

Succession vs Success

Parshat Pinchas - 5781

If you could travel in time to any period, anywhere, where would you go? One of *my* first choices would be Tsfat, any time in the 16th Century, a time and place in which contemporary Jewish law and ritual began to take shape. Among the illustrious personalities that lived there were: Rav Yosef Karo, the author of the commentary *Beit Yosef* and the Shulchan Aruch; Rav Yitzchak Luria (the Arizal) and Rav Chaim Vital- the two primary teachers and disseminators of Kabbalah; Rav Moshe Cordovero, author of the widely studied ethical work *Tomer Devorah*, and his brother in law Rav Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz , who authored *Lecha Dodi*, and Rav Moshe Alshich, who wrote a commentary on the entire Tanach as well as many Halachic works. It boggles the mind that all this spiritual energy was concentrated in one community. Even more astounding is that at the onset of this period, Tsefat had roughly the same number of households as our shul!

When the Chief Rabbi, the formidable Rav Avraham Shalem, passed away, the community faced the daunting task of identifying a worthy successor¹. The community had unanimously thrown their support behind Rav Moshe Alshich, among the senior Rabbinic figures at the

¹ Recorded in the responsa *Ginat Veradim*, of Rav Avraham HaLevi, who was a Dayan in 17th century Cairo:

שו"ת גינת ורדים חלק יורה דעה כלל ג סימן ח
וכן הוגד לי מפי כמה"ר חייא שלום שעשה מעשה בצפת טוב' הרב הגדול המקובל האלקי כמה"ר שלמה אלקבץ שאחר שהסכימו כל בני קהלו של הרב משה אלשיך להושיבו בראש והתחילו לחתום בשטר מנען הרב המקובל הנז' עד שיגדל בנו של הרב כמה"ר אברהם שלם שהוא היה חכם הקהל והמתינו לבנו עד שהיה בר מצוה והמליכוהו במקום אביו אע"פ שלא היה לו יחס עם הרב כמה"ר משה אלשיך שהיה באותו פרק כבן ששים שנה.

time. A contract was drafted and all parties were ready to sign, but at literally the last minute, Rav Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz intervened. Citing a ruling of the Rambam, he asserted that the community was halachically mandated to hire Rav Shalem's son to succeed his father. There were two issues that made this prospect less than pleasing. First, the Alshich was a revered figure whose honor was dear to the community, and whose ascension was assumed as a forgone conclusion. Secondly, **the son in question was all of 12 years old**. Nevertheless, the community members heeded Rav Alkabetz's directive, and waited until his Bar Mitzvah to declare him the official Rabbi, favoring him over the Alshich, who was 60 at the time. To avoid a similar kerfuffle, two centuries later, the council of Lithuanian Jewish communities met in 1761 in Slutsk and ruled that henceforth, no community could hire a Rabbi under 20 years of age².

The very first case of Rabbinic succession in Jewish history takes place in this week's Parshah. The section is introduced with an unusual turn of phrase. Rather than Hashem initiating a conversation with Moshe, the Torah says,

במדבר פרק כז

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' לֵאמֹר:

Moses spoke to the LORD, saying,

יִפְקֹד ה' אֱלֹקֵי הַרְוֵחַת לְכָל־בְּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל־הָעֵדָה:

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https://images.shulcloud.com/291/uploads/Announcements/2014/Adopt_a_Kollel_Newsletters/pinchas-rabbinicsuccession.pdf

“Let the LORD, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community

אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדוּת יְהוָה כְּצֹאן אֲשֶׁר אֵין־לָהֶם רֹעֶה:

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.”

Immediately God responds with the obvious choice - the man who had dutifully stood by Moshe’s side for so many years: Yehoshua bin Nun. If we didn't know any better, we would think that this was the most logical choice, and a seamless transition. Rashi, however, cites the Midrash Tanchuma, noting that not everyone was completely on board.

רש"י במדבר פרשת פינחס פרק כז

(טז) יפקד ה' - כיון ששמע משה שאמר לו המקום תן נחלת צלפחד לבנותיו אמר הגיע שעה שאתבע צרכי שיירשו בני את גדולתי. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לא כך עלתה במחשבה לפני, כדאי הוא יהושע ליטול שכר שמושו שלא מש מתוך האהל. וזהו שאמר שלמה (משלי כז, יח) נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה:

When Moshe heard that the daughters of Tzelophehad were granted permission to inherit their father’s share in the land, Moshe said to himself, “the time has come for me to claim my needs, so that my children will inherit my position.” God replied to him, “This was not my intention. Joshua is worthy to collect the reward for his faithful service to you, for he never left your side.” About this, King Solomon said (Proverbs 27:18), “The one who tends to the fig tree will eat its fruit.”

This most revealing Rashi teaches us about the reward for hard work, consistency and loyalty, and how these values should trump nepotism in matters of employment, community service and succession. But there is something deeper being conveyed by this Rashi. The late Rav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel (1947-2008), a longtime *maggid shiur*, teacher of Talmud at the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalaim, wonders why Moshe made such a request specifically now, upon learning of the inheritance of the daughters of Tzelofechad. What was so special about this moment that Moshe felt he had to seize it immediately? Couldn't Moshe have asked God for his sons' inheritance much earlier? Did he not think about his children earlier?

I'd like to offer an answer to Rav Finkel's question, one that he might have disagreed with and perhaps even objected to. Rashi is sharing with us a profound truth about human nature, one relevant even to the greatest human. It is an idea later articulated by the French philosopher, historian and literary critic Rene Girard, who developed the concept of "mimetic desire." According to his theory, all desires and wants are formulated by observing others experiencing or possessing. We don't necessarily want nice things because we want them- we want them because we see others having and enjoying them. Why does Moshe begin to worry about the inheritance of his own children at this juncture? According to Rashi, it was the realization that Tzelpheachad- a profligate sinner- had five remarkable daughters who inherited the family plot. Moshe was experiencing a mimetic desire, realizing what he wanted only after seeing someone else have it. The truth is, it is partially a credit to Moshe's greatness that he doesn't ask "what about me?" until this point. After all, placing the

needs of the tzibur before his own is a well established pattern throughout his career - whether it was in the context of his marriage or his role as a parent, the call of prophetic duty always came first. Nevertheless, one can't help but feel heartbroken for Moshe, for he really wanted Gershom and Eliezer to inherit his post, yet he was rebuffed by Hashem. He was now forced to reckon with the uncomfortable truth that his children were unsuited for the role - לא כך עלתה במחשבה לפני. Moshe's missed opportunity surely strikes terror in the hearts of all parents, who want their children to continue their legacy. This midrash contains a wake up call for everyone, parent or not. It is the lives of others that most often spur our desires and ambitions. We commit to becoming better parents when we see our friends and neighbors raising estimable children. We decide to become more fiscally responsible, or financially generous, when these traits are modeled by people we respect or of whom we are envious. We advocate for communal programs because we have seen them done elsewhere. There is nothing wrong with emulating positive traits that others display, but if all of our spiritual and physical longings are just the product of a reaction, they will be realized too late. We need to remember the words by which Moshe was rejected: "The time has come to claim my needs." The irony behind Moshe's claim was that the time had long since passed... Let us not be reactive, but proactive. In 2018³, a young fan attended a game between the Calgary Flames and the Washington Capitals. The boy was confined to a wheelchair, and was given an opportunity of a lifetime- to greet his favorite players on the Capitals as they entered the locker room. One by one, they filed by and each of them gave him a fist bump,

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<https://globalnews.ca/video/4625164/alexander-ovechkin-gives-hockey-stick-to-young-fan-in-wheelchair-following-game-in-calgary>

following what the one before him had done. The legendary Alexander Ovechkin walked by, and initially gave him a fist bump- and then he handed the boy his stick. The look of shock and joy on the boy's face was priceless, and all it took was someone to say, "I don't have to act like everyone else." Virtuous and kind behavior is wonderful when emulated, but even better when it is self-driven. Don't let an influencer shape the way you live your life- instead, think long and hard about what you really want for yourself...then go out and make it a reality. The time has arrived.