rabbi, let’s put a stop to this now!” he protested.

The Rabbi broke off his reading, marking his place with the index finger of his left hand, and removed his glasses with his right. He turned to face Moses, his eyes moist.

“Rabbi, please! This is ridiculous! Forgive my language, but I don’t give a damn that on Shabbat it’s okay for me to select the red M&Ms from the other M&Ms if I want to eat them, but it’s not okay for me to do so if I want to eat all the M&Ms except for the red ones. It doesn’t matter in the slightest! And even if it did matter, it still wouldn’t matter because the discussion is not about whether it is a violation of Shabbat but about whether I need to offer a sacrifice to atone for this preposterous sin. And even if that mattered, it still wouldn’t matter because there are no sacrifices anymore because the Temple was destroyed two thousand years ago. And even if that mattered, it still wouldn’t matter because we cannot make sacrifices without a flawless red heifer, which would have been ludicrous even if there were such a thing as a flawless red heifer! There are fifty different ways in which none of this has meaning, not to me, not to the Jewish people, and not to the world!” Moses winced. The left side of his head was on fire.

The Rabbi nodded. “These matters may appear insignificant,” he said, the smile a faint whisper on his lips, “but I assure you that the destiny of the world rests upon them. God created everything by sorting, winnowing, sifting, and selecting during the six days of creation. And you engaged in a similar process in creating your own life. Did you choose the things you wished to include, or did you select the ones you wished to set aside? You cannot fail to see this critical distinction and its role in Creation. And on the Day of Rest all creative activity ceases. That is the source of its holiness.”

Moses glared at him. The words of a tirade against meaningless spirituality and magical thinking that he had kept bottled up for decades flared

and bled and fused and shattered in his brain. But instead of this speech, Moses gave voice only to an inarticulate moan. The sound, that of a wounded animal, bewildered him.

Sadness seemed to stream from the Rabbi's eyes, like water cascading over a falls. The Rabbi sighed. "Your Day of Rest is upon you, Dr. Moses. Will it or will it not be fundamentally different from the other days of your life?"

The pain in Moses' temple was excruciating. He stood abruptly, knocking the divan over behind him. Staggering to the wall of windows facing the city, he rested his hands upon it and took in deep, gasping breaths of air. If only he could get outside! His head threatened to explode, his chest was bound in iron. His vision blurred and then, doubled. Moses closed his eyes and said to himself: So this is how it ends. . . But in the beginning there was darkness and then Light unto the Nations, People of the Book, Genesis and benefits and risks of surgery and purgery, mikvah and tikvah, which we have not lost for two thousand years of exile and yearning, learning and burning, persecution and execution of the Jews, ladies and Gentile men, may I have your attention! Genocide and Deicide and you decide, re-question and re-section, I've seen inside thousands of people but never once have I glimpsed the soul, the soul, the whole and end of it all and I can't go back now to where I started. . .

He opened his eyes and for an instant could see clearly again, and he had no pain. The Chicago skyline came into a kind of hyperfocus, the sun leaping off the skyscrapers, the life of the city rising up to him in silent commotion. He cast his gaze out upon the gorgeous spectacle, a Promised Land that for nearly as long as he could remember had been inaccessible to him. And as he looked out across space, he also seemed to be scanning time, from the distant past to the distant future, and it seemed to him that he had no part in any of it, and Moses was filled with a great sorrow.

As he looked down through the glass, Moses felt himself beginning to fall. He was plunging, but somehow he saw the city fall away beneath him—its buildings getting smaller and smaller—and he was bursting through the clouds. And Moses could see, far below, the Rabbi was still sitting at the table in front of the volume of Talmud, murmuring the words and following them with the index finger of his left hand, while Moses, his body thinning into nothingness, hurtled away.