

Parashat Pinchas 5782, 2022:

Why Yehoshua?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The saddest part of our *parasha* is Hashem's declaration to Moshe forbidding him from entering *Eretz Yisrael*: "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Go up to this mount Abarim and look at the land that I have given to *b'nai Yisrael*. And when you have seen it, you, too, will be gathered to your people, just as Aharon your brother was gathered.'" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 27:12-13, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) One can only imagine the pain and sorrow Moshe felt upon being banned from the Land he longed to explore, his dream lying crushed, in ruins, at his feet.

Regardless of his personal misery, however, Moshe's first response was to seek assurance from the Almighty that the Jewish people would have the fitting leader to bring them into *Eretz Yisrael*:

Moshe spoke to Hashem, saying: "Let Hashem, the G-d of spirits of all flesh (*Elokei haruchot l'kol basar*), 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 Hashem will not be like sheep without a shepherd." (27:15-17)

In his *Commentary on the Torah* on these verses, Rashi (1040-1105), citing *Sifrei Bamidbar*, Parashat Pinchas 138, notes that Moshe's response to Hashem's decree is emblematic of the manner in which *tzaddikim* (truly righteous individuals) react when their death is imminent: "This comes to make known to you the praise of *tzaddikim* when they are about to pass on from this

world, [that is,] they ignore their own wants and actively focus on the needs of the community (*v'oskin b'tzorchei tzibbur*). (Leipzig manuscript, translation and brackets my own) Perhaps because of Moshe's consummate altruism, the Almighty immediately consented to his request:

Hashem said to Moshe, "Take for yourself Yehoshua the son of Nun, a man of spirit, and you shall lay your hand upon him. And you shall present him before Eleazar the *kohane* and before the entire congregation, and you shall command him in their presence. You shall bestow some of your majesty upon him so that all the congregation of the children of Israel will take heed. He shall stand before Eleazar the *kohane* and seek [counsel from] him through the judgment of the Urim before Hashem. By his word they shall go, and by his word they shall come; he and all *b'nai Yisrael* with him, and the entire congregation." (27:18-21)

At first glance, Hashem's choice of Yehoshua as the next leader of the Jewish people seems perfectly apropos. After all, as we find at the end of Parashat Beshalach, Yehoshua was an outstanding military leader:

So Moshe said to Yehoshua, "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..." Yehoshua 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 Moshe and Yehoshua, the latter never leaving his teacher's tent of Torah learning (Rashi): "...but his [Moshe's] attendant, Yehoshua, the son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from the tent." (*Sefer Shemot* 33:11) On measure, Yehoshua seemed the ideal candidate to carry the mantle of Moshe's leadership into a glorious Jewish future.

There are, however, passages in *Chazal* that paint a very different picture of Yehoshua'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 Moshe, *uchsile*—this refers to Yehoshua, for he was not a Torah scholar. Therefore, the Jewish

people called him a fool!” An even more powerful indictment against Yehoshua’s candidacy is found in the following Talmudic passage:

Rab Judah reported in the name of Rab: When Moshe departed [this world] for the Garden of Eden, he said to Yehoshua: “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? [that is. “I have no doubts.”] Did you not write concerning me in the Torah: “...but his attendant Yehoshua, the son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from the tent?” Immediately the strength [of Moshe] weakened, [since it seemed that Yehoshua no longer needed him,] and [Yehoshua] 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)

Why, then, did Hashem choose Yehoshua 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 [Yehoshua] was Moshe’s attendant, he merited the appointment as leader of the people (literally, *zacha l’yerushato*).” What did he do? The *Midrash* teaches us, “He [Yehoshua] honored him [Moshe] 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 Yehoshua 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 Yehoshua’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)

Based upon the Rav's trenchant analysis, we are now better able to understand Hashem's choice of Yehoshua to be the next leader of the Jewish people. Yehoshua, and not Pinchas, Elazar, or even Moses' sons, was the one person who had completely absorbed Moshe's values and way of life to the extent that 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 Yehoshua was like the face of the moon." (Parashat Pinchas, 140) This teaches us that Yehoshua's very being reflected not only Moshe's knowledge, but his entire persona. As such, he was the one disciple who was truly fitting to lead the Jewish people into *Eretz Yisrael*.

Shabbat Shalom

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