

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Great leaders do not lead in a vacuum. They are part of a train of transmission. They are beholden to a people or to a cause that came before them and that will outlast them. Therefore, ensuring a smooth transition for one's successor is one of the most important tasks that a leader can undertake. Following Moses' request for a successor, God commands him to call Joshua and bring him to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting so that he can instruct him as leader.¹ Why is Joshua selected as Moses' successor? Which qualities of leadership has he displayed?

Our first encounter with Joshua occurs when the nation of Amalek, the eternal arch-nemesis of the Jewish people, launch a surprise attack against the Israelites in the desert.² When the Israelites most desperately need a military leader, Moses turns to Joshua. Joshua has never previously fought in a war, much less led troops into battle. He most likely has never even seen armed conflict or studied

military strategy, yet he accepts the mission and fulfils it with spectacular efficiency.

Displaying absolute dedication, this impromptu army general neither falters nor hesitates, but simply does what is necessary in the service of God and his people.

Three thousand years later, Zionist pioneer Joseph Trumpeldor channelled this same spirit when he famously declared:

You need a wheel? Here I am. A nail, a screw, a block? Here take me. You need a man to till the soil? I'm ready. A soldier? I am here. Policeman, doctor, lawyer, artist, teacher, water carrier? Here I am. I have no form... I am a servant of Zion. Ready to do everything, not bound to do anything. I have only one aim - creation.³

Perhaps the most significant episode of Joshua's pre-leadership career comes when he is selected as one of the twelve spies to go and scout out the Holy Land, and to bring a report back to Moses and the

Jewish people.⁴ Ten scouts return and sow seeds of fear and discouragement within the hearts of the nation by attesting to the seeming impossibility of conquering the land. The people are demoralised and become rebellious. Even Moses is rendered helpless. But in a stunning act of defiant leadership, Joshua exhorts the people not to surrender to panic and cowardice. Together with Caleb, the only other faithful spy, he reminds the people: 'You should not fear the people of the land, for they are our prey... God is with us, do not fear them!⁵ **Placing principles above popularity and peer pressure, Joshua epitomises the notion of 'in a place where there is no person, strive to be someone.'**⁶

Joshua's eligibility for the role of Moses' successor is further concretised by his display of another leadership quality. Throughout history, and until today, if a person wishes to become a Rabbi, it is not enough that he learns all the texts and

masters all the theoretical knowledge. He must place himself at the service of a well-established Rabbi, to shadow his activities, observe his character traits and appreciate his decision-making processes. This way, the would-be Rabbi learns values that cannot simply be learned from a text. This ethos of *shimmush*, 'service' in preparation for leadership, is necessitated by the fundamental belief in the importance of spiritual role models, and the notion that Torah must be passed down through living human beings from generation to generation, from leader to leader. This practice instils a sense of humility in the would-be leader.

He comes to appreciate the awesome responsibility that lies ahead of him, of walking in the footsteps of giants.

Joshua develops such a close connection with Moses that the Torah goes into an unusual level of detail describing his activities while Moses is in the Tent of Meeting. Joshua is portrayed as being steadfastly loyal to his master, 'and his assistant, Joshua son of Nun, never departed from inside the tent.'⁷ Joshua spends his entire life emulating Moses, his master, attempting to live up to the towering standards set by our greatest prophet.

We find in the text a litany of hints as to why Joshua is chosen as the successor. **The Torah is in effect laying out for us a road map for successful Jewish leadership, more relevant today than ever before:** Display absolute commitment to the mission. Be ready to jump in at any time and to take on any of the necessary tasks, as the cause



is always more important than your own. Be prepared to take a stand against the majority, as ethics are more important than esteem. Invest time and effort in learning from great masters, for in observing their practice you will learn lessons of life and leadership that are more valuable than anything learned from a text. With these messages, Joshua takes the first steps of his leadership odyssey. Ultimately, he leads the Jewish people into the place where Moses himself did not merit to go - the Land of Israel.

Notes

¹ Deuteronomy 31:14.

² Exodus 17:8-16.

³ Note from Joseph Trumpeldor to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, 1917.

⁴ Numbers 13, 14.

⁵ Numbers 14:9.

⁶ Mishna, Tractate Avot 2:6.

⁷ Exodus 33:11.

Parasha Fact:

The interesting mitzvah of hakhel is mentioned in the parasha. At the end of the shmittah year, the people are to gather, and the king is to read from the book of Deuteronomy. Though the biblical mitzva does not exactly apply these days, attempts to revive the practice have been made in Israel, with the Prime Minister and Chief Rabbis each reading sections to crowds of thousands at the kotel.

Next week in Haazinu:

The famous Latin proposition 'Cogito, ergo sum', stated by sixteenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes, translates into English as 'I think, therefore I am,' indicating that our thoughts are definitive of who we are. More than a thousand years earlier, talmudic scholars debated whether our essence is indeed defined by our thoughts or by our actions. Intriguingly, an approach is hinted to earlier still; two thousand years prior, the order of words that Moses used when describing our nation contained a very subtle hint.

שבת שלום