

Leadership & Succession in Uncertain Times

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So here we are in the midst of political conventions, when very different candidates are vying to take the helm of the most powerful position in the nation, if not the world; when one leader's tenure is coming to an end and another seeks to establish himself or herself as the heir to this high office; when our attention is captivated by the conclusion of one presidency and the beginning of another...and our Torah, our parasha this week is preoccupied with the very same thing! It is becoming clear to Moses that his own term is coming to an end. Seven chapters earlier Moses was told that he would not enter the land of Israel with the rest of the Jewish people. His sister Miriam and his brother Aaron, two of the most inspiring, influential leaders of *b'nai Yisrael* have died. Moses knows that someone else must take the reins...that his term in office, so to speak, is nearing the end. When George Washington gave his farewell address to the nation on September 17, 1796, after serving two terms as president, he informed the new nation that he was taking himself out of consideration for another term. He announced this decision 155 years before the 22nd Amendment limiting presidential terms was ratified. But just as no one knew exactly how the transition of power would transpire after Washington's presidency, it wasn't entirely clear what would happen following Moses's retirement either.

Consider Aaron's legacy as High Priest...He was of course succeeded by his children: Elazar was ordained Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, during Aaron's lifetime! If we needed to search for precedents for the transition of authority and leadership, we have to consider the patriarchs themselves...Abraham was succeeded by Isaac, Isaac by Jacob, Jacob by a confederation of tribal princes whose origins were his own children. So what about Moses? We don't speak much about his children, Gershom and Eliezer. The Torah tells us preciously little about them, and neither of them become the heirs to their father's leadership of the Jewish people. This is one of the Torah's great mysteries...Why are the sons of Judaism's greatest prophet and leader totally undistinguished? Not only are they undistinguished, they are practically unseen in the evolving narrative of the Jewish people. Was Moses too much of a workaholic to inculcate his deep religious faith and nationalism in his own children? Were they overly influenced by the extended time they spent in Midian, while their father was traveling for business? One of the

classical explanations for why Miriam and Aaron spoke out against their Moses was because of his neglect of his wife and children! On January 12, 1989 President Ronald Reagan said in his farewell speech: “Let me offer lesson No. 1 about America: All great change in America begins at the dinner table.” Well, if Moses wasn’t at the dinner table all that often with Gershom and Eliezer, it’s no wonder they didn’t have a sense of what their father stood for... There’s a hint of what became of Moses’s progeny in the Book of Judges. A man named Micha established an idolatrous shrine in the territory of Ephraim, and hired a certain Levite to be the priest on staff there. We are told that the name of this priest is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses... This is one of the untold stories of the Tanakh! See how it pays to come to shul during the summer. Moses’s own grandson was an idolatrous priest! If that doesn’t prove to you that we don’t always succeed in molding our kids the way we hope to, then I don’t know what will...

In any case, Moses understands that succession will not be hereditary. And so he turns to God, and pleads: *Yifkod Adonai, Elohei ha'ruchot le'chol basar, rish al ha'eidah*... Let the Lord, Source of the breath 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, so that the Lord’s community will not be like sheep without a shepherd. Now we could spend time analyzing the meaning of ‘going out before them’ or ‘bringing them in,’ and what these phrases really imply... my sense is that they have military connotations. But what I really want to focus on with you, especially in light of the election season we find ourselves in here in this country, is the very strange phrase with which Moses addresses God: *Elohei ha'ruchot le'chol basar ish*... that’s quite a mouthful: “God, the Source of the breath of all flesh.” Why does Moses use such a wordy, cumbersome title when addressing God? An unusual epithet like that is a major red flag for our commentators, and Rashi seizes on it in a very profound way. He says that what Moses is saying to God, by appealing to God this particular way is: *Maneh aleihem manhig she'yehei sovel kol echad v'echad lefi da'ato*... God, Who created humanity in all its diversity, appoint over the Jewish people as my successor someone who can bear, who can shoulder, who can sustain each and every person according to their uniqueness. That is an incredible statement about leadership. What Moses begs God to is to find a successor who will cherish the people’s diversity, not quash it; Who will appreciate symphony of different opinions, interpretations, ideas, and perspectives that are intrinsic to the nation, not try to make it all uniform and homogeneous. Now, let me ask you, is that so different from the kind of leadership that we

Americans are looking for in this election, or any election, for that matter? Bringing the country together is a value we have heard people clamoring for in conventions and polls. There is a sense that our society is so deeply divided, so polarized, so distanced that many people feel like we are literally coming apart.

So who does God pick to hold the Jewish people, and all its tribalism and stiff-necked antagonism together? He picks Joshua; *Yehoshua ben Nun*...the very Joshua who told the entire nation *al tira'u*, don't be afraid! Who said *tova ha'aretz me'od me'od*, the land of Israel is exceedingly good! Joshua who counsels unity, peace, and optimism; Joshua who urged the people not to give-in to fear or cynicism; He is the rightful successor to Moses, selected by God to be the leader to escort the Jewish people on the next leg of their journey.

I can't imagine a prayer or a hope more fitting that Rashi's poignant words, for us, and for our country, in this year, and any election year...May the next leader of our nation be a *manhig she'yehei sovel kol echad v'echad lefi da'ato*...one who holds up all people, in all of our differences, and protects difference and regards it as a blessing; who recognizes that in our diversity is our strength. May we, Jews and American Jews look forward to the election of leaders of that distinction....and let us all say: Amen