

Parashat Pinchas 5777, 2017:

Why Joshua?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

A great tragedy unfolded when Moses sinned at the Waters of Dispute (*Mei Merivah*). As the Torah states in our *parasha*: "...you [Moses] disobeyed My command in the desert of Zin when the congregation quarreled, [when you were] to sanctify Me through the water before their [the Jewish people's] eyes; these were the waters of dispute at Kadesh, in the desert of Zin." (*Sefer Bamidbar 27:14*, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) What exactly took place? Moses violated Hashem's direct command to speak to the rock and bring forth water (20:8), and instead, "...raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, when an abundance of water gushed forth, and the congregation and their livestock drank." (20:11) As such, Hashem stated, "...therefore you shall not bring this assembly to the Land which I have given them." (20:12) In sum, the Almighty punished Moses by denying him the possibility of leading the Jewish people into *Eretz Yisrael*.

A number of years ago, while attending a rabbinic conference, I heard the well-known rabbi and psychotherapist, Rabbi Dr. Reuven Bulka of Ottawa, Canada describe Moses' sin as a classic case of psychological burnout. In his view, Moses was overwhelmed by

the unceasing trials and tribulations of leading the nascent Jewish nation, and proclaimed in a moment of abject despair: “Now listen, you rebels (*hamorim*), can we draw water for you from this rock?” (20:10) Whether we follow Rashi’s (1040-1105) interpretation of *hamorim* as “obstinate ones” or as “fools,” one thing is crystal clear: Moses no longer had the ability to distance himself emotionally from our people’s slave-mentality-induced behaviors. On measure, their ceaseless complaints and constant murmurings against the Creator and himself were more than he could bear. Hashem knew that this lack of objectivity would prevent him from rendering the crucial kinds of decisions that are the hallmark of a successful leader and, therefore, declared; “you shall not bring this assembly to the Land which I have given them.” (20:12)

Moses’ life’s dream was shattered, for not only was he prohibited from bringing his beloved nation to *Eretz Yisrael*; he was also personally barred from entering the Land. This idea is underscored in our *parasha*: “The L-rd said to Moses, ‘Go up to this mount Abarim and look at the land that I have given to the children of Israel. And when you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people [i.e. and disallowed from entering, see Rashi’s gloss], just as Aaron your brother was gathered.’” (27:12-13)

Beyond a doubt, a lesser man would have been brought to his knees in self-pity and remorse. Yet, this was by no means Moses’ response to his poignant existential anguish. Instead, based on his unceasing love for his people, he immediately asked Hashem: “Let the L-rd, the G-d of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go forth before them and come before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the L-rd will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” (27:16-17)

According to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Moses initially wanted his sons to inherit his leadership role. (Warsaw edition, *Parashat Pinchas* 11) The Almighty, however, responded with a very different choice: “Take for yourself Joshua the son of Nun, a man of spirit, and you shall lay your hand upon him. And you shall present him before Eleazar the kohen and before the entire congregation, and you shall command him in their presence.” (27:18-19)

At first glance, Hashem’s choice of Joshua as the next leader of the Jewish people seems perfectly apropos. After all, as depicted at the end of Parashat Beshalach, he was a consummate military leader:

So Moses said to Joshua, “Pick men for us, and go out and fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of G-d in my hand...” Joshua weakened Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. (*Sefer Shemot* 17:9 and 13)

Moreover, and perhaps even more significantly in the overall view of Jewish history, following the Sin of the Golden Calf we are explicitly informed of the special relationship that obtained between Moses and Joshua, and that the latter never left his teacher’s tent of Torah learning (Rashi): “...but his [Moses’] attendant (*u’mesharto*), Joshua, the son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from the tent.” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:11) Clearly, then, it would appear that Joshua was the ideal candidate to carry the mantle of Moses’ leadership into a glorious Jewish future.

There are, however, at least two passages in Rabbinic literature that paint a very different picture of Joshua’s worthiness to succeed his *rebbe*. In *Sefer Mishle* 21:20 we find: “Precious treasure and oil are in the dwelling of the wise man (*chacham*), but man’s foolishness (*uchsile*) will swallow it up.” The *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* on this verse

presents a startling interpretation, “*Chacham* – this refers to Moses, *Uchsile* – this refers to Joshua for he was not a Torah scholar. Therefore, the Jewish people called him a fool!”

The following Talmudic passage is an even more powerful indictment against Joshua’s candidacy:

Rab Judah reported in the name of Rab: When Moses departed [this world] for the Garden of Eden he said to Joshua: “Ask me concerning all the doubts you have [concerning any *halacha*].” He replied to him: “My Master, have I ever left you for one hour and gone elsewhere? [i.e. “I have no doubts.”] Did you not write concerning me in the Torah: “...but his attendant Joshua, the son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from the tent?” Immediately the strength [of Moses] weakened, [since it seemed that Joshua no longer needed him,] and [Joshua] forgot three hundred laws and there arose [in his mind] seven hundred doubts [concerning various areas of Torah]. Then all the Jews rose up to kill him. (*Talmud Bavli, Temurah 16a*, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

Given these condemnatory passages, why did Hashem choose Joshua as the next leader of the Jewish people? The previously cited section from the *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* provides us with the underlying rationale: “Because he [Joshua] was Moses’ attendant he merited the appointment as leader of the people (literally, *zacha l’yerushato*).” What did he actually do? The *Midrash* teaches us, “He [Joshua] honored him [Moses], and arranged the covers on the benches [so the classes could be held.] Moreover, he sat at his [master’s] feet.”

Why did these behaviors qualify him to be the next leader of our people? My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, provides us with a deeply insightful answer to this question:

Often, a leader’s successor was chosen not only because of his intellectual prowess but also because of his devoted service to his teacher. When the Baal Shem Tov passed away, the mantle of leadership was not given to Rav Yaakov Yosef, a Torah giant and the author of *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*. Rather, it passed to the Maggid of Mezeritch, who had served the Baal Shem Tov with great devotion and loyalty. Similarly, Rav Chaim of Volozhin became the successor to his teacher, the Vilna Gaon, partly because he was not only his student but his confidant. (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, with commentary based

upon the teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Sefer Bamidbar*, edited by Dr. Arnold Lustiger, page 218, underlining my own)

The Rav continues his assessment of Joshua's candidacy in the following manner:

Joshua was not a greater scholar than Phineas or Eleazar, but *the service of Torah [scholars] is greater than its study* (Talmud Bavli, Berachot 7b). Service does not merely signify physical toil; it also represents a special closeness and friendship between the teacher and disciple, a type of partnership. The chosen disciple not only receives information from his rebbe, but absorbs a way of life, until they are practically identical in their essence. Moses knew that through his student-colleague, the Torah would be transmitted to future generations. (Page 219)

We are now in a position to answer our question, "Why did Hashem choose Joshua as the next leader of the Jewish people?" Based upon the Rav's trenchant analysis, it is clear that Joshua, and not Phineas, Elazar or even Moses' sons, was the only person who had completely absorbed Moses' values and way of life until he was able to emulate his rebbe's very essence. Little wonder, then, that the *Midrash Sifrei* famously declares: "The face of Moshe was like the face of the sun, and the face of Joshua was like the face of the moon." (Parashat Pinchas, 140) In other words, Joshua's very being ultimately reflected Moses' knowledge and persona. Therefore, he was the one disciple truly fitting to lead the Jewish people into *Eretz Yisrael*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3)