

Parshat Pinchas : The Making Of A Leader.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'ascend Mt. Avarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. After you see it, you will be gathered to your people....' "

And Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, 'Let the Lord, source of the spirit of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, that the Lord's community not be like sheep that have no shepherd.' And the Lord answered Moses, 'Take Yehoshua son of Nun, an inspired man... " (27:12-20)

In this passage, God issues a fearful, spine-chilling invitation to Moses. He commands him to ascend the mountain which borders Eretz Yisrael so that he may be "gathered" to his people. He is really informing Moses of his impending death.

How does Moses react to this news? Moses responds here in the manner of the quintessential leader. He reacts selflessly, concerned solely with communal matters, worrying as to the fate of his nation even after his own death. His only concern is that there should be a figure of stature who will guide the nation ably and carefully. Moses asks God to choose his own successor.

We will return to Moses later in this essay, but for now let us focus upon the central issues raised by our chosen text. Our pesukim revolve around the complex question of leadership. What is the essence of a suitable leader for Am Yisrael? What talents must he (or she?) have? And does the leader have absolute control or is there a wider governmental system? Clearly, our parsha leaves us with certain clues. The traits which identify Moses' successor, as outlined by Moses and God in our text, will provide the key to understanding the essential qualities of a Jewish leader.

Chavruta Sources:

1. Study the parsha - 27:12-23
· What questions come up in your mind.

Look into the following questions by referring to the Rishonim.

2. Why does Moses refer to God with the adjectival phrase "Lord, source of the spirit of all flesh". What aspect of God does this phrase highlight? (see this phrase earlier in the Sefer, in Parshat Korach - 16:22)
3. Moses defines his concept of a leader by talking of a person, "who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in."

What does this phrase refer to and what type of leader is Moses thinking of when he uses the phrase?

4. What is Moses transferring to Joshua by placing his hands on him? The text makes a reference to this act as investing Joshua "with some of your aura." Others translate the Hebrew word "Hod" as "authority", or "splendour". What precisely is being transferred from Moses to Joshua?

5. We have heard about another leader in this parsha: Pinchas. Why is Joshua more suitable than Pinchas as a national leader?

The Shiur Section:

LORD, SOURCE OF THE SPIRIT OF ALL FLESH

The Hebrew word "ruach" - usually translated as "spirit" or simply "wind" - comes up in two contexts within our story. The first relates to God. The second relates to Joshua. Moses addresses the Almighty as: "The Lord of spirit of all flesh". As for Joshua, when God reveals his appointment, he says "Take Joshua, a man who has spirit within him." [1] With this simple word connection, we can establish a parallel image, whereby a certain characteristic of God is reflected in a quality of Joshua, and it is this characteristic, this trait that makes Joshua suitable for the leadership.

"Moses said before God: 'You know full well the minds of every one of your children and you know that no person is the same as another. When I depart from them, I request that you appoint a person who will tolerate every one of them in their individual uniqueness.' [2]" (Midrash Tanchuma)

The Midrash explains God's title as the source "of the spirit of all flesh" as meaning that He knows the inner workings of all humans [3]. God having created us understands the complexity of human psychology, the diversity in temperament, personality and ideology that are the hallmarks of our human nature, our genius, and our failings. According to the Midrash, Moses addresses God with this particular title because he feels that the next leader will need this God-like trait. National leadership needs an individual who, like God, understands people. A leader must be able to relate to all the diversity that constitutes humanity, with all their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies: extreme and moderate, honest and fraudulent, aggressive and calm, tolerant and intolerant. And indeed, Joshua is the person. He is a man with this "spirit" within him.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftal Tzvi Berlin - Ha'Emek Davar commentary)

offers a different interpretation. He interprets the phrase "spirit of all flesh" like this (16:22):

".. spirit is comparable to flesh in that they both follow ones self-interested desires.."

"Spirit" usually indicates the ephemeral side of Man. Here the Netziv focuses upon desire, impulses, Man's whimsical attraction to that which satisfy his urges. God clearly is the contrast to this - "The rock, his deeds are perfect, all his ways are just, true and upright is He" (Deut 32:4). God is a "rock", un-swayed by selfish motives. But how is this relevant to the leadership issues that we have raised? The Netziv answers (27:18):

"Joshua, A Man Of Spirit: HIS spirit. i.e. He is independently minded and not swayed or diverted by self-centred desires or other pressures."

So most people have a "spirit" - a consciousness - which is in some way controlled by "flesh" - self-indulgent desires. Joshua, on the other hand has a self-sufficient "spirit". He is a principled, resolute individual. He is not be swayed by the crowds.

So we have two approaches here. The Midrash sees Joshua's "spirit" as his empathy, his tolerance, his "people touch", his sensitivity. The Netziv sees Joshua's strength as his resolute independence of mind (a trait which he demonstrated clearly in the "Spies" episode.) It is this ability to stand firm irrespective of the buffeting pressures of national leadership that singles out Joshua for the leadership position.

PINCHAS AND JOSHUA

But let us note that our parsha has already offered a young hero as a leader. In the early verses of the parsha, Pinchas emerges from the pathetic helplessness of the Camp of Israel demonstrating religious leadership, courage, independence of mind, impressive resolve, and a spirit of determination. Indeed, our parsha describes how Pinchas saves the nation! On the backdrop of the personality of Pinchas, let us compare the rise of the two personalities of the younger generation who are both mentioned in our parsha. The comparison is enlightening because in many ways, they are a study of contrasts.

We can securely state that the choice of Joshua is far from a surprise. Joshua has been the faithful assistant to Moses since the earliest days of the wilderness sojourn.

He also has a well documented personal history. It was Joshua who was selected to lead the battle against Amalek. He has a military background; important for the leader whose task is to be the conquest of Canaan. He was one of the twelve spies who toured the Promised Land, Joshua belonging to the minority who returned with a positive view of the Land. From here we can testify to Joshua's first hand experience of the Land of Israel (again, his first role as leader will be to conquer it,) and his personal fortitude. However, maybe even more important, we should view Joshua as Moses' dedicated apprentice. Ever since the days of Mt. Sinai, we read how "Joshua son of Nun, a youth would not stir from the tent." He was always at Moses' side. It was he who waited for Moses for forty days and nights when he

ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the tablets of stone. He was always assisting Moses and studying with him. He knows the strains and pressures of the leadership position. He knows well the phenomenon of prophecy. He was the natural successor.

Pinchas, on the other hand, was never appointed. He rose to the public eye as a result of a single heroic event. And indeed he is awarded with God's blessing. However, Pinchas is not on the leadership track. Why? Yes – he witnessed a shocking situation which prompted him to take immediate spontaneous action. Yes, he demonstrated initiative, leadership, and spiritual fortitude. But there are some negative signs. Pinchas is the passionate intuitive man of the moment. He is given the title of "zealot" by the Torah. He is impetuous, unpredictable, and he acts as a loner. [4]

The leader that Israel needs now is the deliberate well-trained leadership of Joshua rather than the impulsive passion of Pinchas. Maybe this also demonstrates the maturation of Israel as a nation. Their first leader - Moses - was inexperienced at the outset. Now, forty years later, they have the benefit of experience on their side. Joshua has both the appropriate talents and the requisite experience to take the immense responsibility of the nation on his shoulders.

IN AND OUT

Moses defines his concept of a leader by talking of a person, "who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in." What does this cryptic phrase refer to?

With a simple cross-reference to the book of Samuel, we can see that these phrases refer to the act of waging war:

"They said, ... We want a king ... and he will GO OUT BEFORE US and fight our wars" (I Samuel 8:20)

"Even while Saul was king over us, it was you who lead Israel in war (lit. lead Israel to GO OUT, and COME IN.)" (II Samuel 4:2)

Why is this trait singled out by Moses? Because a war leader is the primary need of the nation at this historical juncture. After all, the most significant challenge facing the fresh, untried leader is the imposing task of the conquest of Canaan. This project is a campaign of massive military proportions. For Moses to seek a military man is most appropriate. If the military reading is the correct interpretation of the words here, then Rashi's comment is most relevant.

"WHO WILL GO OUT BEFORE THEM: Rather than the gentile kings who stay behind .. sending their soldiers ahead to war ... (the Jewish war leader) leads them to war at the head of his troops and returns at their head." [5]

GOD'S ADJUSTMENT

It is interesting, however to note that God "adjusts" Moses' request somewhat. Moses' talks of a leader who will

"lead them out and bring them back."

God, however, tells Moses that Joshua

" shall stand before Elazar the priest ... BY HIS WORD shall they go out and by his word shall they come in." (v.21).

Moses has a request, however God adjusts the terms of the request. Moses looks at the national figurehead of the Jewish nation as the person who will make the decisions of war. God is telling Moses that Joshua must consult with the High Priest, Elazar before taking the nation to war. (The High Priest is to consult God via the prophetic tool of the "Urim".) Why do we need this detail here? Because apparently God is changing the current status quo!

Moses as leader was the ultimate civil AND religious leader. He was the prophet extraordinaire and the supreme leader. He never needed to consult with Aaron the High Priest for he was his superior. Moses took his issues directly to God. But leaders of the future will not necessarily be bestowed with both leadership skills and spiritual excellence. Now a new system - a system for a post-Moses world - is being set up. In that new administrative order, the king must take advice from a higher authority, to consult, before he leads the nation to war. Indeed, even after the prophetic powers ended, the Halakha still reflected this innovation to the law:

"The king cannot take his people out to a non-defensive war without the approval of the High Court of seventy one scholars." (Maimonides. Mishne Torah. Laws of Kings and their wars.)

This addition to the law is rather fascinating and a very advanced ethical measure. Even the monarch, the Officer in Chief of the army and the governor of the land, is restricted in his ability to wage war, having to take it to a higher body for discussion and approval.

SEMICHA

The act of a person laying their hands upon another object and resting one's weight upon it is known as "semicha". This action is not restricted solely to our situation. We find it in other circumstances as well. For instance in the world of Korbanot (the sacrificial rite – Vayikra/Lev 1:4), when a person is bringing a personal sacrifice, they rest their weight on the animal, as if to transfer their own person, their personality, onto this animal.

Here too, Moses rests his hands upon Joshua. What exactly is being transferred from Moses to Joshua? The Hebrew word used is "Hod" meaning splendour, but what might that mean?

Maybe a clue is the fact that this action is to be taken in a public ceremony. Why does this have to happen in front of the community? But maybe this is exactly our clue! Maybe what is being transferred is not something tangible, nor something physical. Maybe the purpose of this ceremonial act is to create some sort of impression in the eyes

of the nation. This public symbol is the official transferral of authority, Moses publicly expressing the fact that he supports Joshua as leader. The message that this simple act sends is more powerful than any words that Moses could express. In the words of Rabbeinu Bachya, God said to Moses, "Honour him publicly in the presence of the entire nation."

PART II - MOSES' AGENDA

Thus far, we have ignored Moses' personal position in this discussion, but it would be inappropriate not to devote some attention to it. Moses is invited to Har HaAvarim - literally, the mountain of "passage" or "transition". Moses is about to undergo the ultimate transition. He is about to die. He is handing over his people who he has shepherded for forty years to a new leader, a new land and an unknown future. This pre-death period has to be one of the most emotional, and fearful of his life.

So what does he choose to say at this time? One approach sees the entire dialogue between God and Moses as a calm, gentle, caring interaction. God invites Moses to Har HaAvarim so that he may view the land, as the Italian commentator, Shadal, states:

"He wanted to show him the land so that he would see how close Israel were to their destination and that he will realise that his considerable efforts have not been in vain."

Thus, God demonstrates sensitivity to Moses' feelings. In the same vein, we might read Moses' appeal to God as an expression of his heartfelt concerns, his care and worry. The request to God reads as a simple plea: 'Please make sure that the flock which I shepherded for so long have another shepherd to lead them after I am gone'. In this reading, Moses reflects his altruistic humility. He could have much to be angry about. He could jump on the bandwagon of his personal agenda, but he does not. He turns his attention to the issues that matter in a mood of optimism, selflessness and dignity.

So, this approach reads the entire passage as animated by a spirit of calm and caring.

But the Midrashic scholars peel back the layers of the text and reveal a different mood, a powerful textual undercurrent reveals a more strident, even bitter tone in Moses' words. We begin with the "narrator's" introduction to Moses' appeal to God. If we read attentively we notice something familiar about the introduction:

"And Moses spoke to the Lord, saying..."(27:15).

This choice of words here is precise. The linguistic phraseology corresponds precisely to the familiar phrase that is customarily used to preface a command from God to Moses: "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying..." That is the normal usage of this phrase. However, here the thrust is reversed. Is this simply a coincidental overlap of phraseology or is the text trying to express Moses' command-like stance before God?

We might suggest that the Torah is presenting this speech of Moses less as a request or a plea but, rather as a command; a demand! Moses is boldly issuing God with a command.

But what is the nature of this "command"?

ACCUSATION

In this context there is one Midrashic insight (brought in Midrash Rabba) which is so sharp that it is impossible to overlook. It reads the verses here with an entirely fresh angle, reading Moses' appeal to God with a defiant, bitter and resentful tone. Let us read the comment:

"LET GOD APPOINT. A parable: A king once noticed an orphan girl and wished to take her hand in marriage. He sent messengers with a proposal of marriage but she refused. 'I am not worthy of royalty,' she said. He sent proposal after proposal - seven times! - she not initiating a thing; and in the end she conceded to marry him. After some time, he became angry with her and wanted to divorce her. 'I never wished to marry you,' she cried, 'you courted me! If you desire to divorce me and to take a different wife, do as you have decreed, but promise me that you shall treat your next wife better than you have treated me.'

This is like God himself, the Holy one blessed be He. He implored Moses seven times to accept the task of leading the nation, (Moses repeatedly refusing - see Ex, Ch.3-4) ... and now, later, he tells him 'You will not lead the people into the land.' (Numbers 20:12) Moses said, 'Master of the Universe, I don't want to give up my task... but since you have so decreed, promise me that you will not treat the next leader in the way you have treated me; rather, ' that he will go forth before them and come in before them.' (27:17)"

Up to this point, we have assumed that we are dealing with the humble Moses who altruistically places the communal agenda over and above his own personal feelings. But this Midrash suggests a certain resentment, maybe a more "human" side to Moses.

The Midrash notes the repeated usage of the verb, "to come". This is the verb used in God's decree to Moses that he be restricted from the Promised Land and it is the same phrase that Moses uses here. The Midrash suggests that the great Moses, although he will not attack God directly, will find a way to express his hurt and pain at his own unfortunate situation.

IN CONCLUSION

Our parsha begins the process of the preparations from settling the land of Israel. A census is performed with the explicit aim of dividing up the Land of Israel (see 26:52-56). The daughters of Tzelofhad realise that the settlement and division of Canaan is a reality and hence claim their own portion in the land. And in the passage that we have

discussed, we see another symbol of the retreat of the scenery of the wilderness and rise of the symbols of a new generation. Moses, the leader of the wilderness generation is preparing to step down and Joshua his student is appointed to take over.

The issues that we have discussed here are relevant to the Biblical debate but equally so to leadership issues today. In an era in which leaders are judged by the photogenic looks and their sound-bite speeches, we remind ourselves of that blend of personal integrity and practical applicability that the Torah looks for in its leaders.

Shabbat Shalom.

Footnotes.

[1] In the translation above, we have adjusted the accuracy of certain words to accord with the general flow of the text. Here we are focussing on the particular Hebrew phraseology, hence we have translated these phrases a little differently.

[2] There is an interesting variation in the Midrash here. One text speaks of the appointment of a "person who will TOLERATE every one of them in their individual uniqueness" whereas the other midrashic version speaks of a "person who will be able TO WALK with every individual according to his uniqueness". Clearly the second vision is wider than the first. The first talks of tolerance to all. The second talks of an ability to connect and understand each and every person in all their uniqueness; a meeting of minds.

[3] The same phrase appears in the episode of Korach. See Bamidbar 16:22.

[4] In a shiur, Rav Yaakov Medan once noted that Pinchas appears repeatedly in the eyes of Chazal, in Sefer Shoftim. In the text, Pinchas appears only once, in Ch.20-21 of Sefer shoftim in the war against Shevet Binyamin. (We might add that this is a war waged against a town who committed a sexual travesty - enter Pinchas.) But the midrash pictures Pinchas in additional situations. Pinchas is the anonymous prophetic personality- at "Bochim" in 2:1 - see Rashi there. Again in the story of Gidon, the Midrash portrays Pinchas as the Navi - see Rashi 6:8. Pinchas is also pictured by the Midrash as the Rabbinic figure who interacts with Yiftach (Tanchuma Bechukotai). Why does Chazal insert Pinchas again and again into Sefer Shoftim? Because the problems of Sefer Shoftim are the problems that Pinchas deals with. One can well see the story of idolatry and sex at Ba'al Pe'or as a foreshadowing of future problems within Eretz Yisrael. And - just like in the Pinchas story where everybody stands crying and doing nothing about the problem - Sefer Shoftim is a classic period of no stable leadership. The only type of leadership within Sefer Shoftim is a spontaneous dashing type of whirlwind leadership which arises from nowhere and dissipates soon after. Chazal put Pinchas into Sefer Shoftim because Pinchas "belongs" to that Sefer. Both the problems of that period and the solutions are Pinchas-style.

This of course is an enormous contrast to Joshua who has the stability of years of apprenticeship with Moses, and the official position of leader.

[5] Even in today's Israeli army, the officer's cry is "Acharai!-After Me!".