

## The Fate of Moses' Children

### Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Pinchas*, we hear the story of five unmarried sisters. Their father Tzelaf'chad died, and had no sons to inherit his land. They went to Moses and asked him to be allowed to inherit it. The daughters' tribe, Manasseh, was not opposed, but said they then *had* to marry within their tribe, so the land would not end up in the tribes of their husbands. Moses consulted with God, and God decided the daughters would *both* inherit the land *and* marry within their tribe. So they married their cousins.

Immediately afterwards we read about who will lead Israel after Moses:

The Lord said to Moses: “Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the Land that I have given to the Israelite people. [Then you will die,] for you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity in their sight by [striking the rock instead of talking to it to bring] water.” ...

[Moses said to God:] 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 may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.

And the Lord answered Moses, “Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him.” [Num. 27:12-18]

### Why are these two stories next to each other?

The Midrash says:

Why did [Moses] make this request [right] after ordering [that the women should inherit]? Simply this. When he saw that the daughters of Tzelaf'chad inherited the properties of their father, he thought, “This is the time for me to make my own request. If daughters inherit, it is [also] proper for my sons to inherit my glory.”

[But] the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, [quoting Proverbs]:

He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruit. [Prov. 27:18]

Your sons sat idly and were not involved with Torah [study]. It is [more] appropriate that Joshua, who served you, serve Israel and not lose his compensation. [Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 11]

So Moses' sons were not sufficiently meritorious. The mantle of leadership passed to Joshua, a disciple of Moses, not to his sons.

## What happened to Moses' sons?

Moses had two sons: Gershom and Eliezer. They were not part of the Exodus proper. While still in Egypt, Moses had sent them off with their mother Zipporah to their grandfather Jethro in Midian. After the Exodus, they joined their father in the desert. [Exodus 18:1-6] This is the last mention of them in the Torah.

Their descendants are mentioned much later in the Book of Chronicles:

The sons of Moses [were] Gershom and Eliezer. The sons of Gershom [were] Shebuel the Chief. And the sons of Eliezer [were] Reḥavia the Chief (רַחְבִּיָּה הַרֹאֵשׁ). Eliezer had no other sons, but the sons of Reḥavia were very numerous. [1 Chronicles 23:14-17]

So Moses had a lot of descendants. We just don't know who they are. They disappear from history. The Talmud adds:

From where do we [derive that all of God's promises are fulfilled?] From Moses our teacher. [God said to him...] I will make from you a mighty nation [Deut. 9:14] ... The promise was fulfilled, as it is written ... "the sons of Reḥavia [Moses' grandson] were very many" רַבּוּ [1 Chronicles 23:15-17] ... And Rav Yosef taught in a baraita: "Many" means more than 600,000. [Why? Because it says here] "[the sons of Reḥavia ] were very many" [and it is written in Exodus with regard to the Israelites in Egypt]: "And the children of Israel became numerous and multiplied and were very many." [Exodus 1:7] [Berachot 7a]

And the Torah says that the children of Israel were 600,000. [Ex. 12:37]

Note: 600,000 is about  $2^{19.2}$ . Assuming every descendant has two children, it takes less than 20 generations for one person to engender 600,000.

We also learn that King David appointed Moses' grandson as his treasurer:

And Shebuel, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, was ruler over the treasuries. [1 Chronicles 26:24]

## Idolatry in Moses' family?

Did Gershom's line descend into idolatry? The Book of Judges, which begins after Joshua's death, says:

The Children of [the Tribe of] Dan erected graven images for themselves; and Jonathan son of Gershom son of Menashe [וְיִהוֹנָתָן בֶּן-גֵּרְשֹׁם בֶּן-מְנַשֶּׁה], and his descendants, served as [idolatrous] priests to the tribe of Dan until the land went into exile. [Judges 18:30]

The Talmud enlightens us:

Was Gershom the son of Menashe? No, he was the son of Moses. But his actions were not like those of Moses his father, so they added a *nun* to connect him to Menashe instead. [Avot d'Rabbi Natan 34:4]

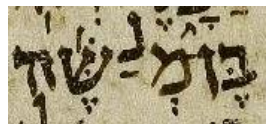
Why Menashe? The Talmud says:

[Although he was the son of Moses] he acted as Menashe [the wicked king of Judah who was notorious for idol worship], so the verse linked him to Menashe. [Bava Batra 109b]

Rashi adds that the extra *nun* is raised above the line:

In deference to Moses, the letter *nun* was included, thus altering the name. It is scripturally suspended to indicate that he was actually not “Menashe”, but “Moshe”. [Rashi]

Here is the raised *nun* in the Aleppo Codex (10<sup>th</sup>-century):



But one wonders. What does the raised *nun* accomplish? If anything, it brings attention to the fact that Moses' grandson descended into idolatry, which is what the *nun* attempts to hide in the first place. Perhaps it is there precisely for us to know the story, as a warning to take the education of our children seriously. Also, if the written word hides, why did the Sages reveal? Besides, like all humans, biblical characters have flaws which the Torah not only mentions but frequently highlights. So what is the lesson here?

The Jerusalem Talmud offers another explanation [Berakhot Yerushalmi 9:2]:

The hanging *nun* is meant to teach the power of *teshuva*: If Jonathan son of Gershom repents of his idolatry, *then* he will be considered like a son of Moses, but if not, he will be considered like a son of the idolatrous King

Menashe. In this approach, Jonathan has no biological links to either Moses or Menashe.

Back to: "The sons of Gershom [were] Shebuel the Chief." Why the plural when only one is listed. Is the other son (Jonathan, the idolater) not listed to erase his memory? Unlikely, because the same is done for the child of Gershom's brother Eliezer, who was not recorded as idolatrous. The Talmud says that Shebuel and Jonathan were the same person, who repented:

When King David saw that money was excessively precious [to Jonathan], he appointed him [as director] of the treasuries of the Temple, as it is stated: "And Shebuel, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, was ruler over the treasuries" [1 Chronicles 26:24].

And was his name really Shebuel? Wasn't his name Jonathan? Rabbi Yohanan says: [He is called Shebuel because he repented and] returned to God [*shav la'eil*] with all his heart. [Bava Batra 110a]

The Midrash adds that Jonathan only took up idolatry as a job to survive!

The rabbis expressed surprise: After [Jonathan] became a priest to idolatrous worship, how could he have lived so long? [Some 200 years from the Judges to King David.] ... Because he tried to discourage idolatry ... by shaming [those who engaged in it]. One cunning fellow ... asked him: "Why then do you sit here and serve [idols]?" He replied: "I am paid for it, but I despise it."

When [King] David heard of him he sent for him and said, "Do you, the grandson of so righteous a man practice idolatry?"

He replied: "I have received this teaching from the house of my father's father [Moses]: Sell yourself to idolatry rather than be dependent on your fellow-creatures."

[David] said to him: "God forbid! That is not so. What it means is: Sell yourself to a service which is foreign to you [i.e., which you consider to be below your dignity] rather than depend on your fellow-men." [Song of Songs Rabbah 2:18]

The Talmud indeed says:

Rav said to [his student] Rav Kahana: Skin a carcass in the marketplace and take payment [if you need money], but do not say: I am a great man and this work is beneath me. [Bava Batra 110a]

The Midrash continues:

So David saw [Jonathan's] love of money and put him in control of his treasury.

They say that after David died [Jonathan] returned to his evil ways. [Song of Songs Rabbah 2:18]

Why the relapse? The Jerusalem Talmud says that that was because, when King David died, King Solomon replaced all the ministers, including Jonathan, so Jonathan was again out of work. It includes this amusing story:

[A man came to Jonathan and asked him what offering he should prepare for the idol.] Jonathan said: "Go, prepare and bring to me one dish of fine flour and place upon it ten eggs, then put it before the idol, and he will eat from all that you bring and I will appease him on your behalf." As soon as the person would go on his way, Jonathan would eat the foods himself. [Berakhot Yerushalmi 9:2]

This brings up the question: Should one take legal but ethically questionable jobs out of necessity, like Jonathan? Should one take advantage of people's gullibility, arguing that, if these people feel good afterwards and everybody's happy, there is no harm?

## **Did Moses allow his son to worship idols?**

The Mekhilta even tells us that Moses agreed to have idolatrous descendants!

When Moses said to Jethro, "Give me your daughter Tzipporah as a wife", Jethro answered, "If you do what I ask of you, I will give her to you as a wife."

Moses said: "What do you ask?"

Jethro replied: "Your first son must serve idolatry. The following sons may serve God in heaven."

Moses accepted.

Jethro said: "Swear."

And Moses swore. [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 18:3]

Why would Jethro make such a request of Moses in the first place? Didn't God Himself tell Moses to welcome Jethro into Judaism with great honor, [Midrash Tanhuma, Yitro 6] after Jethro said in the Torah:

Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods. [Ex. 18:11]?

One answer is provided by Rabbi Shim'on Schwab (20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and US). The Midrash says that Jethro worshipped all existing idols and concluded only God was real:

Jethro said: I have not neglected to worship any idol in this world, but I have found no god like the God of Israel. [Midrash Tanchuma, Yitro 7]

So Jethro wanted a grandson to do as he did: Worship all existing idols and conclude only God was real. This would give him a better appreciation of monotheism. [Mayan Bet Hashoeva on Yitro 18,4] To be sure, this is a dubious interpretation of the injunction to teach Torah to our children:

וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ -- *Veshinantam levanecha* -- and you will teach it to your children. [Deut. 6:7]

Perhaps, since Gershom lived with his grandfather Jethro in Midian for a long time, Jethro's bad influence indoctrinated him into idolatry. Later, when Jethro converted to Judaism, it was too late to turn Gershom around. Moses' other son, Eliezer, was younger and was not irrevocably influenced.

One may wonder: Is this why Moses at first did not circumcize Gershom, and God threatened to kill him, and his wife Zipporah had to do it in his stead?

The Lord met [Moses], and sought to kill him. Then [Moses' wife] Tzipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her [newborn] son... So [God] let [Moses] go... [Ex. 4:24-26]

Perhaps Moses intentionally did not want Gershom circumcised because of his promise to Jethro.

Early on, Judaism struck a balance between hereditary rights and meritocracy. Priesthood and kingship were hereditary; prophecy and scholarship were not. The Mishna says:

Rabbi Shim'on said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty. [Avot 4:13]

The Rambam adds:

Aaron merited priesthood, David merited monarchy, but the crown of Torah remains for anyone who wants to be crowned with it. [Rambam on Avot 4:13]

Aaron got a hereditary dynasty to last forever -- the kohanim. But Torah scholarship is *not* hereditary. It belongs to all of us. The Torah states:

תּוֹרַת צִוְּיֵינוּ מִשָּׁה מוֹרֶשֶׁה קִהַלְת יִצְחָק Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. [Deut. 33:4]

Another question arises from this narrative. The Torah says:

This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. [Numbers 6:1-2]

But only Aaron's four sons are listed! Moses' sons are not. The Talmud says:

Moses' nephews are considered as his children because he taught them Torah ... Anyone who teaches another person's son Torah, it is as if he fathered him. [Sanhedrin 19b]

The Midrash adds:

Rabbi Natan says: Moses was saddened that one of his sons did not stand [in his place], whereupon the Lord said to him: Are the sons of your brother Aaron not like your sons? [Sifrei Devarim 305:2]

So Moses taught the sons of Aaron but not his own? Why? The Torah that he preached says:

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיכֶם -- *Veshinantam levanecha* -- and you will teach it to your children.  
[Deut. 6:7]

Does teaching other children replace teaching your own? Or could it be that it is better to let others educate your children, on the grounds that the teacher-student relationship is fundamentally different from the parent-child relationship?

Finally, a disturbing question to which there is no definitive answer: Are the children of important and charismatic people doomed to a life of mediocrity, wrongdoing and irrelevance? It is true that in many cases important people have little time for family, and that their children suffer for it. There are examples and counterexamples. Sadly, Moses' children are an example.

Shabbat shalom.