

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
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## Transitions

When I was in yeshiva I was told a cautionary tale of a rabbi who got into a great deal of trouble when he was caught with an entire filing cabinet in his office that was filled with pre-written eulogies for the entire board of directors for his shul.

That story came to mind this week.

I thought of that story this week because we have been doing a lot of saying goodbye in the congregation. This is the time of year when beloved members of the shul find new jobs, enroll in graduate programs in other cities, complete their degrees, and move on. Although it's unpleasant to talk about, some of us even buy houses in the suburbs. Apparently, it's also prime aliyah season, and this year, we are sending the State of Israel some of Lakeview's finest.

In saying goodbye and thanking departing members and publicly recalling all that they have done for this community, I've felt as though I were delivering eulogies for people who are very much alive and well—and even sitting in front of me—and it feels a bit strange. David Harris is moving to Israel in two weeks and he is sponsoring kiddush today to mark his departure. I think he is sponsoring kiddush because he was worried that after his remarks at the soiree we might not say nice things about him, but we shall see....

This is the parsha of leadership transitions. There is a chiasmic structure, a pattern in the form of A, B, B, A that overlays this section of Sefer Bamidbar. Aharon dies, Pinchas is chosen as the one who will inherit his leadership position, then Yehoshua is chosen as the one who will inherit Moshe's leadership position, and then Moshe dies (although that isn't described until the end of the next book of the Torah).

In truth, the transition away from Moshe's leadership has been a not-so-hidden theme of the entire book of Numbers. We've spoken before about the Netziv's theory that the entire Book of Numbers tells the story of our transition away from a miraculous existence towards a natural, non-miraculous way in which we conquered and settled Eretz Yisrael and farmed for our sustenance. And we've spoken as well about Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's dramatic explanation of Parshat Baha'lotcha, the turning point in the middle of Sefer Bamidbar. After ten chapters in which everything is going well, and we follow the *aron* towards a quick entry to Eretz Yisrael, everything changes and begins to go badly, and Moshe realizes that his own style of leadership will need to be more intensive and more nurturing than he had anticipated. "With the inverted letter - nun - (marking off before and after that turning point in the Torah) Jewish history was inverted," in Rav Soloveitchik's words.

But, as was demonstrated by Rabbi Nati Helfgot in his book "Mikra and Meaning", those same chapters, beginning with that turning-point moment where the inverted nuns are written in the Torah, also tell the story of the gradual eclipse of Moshe's leadership paving the way for his appointment of a successor in Parashat Pinchas.

A few examples out of many illustrate this transition:

When the "*mitonimim*" murmur and complain in the beginning of Numbers 11, they make no explicit complaint against Moshe or his leadership and instead turn to him for help and he prays on their behalf. The very next episode however, when we complained about wanting meat and more interesting food, we ignored Moshe entirely. He overheard our false tears, but we did not turn to him for a solution to our problems. This

sparked Moshe's most dramatic leadership crisis and crisis of confidence when he turns to God and asks to be relieved of the burden of leadership. God partially acquiesces to that request and takes "from the spirit" that had rested upon Moshe and spreads it upon the elders. When the spies later give their report and instigate a mutiny, the people, for the first time, express a desire to appoint a new leader to bring them back to Egypt. Last week's parsha, Parshat Balak, contained an entire story of prophetic communication with God over the course of three chapters and Moshe is not present at all.

The episode, in which Pinchas steps forward and stops the plague, brings the transition away from Moshe's leadership to the fore. During the first mass apostasy of worship of the golden calf, Moshe himself rallied those loyal to God by crying out, "Whoever is for the Lord come follow me!" During this singular episode of mass apostasy of the second generation, Moshe does nothing and Pinchas must act on his own.

Pinchas, the grandson of the recently deceased Aharon, becomes the progenitor of a line of high priests that dominate most of the subsequent history of that institution. It is therefore fitting that a successor be found for Moshe as well. But right at this moment, Moshe recovers his leadership and audaciously demands a successor. In a shocking, bold and direct fashion, Moshe reverses the expected convention of Divine communication and speaks straight to God in the way that God has spoken to him on so many occasions.

לאמר: אלהי משה וידבר

Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, "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.

Moshe knows that he cannot be the leader that this second generation needs to bring them to Eretz Yisrael, but he knows that leadership must emerge.

Moshe taught Torah for 40 years. Someone else will need to take on that task.

Moshe advocated on our behalf and saw our best potential at moments when our future appeared bleak. Someone else would have to take on the burden of care and concern.

Moshe made sure that we were fed and that thousands of people with no real jobs and no real money could nonetheless find food and water in order to flourish and thrive during an arduous journey. Others would need to take on that responsibility of feeding the Jews.

This is the season of leadership transitions at our shul. Looking over the shul's records of the past few years, I see that it is consistently challenging to find Torah readers for these weeks in particular. It is consistently hard to find enough mikvah attendants this time of year. It can be a particular challenge to find eruv checkers at this time of the year. Our weekday minyan attendance sometimes drops in the late spring and summer. May, June, and July, is when many people leave Lakeview and their absence is felt immediately.

But this is also the time of year when new people arrive in our community, with their passions and their skills and their fresh takes on old problems. It is upon us veterans to be friendly and outgoing and hospitable to those who are looking to figure out what place they will have in their new community. And it's crucial that newcomers feel empowered, invited, and even obligated to shape this community according to the values and vision that they bring with them.

Rabbi Daniel Lifshitz, whom I've quoted before, asked why Pinchas was rewarded for decisive action when Moshe and Aharon were never similarly rewarded for occasions when they acted decisively. He answered, quoting the book *Moznayim l'Torah*, that Moshe and Aharon had formal leadership positions and it is to be

expected that they would act boldly when necessary. But Pinchas was a civilian Jew with no obligation to act as he did and with no expectation that he would do so.

That's our community. ASBI is large enough to have all of the infrastructure necessary for Jewish life: *minyanim*, *mikvah*, *eruv*, access to kosher food, convenient and compelling day school options. But the community is small enough to allow each and every newcomer to shape this community, to respond to a need, to repair a breach that perhaps you alone notice. Not only do we invite newcomers to do so, we depend upon it.

The radio show "This American Life" recently reported a segment on Chicago comedian David Maher. Several years ago, David was in a coma and facing a grim prognosis. His physicians had given up hope of his recovery and recommended that his family suspend life support. David's best friend, when he heard these words from the doctors, left the hospital, went home, and posted a eulogy of David to his Facebook page. That post attracted dozens of David Maher's friends, and they too, over a period of weeks, shared loving memories of their recently departed friend.

As it turned out, David's parents did not accept the doctor's prognosis and transferred him to another hospital where he emerged from his coma after several weeks, only to discover a vast online discussion among his friends who were mourning his death.

Whenever we have a chance to say goodbye and thank you to someone in good health, we should consider ourselves very lucky. We are very fortunate at Anshe Sholom to have the chance to say thank you and goodbye to our veteran members who are moving elsewhere, and we have a wonderful opportunity as well here at Anshe Sholom, to say welcome to all of our new arrivals.