

Passing the Mantle of Leadership

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayeilech* (Deut. 31:1–30)

By Alan I. Friedman

“Vayeilech Moshe vay’dabeir et-had’varim ha-eileh el-kol-Yisrael.”
*“Then Moses went out and spoke these words to all of Israel.”*¹

Parashat Vayeilech is the shortest parashah in the Torah, consisting of only 30 verses. The narrative recounts a poignant transfer of authority from Moses — who is well aware of his imminent demise — to Joshua, his second in command.

To the reader who has been following the Torah saga, the appointment of Joshua to lead the Israelites in Moses’ absence comes as no surprise, the detailed succession planning actually having begun 11 parashiot earlier in *Parashat Pinchas*.²

When Moses ascended Mount Avarim³ to gaze across the Jordan at the Promised Land, two thoughts may have been on his mind. First, he was probably hoping that God would rescind the decree about prohibiting him from entering the Land.⁴ But this was not to be. God reiterated that Moses would die without crossing the Jordan: “You shall see it, and you shall be gathered to your people ... because you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity...”⁵

Second, when Moses asked God to appoint a successor (“Let Adonai ... appoint someone over the community ... so that Adonai’s community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.”⁶), he may have been expecting that his sons would succeed him.⁷ After all, the priesthood was an inherited position. But God had a different plan: “Single out Joshua, son of Nun, an

¹ The Septuagint [the third-century BCE translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek] renders this sentence as, “And Moses finished speaking all these words to all the children of Israel” — changing the word וַיֵּלֶךְ (went) to וּבְלָה (finished). [Ref. The Septuagint Bible Online, <http://ecmarsh.com/lxx/>].

² Numbers 25:10 – 30:1.

³ Some claim that Mount Avarim is Mount Nebo. Others assert that Avarim and Nebo are separate locations in the Mountains of Moab.

⁴ Earlier (in *Parashat Va-et’chanan*, Deuteronomy 23:25), Moses had implored God to let him enter: “Let me now cross and see the good Land that is on the other side of the Jordan.”

⁵ Numbers 27:13-14.

⁶ Numbers 27:26-27.

⁷ An order of succession is an algorithm that determines who inherits an office upon the death, resignation, or removal of its current occupant. Under the male-dominated societal standards of the biblical Near East, succession was almost always determined by primogeniture (or, more properly, *male* primogeniture), the mechanism whereby male descendants of the leader take precedence over female descendants, and elder sons take precedence over younger sons.

inspired man, and lay your hand upon him.⁸ Have him stand before Elazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority⁹, so that the whole Israelite community may obey.”¹⁰

We might suppose that Moses would be angry or bitter about God’s decisions, but, in a remarkable show of altruism, Moses abandons thoughts of his personal needs and selflessly pleads only for the welfare of the community.

It is here that Moses’ leadership role changes — from leading the people, to training and developing their new leader. A leader who leaves his post without identifying and training his replacement has not done his job well. According to tradition, “Moses placed Joshua at his side as one does a beloved son”¹¹ to accelerate Joshua’s leadership development. Rashi explains that Joshua taught alongside of Moses so that Joshua’s authority would be affirmed through his relationship with God and Moses.¹²

Transitions are rarely easy, and installment of a new leader can be quite unsettling. A paradigm for easing that transition is the timeless message of *Parashat Vayeilech*:¹³

Knowing when to call it quits – It’s an art to know when to retire. Recognizing that he is the only leader the people have known and that they will find it difficult to envision any future without him, Moses disparages himself by emphasizing his advanced age and diminished abilities:¹⁴ “I am now one hundred and twenty years old; I can no longer be active.”¹⁵ With true humility, Moses acknowledges that it is time for change. He then reassures the people that his presence is not necessary to provide them with access to God’s continued help.¹⁶

Letting everyone know that the successor has the backing of “management” – Nothing could be more damaging to the transition process than undermining the authority of one’s successor. Having minimized his own importance, Moses publicly proclaims that Joshua is the ideal person to succeed him.

⁸ Laying on of hands, a process of consecration, commissioning, or ordination called *smichah*, symbolizes a transfer of power.

⁹ Also “majesty” or “splendor.” Numbers 27:20 is the only occurrence of *וְהָיָה* in the Torah.

¹⁰ Numbers 27:18-20.

¹¹ Commentary on *Parashat Vayeilech* by Rav Lipman Podolsky; Gates to Jewish Heritage.

¹² “True Jewish Leadership,” a commentary on *Parashat Haazinu* by Moshe Kornfeld; *Al Regel Achat*, Columbia University Weekly Torah Publication; 2000.

¹³ “Passing the Torch,” a commentary on *Parashat Vayeilech* by Rabbi Philip N. Kranz, Temple Sinai, Atlanta, Georgia; 2000.

¹⁴ “A Time to Retire,” a commentary on *Parashat Vayeilech* by Rabbi Marc Saperstein, Professor of Jewish History, George Washington University; 2001.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 31:2.

¹⁶ Saperstein, *op cit*.

Moses ratifies the legitimacy of Joshua by declaring that Joshua has the blessing of “top management”: “Joshua is the one who shall cross at your head, as Adonai has spoken.”¹⁷

Providing public support for one’s successor – The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind in others the capability, conviction, and will to carry on.¹⁸ Moses — in the sight of all Israel — bestows his blessing upon Joshua, encouraging him and offering assurance that he is the best man for the job: “Be strong and of good courage, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that Adonai swore to their fathers to give to them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them. Adonai will go before you. God will be with you; God will not fail you or forsake you. Fear not and be not dismayed!”¹⁹ With these words and through the *smichah*, Moses does not merely delegate authority to Joshua; he cloaks Joshua in the mantle of leadership and empowers him to carry on.

Throughout the 11 parashiot separating *Pinchas* and *Vayeilech*, Moses trains Joshua by mentoring and coaching. Joshua shadows Moses, and Moses leads by example. However, Moses may not have recognized the need for a new type of leader.²⁰ He speaks of the people continuing to need a shepherd, but this was now a different people, born in freedom and hardened by years of overcoming obstacles in the wilderness. It would take more than a shepherd to lead them to conquer the inhabitants in their Promised Land. It would take a military leader well schooled in the spiritual demands laid down by God.

If Jewish leadership ultimately comes from God, then listening to God and teaching his precepts are requisites for good Jewish leadership — leadership that will ensure the continuity of God’s eternal covenant with the Jewish people.²¹

Benjamin Disraeli, England’s only Jewish Prime Minister, once said²² that change is inevitable in a progressive society. Moses embodied a special sensitivity to know when the time for change had come, the insight to bring about that change, and the grace to ensure a seamless transition.²³

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 31:3.

¹⁸ “Roosevelt Has Gone,” a commentary by Walter Lipman, 14 April 1945.

¹⁹ Leviticus 31:7-8.

²⁰ “Who’s Next? The Change and Challenge of Leadership,” a commentary on *Parashat Pinchas* by Cantor Janice L. Roger, Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, Indianapolis, Indiana; 2002

²¹ Kornfeld, *op. cit.*

²² In his speech at Edinburgh, 29 October 1867.

²³ Kranz, *op. cit.*