

PARASHAT NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

Deuteronomy 29:9–31:30

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech is one of seven designated Torah portions that, depending upon the number of Sabbaths in a year, is either read as two separate portions or combined to assure the reading of the entire Torah. While this volume will combine them, it will present an interpretation on each of their most important themes.

Parashat Nitzavim continues Moses' speeches to the Israelites just before they enter the Land of Israel. He tells them that God is making a covenant with them and, through them, with all future generations, fulfilling the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The covenant will last, he warns, only if they do not worship other gods. If they forsake the Torah's commandments, devastation, plagues, and curses will afflict them. However, Moses promises that they will not be entirely forsaken. If they return to *Adonai* and take the blessings and curses seriously, God will forgive them and restore them to their land, allowing them another opportunity to conduct their lives according to the laws of Torah. God, says Moses, is setting the choice of life and death before them. They are told: "Choose life."

Parashat Vayelech begins with Moses' announcement that he is one hundred and twenty years old and no longer able to lead the people. He assures them that they will be successful in reconquering the Land of Israel and calls upon Joshua to succeed him as leader, promising that God "will not fail you or forsake you." He transmits the Torah to the priests, instructing the people to gather every seven years at the festival of Sukot to hear the reading of the Torah, which they are to study. Forecasting that the people will nonetheless abandon the laws of Torah, God gives Moses a poem to "confront them as a witness" to all they have been taught. (See Deuteronomy 32: 1–43.) Moses transmits the Torah to the Levites, asking them to place it in the Ark of the Covenant. Moses then calls the people together to hear the poem.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Parashat *Nitzavim* opens with Moses' announcement to the people: "You stand this day, all of you, before *Adonai* your God . . . to enter into the covenant of *Adonai* your God . . . as God swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant . . . both with those who are standing here with us this day . . . and with those who are not with us here this day."

Recalling the forbidden idolatry of other nations, Moses warns the Israelites that they must not turn to "fetishes of wood and stone, silver and gold." Those who do will be punished, especially those who say: "I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart." God will punish those who serve other gods with the misfortunes of disease, plagues, and devastation, like those brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses tells the people that when later generations ask, "Why were they punished with such terrible curses?" they will be told of Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Foreseeing such a time, Moses speaks of the Israelites' exile from their land, but he promises that God will ultimately restore them. God will open their hearts to the Torah's commandments, and they will be given "abounding prosperity" in all they do.

• 2 •

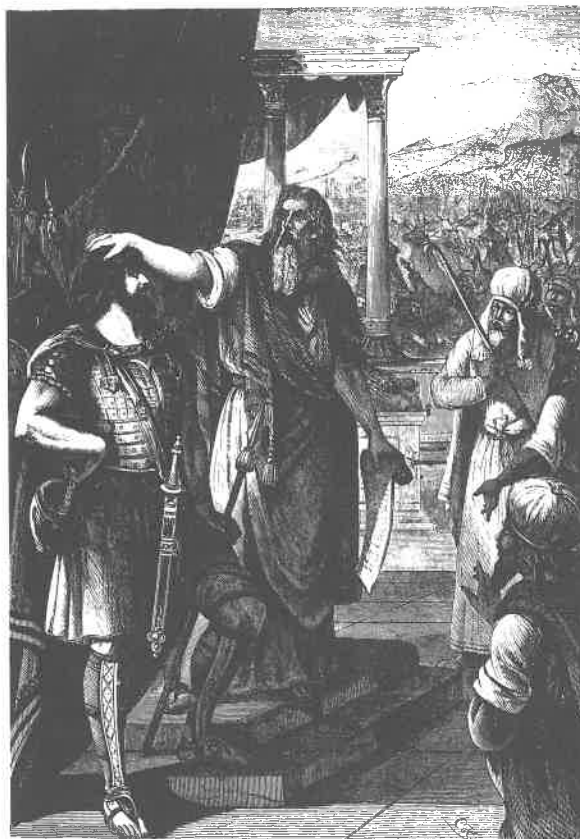
"This commandment that I place before you," declares Moses, "is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and teach it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the Torah is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to observe it."

Lifting his voice, Moses pleads with the people. "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. For I command you this day to love *Adonai* your God, to walk

in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life . . . by loving *Adonai* your God and observing God's commandments."

• 3 •

Parashat Vayelech opens with Moses informing the Israelites that he is one hundred and twenty years old and no longer capable of leading them. "Joshua will lead you," he says, calling upon the people to be strong and resolute against their enemies when they go forth to reconquer their land.



Speaking to Joshua before all the Israelites, Moses publicly transfers his authority to him, declaring: "Be strong and courageous, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that *Adonai* swore to their ancestors to give them, and it is you who shall divide it among them. God will go before you. . . . Fear not. . . ."

·4·

Moses writes the Torah and gives it to the priests and to the elders of Israel. He instructs them to read it to the people every seven years at the time of the fall harvest of Sukot.

·5·

Moses is told by God that he will soon die and that he and Joshua should come to the Tent of Meeting. God tells them that after Moses dies, the people will forsake the Torah and worship false gods. God will abandon the people and punish them with evils and troubles. In the midst

of all their sorrow, they will understand why they are suffering. "Surely," they will say, "it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us." Moses informs them that he is giving them a poem to be read and studied at such a time. (See Deuteronomy 32:1–43; also *Parashat Ha'azinu*.)

About to die, Moses hands the Torah to the Levite priests, who place it in the Ark of the Covenant. He then speaks to the people, complaining that they are stiffnecked, and he asks that all the elders come forward so he can share with them the words of his poem.

THEMES

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech contains two important themes:

1. The meaning of *teshuvah*, or "repentance."
2. Passing leadership from one generation to the next.

PEREK ALEF: *Seeking and Achieving Teshuvah, "Repentance"*

The setting of our Torah portions, *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*, is dramatic. Moses, grown old and weary, speaks for the last time to the people he has led for forty years through the desert. They are at the parting of the ways. The people will enter the Land of Israel, led by Joshua; Moses will die on Mount Nebo. What can Moses say in his final speech to the Israelites? What final message can he leave them with?

He decides to challenge them with the covenant they have made with God. It is a covenant, he reminds them, that is made not only with them but with all Jews for all times. Its conditions and commandments, he assures them, are accessible. These are not impossible to carry out. Moses urges them to be loyal to the covenant, warning that they will suffer great hardships and punishment if they reject it. "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity," he tells the people, pleading, "Choose life . . . by loving *Adonai* your God."

Woven into this moving appeal is a central theme of Jewish tradition: *teshuvah*, or "repentance." Moses encourages the Israelites to carry out the commandments of their covenant with

God. While he warns them of the painful consequences of rejecting the commandments, he also leaves the door open for them to correct their mistakes or wrong decisions. Should they deliberately plunge into wrongdoing or err accidentally, says Moses, they can seek forgiveness. Human errors, selfish and harmful acts, shameful behavior—all can be rectified and will be forgiven by God.

Moses explains that even an arrogant person who believes he can break the law with impunity because God will protect him will be punished for abandoning the commandments but will also be given another chance. God does not abandon human beings. God wants human beings to right the wrongs they do, to feel regret for hurting others, and to improve their behavior. God, explains Moses, wants every human being to make *teshuvah*, or "repentance," returning to a life of performing mitzvah deeds defined by the Torah.

Many commentators point out that Moses uses a form of the verb *shuv*, or "turn," seven times within this last speech to the Israelites. (Deuteronomy 30) The repetition of the verb emphasizes Moses' message that *teshuvah* is desirable and possible. Failure to observe the commandments of the covenant may lead to punishment but not to God's abandonment. God does not turn away

from any human being nor forsake any sinner. Instead, God waits for the repentance or return of every person. One can always make *teshuvah*, always “return” to God.

This view that the person who rejects God’s commandments can seek forgiveness through *teshuvah* is also voiced by the prophets of Israel. For example, Isaiah declares, “Let the sinner give up doing wrong and . . . return to God.” Jeremiah suggests that those who turn away from God’s commandments will realize their mistakes and seek a new sensitivity for doing good. “Amend your ways and your doings,” he instructs the people. Ezekiel speaks of “making a new heart and a new spirit” and doing God’s will. Hosea tells his generation, “Return, O Israel, to Adonai your God.” (Isaiah 56:6; Jeremiah 7:3, 26:13; Ezekiel 18:21; and Hosea 14:2)

It is not surprising, therefore, to find the concept of *teshuvah* as a central theme in Jewish thought and practice. Both the Torah and the prophets share the conviction that our mistakes, even our deliberate wrongs, should be forgiven through repentance. Most rabbinic interpreters agree. Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman, one of the renowned teachers of the third century C.E. in the Land of Israel, speaks for many when he observes, “The gates of repentance are always open.” Another rabbinic teacher declares, “Just as a soiled garment can be made white again, so can the people of Israel make repentance and return to God.” (*Lamentations Rabbah* 3.44. 9; *Exodus Rabbah* 23:10)

Great is teshuvah

Rabbi Hama ben Hanina taught: “Great is repentance for it brings healing to the world.”

Rabbi Yonatan ben Eleazar taught: “Great is repentance for it prolongs life.” (Yoma 86b)

The test of teshuvah

Rabbi Judah ben Ezekiel taught: “The test of repentance is refraining from sin on two occasions when the same temptation returns.” (Yoma 86b)

The rabbinic tradition, however, adds a further dimension to correcting our errors through repentance. It claims that “if we begin to incline toward regretting the wrongs we have done, God moves within us, pushing us toward admitting and correcting our errors.” Another interpreter claims that “God rushes toward all those who make repentance with compassion, mercy, and love.” Rabbi Jassa agrees, arguing: “God says to us, ‘Make an opening for repentance as large as the eye of a needle, and I will make it large enough for wagons and carriages to pass.’” These rabbinic teachers believe that God is not passive but active in encouraging us to recognize our transgressions and to correct our behavior. (*Midrash* on Psalms 120:7; *Numbers Rabbah* 2:10; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:2)

This emphasis by Moses, the prophets, and rabbinic interpreters that *teshuvah*, or “repentance,” is possible raises significant questions. Does the opportunity for *teshuvah* mean a person can deliberately hurt or wrong others, say a few prayers, and be forgiven? Is returning to God accomplished by piously proclaiming on Yom Kippur, “*Avinu Malkenu*, inscribe us in the Book of Forgiveness,” or by confessing our errors with *Al Chet*, “For the sin we have sinned against You . . .”?

Fourteenth-century Spanish philosopher Joseph Albo confronts these questions about *teshuvah*, explaining that the improvement of our behavior through the process of *teshuvah* is neither automatic nor easy. It requires a careful, painstaking process of “correcting thought, speech, and behavior.” By “correcting thought,” he means that a person “should feel regret for the wrongs he has done to others.” By “correcting speech,” he means that a person “should confess his wrongs.” By “correcting behavior,” he means that a person “pledges never to repeat the wrong again and takes on deeds meant to rectify any damages done, intentionally or unintentionally.” For Albo, repentance is more than a pious expression of regret. It moves a person toward a change of heart, mind, and behavior. (*Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 4:26)

In his discussion of *teshuvah*, Moses Maimonides stresses the difficulty of achieving such personality transformation or “true repentance.” He

points out at least twenty-four different things that hinder human beings from dealing with their mistakes: (1) deliberately misleading others to sin; (2) enticing others to wrongdoing; (3) allowing your children to sin; (4) saying "I will sin and then repent"; (5) standing aloof from the community; (6) opposing the authority of community leaders; (7) making a mockery of the laws of Torah; (8) insulting one's teachers; (9) refusing to hear criticism; (10) cursing others; (11) sharing with a thief; (12) failing to return lost property; (13) robbing from the poor; (14) taking bribes and tampering with justice; (15) taking food from those in need; (16) making profit from a poor person's property; (17) looking lustfully at those of the opposite sex; (18) elevating oneself at the expense of others; (19) condemning others with suspicions, not proof; (20) gossiping; (21) slandering others; (22) acting out of anger; (23) nurturing designs for wrongdoing; and (24) keeping company with those who might influence you to evil ways.



Rambam (Maimonides)

All the above "hinder" but do not "prevent" us from achieving *teshuvah*. Maimonides points out that human beings can achieve repentance by "reviewing and confronting their evil traits" and by "seeking to get rid of them." He argues that none of us is "completely righteous." Every person sins, commits errors, and makes mistakes. "If a person is sincerely remorseful about them and repents, he can achieve full repentance."

Repentance, however, is important not only for individuals but also for society. "Human beings," says Maimonides, "should see themselves and the world as always balanced delicately on scales, hovering between half-guilty of evil and half-innocent of evil." If we think constantly in such terms and measure our every action on such scales, then each action will be seen as either tipping the scales of the world to evil or to good. Our choices of action may either do harm to society or improve the lot of all human beings. Quoting Proverbs 10:25, Maimonides con-

cludes: "A righteous person is the foundation of the world." (*Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah* 4:1-6; 7:2-4, 8)

Cheshbon ha-nefesh

In discussing the harm of sin and the power of repentance, modern philosopher Israel Knox calls attention to the rabbinic concept of cheshbon ha-nefesh, "taking stock of one's soul, an inner accounting, a sitting-in-judgment upon oneself." He regards this as the essence of teshuvah. "As we make our cheshbon ha-nefesh, we confess our failure to span the gap between conscience and conduct, between the standards we profess and the actions we perform. . . . This chasm between believing and living may or may not always be surmountable, but the refusal to try to span it is sin and the will to bridge it, at least to narrow it, is atonement [repentance]." (The Jewish Spectator, vol. 27, no. 7, September 1963, pp. 7-9)



Steinsaltz

Reaching out

Repentance does not bring a sense of serenity or of completion but stimulates a reaching out in further effort. Indeed, the power and the potential of repentance lie in increased incentive and enhanced capacity to follow the path even farther. The response is often no more than an assurance that one is in fact capable of repenting, and its efficacy lies in growing awareness, with time, that one is indeed progressing on the right path. In this manner the conditions are created in which repentance is no longer an isolated act but has become a permanent possibility, a constant process of going toward. It is a going that is both the rejection of what was once axiomatic and an acceptance of new goals. (Adin Steinsaltz, The Thirteen Petalled Rose, Basic Books, New York, 1980, pp. 131-132)

On the basis of these views of Moses Maimonides, modern interpreter and philosopher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik elaborates on another important aspect of *teshuvah*. He claims that struggling with our failures and errors and seeking forgiveness for them leads us to *taharah*, or "purification." Through the process of admitting our sins, asking God and those we have hurt to forgive these sins, and correcting them, we "strive to convert them into a spiritual springboard for increased inspiration and evaluation."

This, Soloveichik points out, is the other benefit of *teshuvah*. It allows us to use our mistakes and selfish behavior as building blocks for human growth. The memory of our wrongdoings has the potential of transforming us into more generous, kind, and loving human beings. Our sins, observes Soloveichik with sharp psychological insight, "become part of our ego . . . awaking a creative force that shapes a new and loftier personality." In other words, confronting our sins forces us to improve ourselves, and remembering them helps us change our behavior for the good.

"When a person stumbles and falls . . . he should not despair . . . but should cultivate hope . . . 'gaining' by his experience new visions and vistas. Our ideal," Soloveichik concludes, "is not repetition but re-creation on a higher level. *Teshuvah* contains hope and purification." It motivates us to mature and develop positive aspects of our personalities. (*Gesher*, vol. 3, no. 1, June 1966, pp. 5-29)

Soloveichik's view is in harmony with another modern interpreter, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, who argues that *teshuvah* "stands for nothing less than the continual remaking of human nature." It is a form of "introspection," a means of achieving "progressive self-realization." Kaplan claims that repentance has the potential for repairing "three types of failure."

The first type is the failure "to integrate our impulses, habits, social activities, and institutions in harmony with those ethical ideals that make God present in the world." For example, we may busy ourselves with feeding strangers but be careless and hurtful in our family relationships. Through *teshuvah* we can examine honestly and

critically what we are doing and close the gap between our "aspirations" and behavior.

The second type of failure is "fixation," ceasing to change and grow as human beings. Kaplan points out that at various stages in our lives we develop different responses and habits. They may work while we are children but are inadequate, even dangerous, in adulthood. As children we depend on our parents and teachers and what the community provides for us. As we mature, we realize we can no longer "depend on others." We must not only take care of ourselves but also contribute to the welfare of the entire community. Repentance, Kaplan claims, helps us "recognize the inadequacy of our acquired personality to do justice to the demands of a new situation." It spurs our ethical growth.

The third type of failure *teshuvah* helps us confront is the failure to realize "to the fullest degree the potentialities inherent in our natures and in the situations in which we find ourselves." Kaplan points out that "we all have latent powers for good, powers we do not summon to active use." For example, we will plunge into petty arguments with others or refuse to cooperate because of jealousy, rather than build friendship and enjoy the benefits of trust and mutual support. Through the introspection of *teshuvah*, we examine how we waste our potentials and discover how we should use them creatively and constructively, not only for ourselves, but for our society. The act of repentance, Kaplan concludes, is meant "for the reconstruction of our personalities in accordance with the highest ethical possibilities of human nature." (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1962, pp. 178-187)

Jewish tradition places great emphasis upon the importance of *teshuvah*. While various interpreters offer different points of view about its meaning, process, and potential, none doubts its power to transform human behavior. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish summarizes the overwhelming agreement of our commentators. "Great is repentance," he writes, "for it turns sins into incentives for right conduct." It is through *teshuvah* that human beings find forgiveness for their mistakes and summon the strength to repair their faults and errors. Repentance leads to renewal and to

new opportunities for ethical and personal growth. (*Yoma* 86b)

PEREK BET: *Moses Passes on Leadership to Joshua*

On two occasions the Torah speaks of Moses' retirement and of his responsibility to pass on his leadership to the next generation. In *Parashat Pinchas*, Moses is told he will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel but, like Aaron, will die in the wilderness because of his excessive anger in striking the rock and damning the people at the Waters of Meribath-kadesh. (Numbers 27:12–14)

Moses responds by asking God to "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 *Adonai's* community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." God answers Moses: "Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him." Moses then confirms the appointment publicly before the priests and the entire people. (Numbers 27:15–19)

In *Parashat Vayelech*, Moses has reached the age of one hundred and twenty years and is about to die. He calls Joshua and "in the sight of all Israel," transfers the powers of leadership to him. Moses tells him, "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land . . . and it is you who shall apportion it to them. . . . Fear not and be not dismayed." (Deuteronomy 31:1–8)

Interpreters ask several questions about the Torah's description of the passing of leadership by Moses to Joshua: Why doesn't Moses choose one of his sons to succeed him? What is special about Joshua? Why does Moses *publicly* confer his leadership powers upon Joshua?

Some of the first rabbinic commentators seek to explain why Moses' sons, Gershon and Eliezer, do not inherit the leadership from their father. Because the Torah does not contain any direct information about the decision, rabbinic interpreters use their imagination. They portray Moses as a concerned father, worried about the rights of inheritance of his sons. Arguing with God, Moses says, "Whoever keeps the fig tree should

have the right to eat its fruits. Let them succeed me." But Moses is told, say the rabbis, that Gershon and Eliezer are not worthy of leadership. "They idle away each day. They do not study Torah or put it into practice. Joshua does. Furthermore, Joshua honors you. He cleans and arranges the room where students gather to learn from you, and he has protected you from harm. For those reasons he is more worthy to succeed you than your own sons." (*Numbers Rabbah* 21:16)

In their imaginative reconstruction of a conversation between Moses and God about the succession, rabbinic commentators highlight the criteria for leadership of the Jewish community. The accident of birth, as in the case of Gershon and Eliezer, is insufficient; character is all important. Moses' sons are unworthy because they waste their energies and talents, and they are not dedicated to growing intellectually and spiritually through study. Nor are they committed to putting their knowledge into practice.

Joshua, on the other hand, is worthy of inheriting the leadership from Moses. Rabbinic commentators note not only his inquiring mind devoted to learning but his willingness to work hard and serve as an apprentice to Moses, honoring and protecting him. Joshua is chosen because of his demonstrated commitment to Moses and his loyalty to the Israelites.



Rashi

Agreeing with this assessment, Rashi adds another reason for the choice of Joshua as successor to Moses. Rashi points out that Joshua's competition was neither Gershon nor Eliezer but Pinchas, Aaron's son. Pinchas had demonstrated loyalty to both Moses and God when he rushed forward to murder an Israelite who had, in violation of the law of Torah, taken a Midianite woman into his tent for sexual pleasure.

Pinchas's action, however, revealed his propensity for quick, careless, and violent action. Instead of consulting with Moses, Pinchas took matters into his own hands, acting rashly and self-righteously. Rashi reasons that Moses' successor could

not be impulsive or tend to act in anger. The Israelites required a person who would understand their diverse nature and regard each individual with patience. Leadership demanded tolerance and a temperament of careful and cautious judgment.

Pinchas was not such a person. He acted before he questioned. He was a single-minded zealot and, therefore, unworthy of leadership. Joshua, on the other hand, is seen by Rashi as judicious, careful, slow to act, and sensitive to differences of opinion. While forming his own conclusions, Joshua is a person who listens and learns from others. Rashi implies that only a person with such characteristics deserves to succeed Moses and lead the people into the Promised Land. (Comments on Numbers 27:16)



Peli

Fair and firm

As the future leader, Joshua is described as “a man in whom there is spirit.” Here Rashi comments: “A man who knows how to stand up against the spirit of each one of them” [and who knows how] to teach us that to be tolerant does not necessarily imply passivity or spinelessness. A good leader must know his own mind; he must be able to stand up for his views; and he also must be capable of changing his mind, of freeing himself from preconceived ideas. He must not be the type who declares: “My mind is made up—don’t confuse me with facts.” (Pinchas H. Peli, Torah Today, p. 186)

Leading

Leaders who truly lead their people will raise them to their own level. They have a chance to “lead them out” of corruption and to “bring them in” to holiness. Leaders who trail behind their people will finally be dragged down by them to their own low level. (Avnei Ezel, from A. Z. Friedman, Wellsprings of Torah, p. 337)

Modern interpreter Pinchas H. Peli points out that Joshua is chosen by Moses because of his bravery and courage. In his prayer for a successor, Moses asks God to “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.” Joshua is chosen, says Peli, because Joshua is “not like leaders of other nations who send their troops into battle while they themselves stay behind.” Instead, he is a person “who goes before his troops.”

Moses, explains Peli, is concerned about the great task of leading the people in the many battles that will be necessary to conquer the land. “He knew well that it is one thing to take a people out to war and another to get them out of war and bring them back home. The second task is much harder. A true leader has to be capable of both.” Joshua had collaborated with Moses for years. The old leader had confidence in his determination and courage. Joshua was a man who would “go before them,” bravely shouting, “Follow me.” (*Torah Today*, pp. 186–187)

Philosopher and commentator Martin Buber offers another perspective. He says Moses chooses Joshua as his successor because of Joshua’s personal loyalty and for his “physical and instinctive interest in everything connected with fighting.” Buber speculates that young Joshua proves himself to Moses by helping put down the many revolts against Moses by the Israelites. He silences the opposition against Moses and defends Moses against his critics. Moses entrusts him with guarding his tent against those who might come to do him harm; Joshua demonstrates his total commitment. When the spies return with their fearful report, doubting the Israelites’ ability to conquer the Land of Israel, it is Joshua who contradicts them, boldly telling the people: “Have no fear . . . *Adonai* is with us.” It is all this evidence of enthusiasm, determination, courage, and faith that leads Moses to choose Joshua as his successor. (*Moses*, pp. 197–198)

Aaron Wildavsky agrees with Buber. He points out that Moses at times is a guide for Joshua’s enthusiasm and leadership skills. For example, when two men, Eldad and Medad, are overheard speaking in a prophetic manner in the camp,

Joshua immediately reports the matter to Moses. Believing they represent a dangerous challenge to Moses' authority, Joshua urges Moses to stop them. Instead of acting rashly against the men, Moses calms Joshua's fears, telling him: "Do not be concerned about me. Would that all of God's people were prophets." (Numbers 11:26–29)

Moses' lesson to Joshua is twofold. A leader must not make quick decisions. Taking counsel with others, a good leader can allow other voices, even dissenting ones, a place in the community. Leading is not silencing or repudiating the opinions of others. It is providing an atmosphere where all views flourish and where even diverse decisions are made, still maintaining the unity of the community. Moses, Wildavsky maintains, seeks to train Joshua with such wisdom. (*Moses as a Political Leader*, pp. 143–44)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides appears to agree when he stresses the educational role Moses played in preparing Joshua for succession. In his commentary, Nachmanides observes that Moses' instruction of Joshua was not private. It was not a closed-door tutorial with student and teacher sharing information and wisdom. Instead, says Nachmanides, it was, as the Torah indicates, "before the eyes of the community."

In other words, Nachmanides maintains that Moses taught Joshua before the entire community. Moses *publicly* "instructs him in his duties as a leader and judge." Moses emphasizes Joshua's role as the one who should go out before them, care for them, be concerned about bringing them back safely from battle, and be careful in all matters of judgment. Every direction and explanation of the law Moses gives to Joshua is open for all to hear and discuss.

The reason for such a public, open process of leadership education and transition, concludes Nachmanides, has to do with the morale of the people. Hearing all Moses' instructions to Joshua and witnessing everything being taught to him, the people are encouraged to trust him. They

come to believe he would treat them honestly and fairly. The prospect of change appears less traumatic. Moses wants a smooth shift in power and authority from him to Joshua. Building up the confidence of the people in Joshua is critical for that smooth transition. (Commentary on Numbers 27:19)

Although Moses prepares Joshua to succeed him, loving him as a disciple, the reality of retirement and death is difficult for Moses to accept. Leading the people for forty years, making all the decisions, interpreting the law, and fighting off detractors and enemies, Moses must have become accustomed to power and responsibility. Giving up such responsibilities and power must have resulted in personal pain.

The rabbis capture Moses' feelings in those transition moments between retirement and death. They call attention to the deal Moses seeks to make with God. "Please let me live," the rabbis imagine him saying. "Let Joshua take over my office, but allow me to live by his side." God grants Moses' wish, and the next day he goes with Joshua to the sanctuary. They enter, and a pillar of cloud separates them. When it departs, Moses asks Joshua, "What did God tell you?" Joshua, looking at the aged leader, responds, "When God spoke to you, did you tell me what was said?" Stunned, Moses realizes that authority has shifted to Joshua. The transition is complete, and Moses is deeply jealous. "Better to die than to experience such envy," he mutters to God. Now Moses is ready for death. (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 9:9)

This rabbinic tale about Moses makes the point that retirement is not easy. Giving up authority, power, position, status, and office is difficult, even if you have trained your successor. Envy and jealousy, bewilderment and resentment are natural feelings surrounding the loss of one's position. So, too, is fear—especially fear about the unknown future, about the end of one's career, and possibly about impending death. Will others forget me? Will I die unnoticed, alone?

These fears must burden Moses as he prepares to pass on to Joshua the mantle of leadership. Nonetheless, Moses turns his concerns to the future of his people, rising above his envy and anxiety, urging Joshua to go forward and recon-

quer the Land of Israel. He inspires his successor with the promise, "God will be with you. God will not fail you or forsake you." Moses transforms his retirement and death into a legacy of courage and love.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How is *teshuvah*, or "repentance," a process for healing? Can it repair relationships? Can it bring inner peace? Can it bring world peace?
2. Are there some acts for which there can be no *teshuvah*? What about abandoning a friend in time of need? What about failure to speak out when injustice is being done?
3. According to the commentators, what character traits did Moses find in Joshua? Are these qualities still important for leadership today? How?
4. At the moment of passing on his authority to Joshua, Moses assembles all the people and says to Joshua, "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that *Adonai* swore to their ancestors . . . it is you who shall apportion it to them." Why does Moses choose to say those words "in the sight of all Israel"? Why did he not choose to voice them in a private ceremony?