Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayeilech

Passing on the Torch

This week's portion, Vayeilech, marks the beginning of the end for Moses. After concluding the extended speech that makes up most of Deuteronomy, Moses learns from God that his death is approaching and begins the transition of leadership to his successor, Joshua:

דברים לא:ז-ח	**Deuteronomy 31:7-8**
(ז) וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזַק וֶאֱמָץ כִּי אַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לַאֲבֹתָם לָתֵת לָהֶם וְאַתָּה תַּנְחִילֶנָּה אוֹתָם: (ח) וַיהוָה הוּא ׀ הַהֹלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ הוּא יִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ לֹא יַרְפְּךָ וְלֹא יַעַזְבֶךָּ לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תֵחָת:	(7) Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that God swore to their fathers to give them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them. (8) And it is indeed God who will go before you, and be with you—and not fail you or forsake you. Fear not and be not dismayed!"

- **Why do you think Moses specified that Joshua would be the one to apportion the land of Israel to the Jewish people?**
- **What do you think are some characteristics of a successful transfer of leadership?**
- **Can you think of a time you received a position from someone else or passed on a role to your successor? What steps did you take to make the transition successful?**

The Midrash Lekach Tov, an 11th–12th-century Torah commentary that combines straightforward interpretation with elaborative traditions, focuses on the verse's emphasis that Moses spoke to Joshua in the presence of the entire Jewish people. It understands this as a deliberate choice by Moses, intended to ease the transition of leadership from himself to Joshua:

מדרש לקח טוב, דברים לא:ז	**Midrash Lekach Tov, Deuteronomy 31:7**
ויקרא משה ליהושע. אחר שדיבר לישראל שלא בפני	"Moses called Joshua..."After he had

יהושע חזר וקרא את יהושע. ויאמר אליו לעיני כל ישראל חזק ואמץ. לכבדו בפניהם.	spoken to Israel without Joshua present, he then called Joshua back. "And said to him in the sight of all Israel: Be strong and resolute"—this was to honor him in their presence.

- **Moses seems to believe that publicly honoring Joshua was necessary for a smooth transfer of leadership. What might that tell us about how he viewed the Jewish people?**
- **What are some advantages and disadvantages you see in the approach Moses takes here to transfer power to Joshua?**

Even before his final moments, commentators portray Moses as taking steps to make the transition to Joshua's leadership as seamless as possible. Shemot Rabbah, an exegetical work on Exodus compiled around the same period as Midrash Lekach Tov, focuses on Moses' earlier decision to appoint Joshua to lead the battle against Amalek.

שמות רבה כו:ג וַיֹּאמֶר משֶׁה אֶל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּחַר לָנוּ אֲנָשִׁים, לָמָּה לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, מִתְּחִלָּה אַתָּה דוֹרֵשׁ שֶׁהָיָה מְבַקֵּשׁ לְהַדְרִיכוֹ לְמִלְחָמָה, לְפִי שֶׁהוּא עָתִיד לְהַכְנִיס אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לָאָרֶץ.	**Shemot Rabbah 26:3** "Moses said to Joshua: Choose men for us." Why Joshua? He was seeking to instruct him in war because he was destined to take Israel into the Land.

- **What does Moses' statement that "tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill, with the staff of God in my hand" add to our understanding of his relationship with Joshua?**

Up to this point, the sources we have seen portray Moses as proactively working to ensure a smooth transition of leadership to Joshua. Not all sources, however, depict Moses as quite so eager to relinquish his role. Rashi, the influential medieval commentator, draws on the juxtaposition of two topics in Numbers 27: the laws of inheritance and the appointment of Moses' successor.

רש"י על במדבר כז:טז יפקד ה'. כֵּיוָן שֶׁשָּׁמַע מֹשֶׁה שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הַמָּקוֹם תֵּן נַחֲלַת צְלָפְחָד לִבְנוֹתָיו, אָמַר הִגִּיעַ שָׁעָה שֶׁאֶתְבַּע צָרְכִּי—שֶׁיִּירְשׁוּ בָנַי אֶת גְּדֻלָּתִי, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּבָ"ה לֹא כָךְ	**Rashi on Numbers 27:16** Let the Lord set—When Moses heard that the Omnipresent said to him, "Give the inheritance of Zelophehad to his

עָלְתָה בְמַחֲשָׁבָה לְפָנַי, כְּדַאי הוּא יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לִטֹּל שְׂכַר שְׁמוּשׁוֹ שֶׁלֹּא מָשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֹהֶל (שמות לג:יא), וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה (משלי כז) "נוֹצֵר תְּאֵנָה יֹאכַל פִּרְיָהּ" (תנחומא):	daughters," he said to himself, "The time has come that I should ask for something that I want—that my sons should inherit my high position." God replied to him, "Not thus has entered My mind; Joshua deserves to receive the reward of his ministrations, because "he has never departed from out the tent" (Exodus 33:11). This is what Solomon said, (Proverbs 27:18) "Whoso keepeth the fig-tree shall eat the fruit thereof [and he that waiteth on his master shall be honored]" (Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 11).

- **Rashi implies that it was Joshua's loyalty to Moses that earned him his position of leadership. In your opinion, is loyalty a good basis for choosing a successor?**
- **If you could pick one intangible thing in your life—a role, a value, or something else—to pass on to your descendants, what would it be?**

However, despite the disappointment he may have felt that his sons would not succeed him, Moses still took it upon himself to smooth the transition to Joshua. According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, this reflects a recurring theme in Judaism: the importance of planning for succession:

***Covenant and Conversation*, Numbers: The Wilderness Years, Pinchas, Lessons of a Leader**

This is, in itself, a significant lesson. *Great leaders care about succession*. What matters to them as they face their mortality is that the work should continue. In *Parashat Hayei Sara*, after the death of Sarah, Abraham instructed his servant to find a wife for Isaac so that there would be continuity for the family of the covenant. David chose Solomon. Elijah, at God's bidding, appointed Elisha. Unlike most other religions, Judaism is not about a single transformative moment in history, to which all the rest of time is either before or after. We believe that the work of the covenant is an ongoing process, a continuing journey, an effort that must be renewed in every generation. Succession is vital, and Moses knew it.

- **What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he refers to "the work of the**

covenant"?

- **Can you think of a time you experienced the importance of continuity in your own life, whether you were the one creating it or its beneficiary?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Many of the sources on this sheet portray Joshua as a leader with a strong military focus. How does that compare with your understanding of Moses as a leader, and how might those differences shape the transfer of leadership between them?
2. In the second-to-last source, Rashi adds a layer of complexity by describing Moses' disappointment that his sons will not succeed him. How might this change or deepen your understanding of the other sources on this sheet?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayeilech, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayeilech page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayeilech, you can find them on Sefaria's Vayeilech topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Moses, Joshua, and Leadership.

The story of Joshua's time as a leader is told in full in the Book of Joshua, the first book of Prophets. If you are interested in learning about what happened next, Joshua Chapter 1, available in Hebrew with English translation on Sefaria, is a good place to start.

Enjoyed this sheet? Receive a new one in your inbox every week by subscribing at simchattorahchallenge.org.