

From Moses to Joshua

As the Book of Deuteronomy moves towards its conclusion, Moses prepares for his death and bids his people farewell. His leadership has brought the Israelites this far, to the plains of Moab. Now it is Joshua who will lead the people forward, across the Jordan, into the land promised by God.

Read chapter 31, with particular attention to the first nine verses. Were you touched by the human sensitivities of these final scenes of the Torah? The time has come for Moses—the great prophet, leader, intimate of God, father-mother to Israel—to let go of everything: his authority, his ‘job’, his Israelite family, his dream of entering the promised land, and even his life. Was there something in this chapter that particularly resonated in you? How does the Torah speak to you?

“I am now one hundred and twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross over this Jordan.’”
(Deuteronomy 31:2).

A more literal translation of the Hebrew reads: ‘I am no longer able to go-out and to come-in’. According to Rashi, [1] Moses is referring to his diminished prophetic powers. Whereas once his face shone in the radiance of the divine presence as he received the Lord’s teachings in full clarity, now his ability to interpret the Torah is weakened. Say the Jewish sages of old, the light of the sun is dimmed. And as it dims, Joshua’s face shines like the moon. Joshua is not Moses, whose prophetic role was unique. Yet his time for leadership has come, and now it is the Lord himself, not Moses, who instructs Joshua (see v.14).

What is Moses’ reaction to all this? Where the Torah hints, the Midrash [2] elaborates. The Torah tells us (v.7) that Moses declares his unreserved support for Joshua. Yet the imaginative stories of the midrash describe how Moses’ willingness to relinquish leadership, like his willingness to accept death, is a gradual

letting go. In one passage he bargains with the Lord:

“Master of the universe, if I must die [to vacate my post] for Joshua, let me be his disciple [in my remaining hours].” The Lord agrees, so Moses goes to where Joshua is teaching Torah and becomes his student. Says the midrash, “At that session, the tradition of wisdom was taken away from Moses and given to Joshua.” Later, Joshua receives a revelation in a pillar of cloud. “After the cloud departed, Moses went over to Joshua and asked, ‘What did the Word say to you?’ Joshua replied, ‘When the Word used to reveal itself to you, did I know what it said to you?’ In that instant, Moses cried out in anguish and said, ‘Rather a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy. Master of universes, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to you.’” Thus did Moses become reconciled to his dying.

For the sages, the final scenes of the Torah portray Moses as both heroic and fragile; humble yet touched by envy; whole-hearted despite inner struggle. In your own midrashic reflection, how do you ‘read between the lines’ of the sacred text?

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[1] Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi: 11th century Torah scholar.

[2] Midrash: Jewish storytelling traditions that imaginatively explore the biblical narrative and enrich one’s interpretative grasp of the text.

Bibliography: Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds. *The Book of Legends* (New York, 1992); Fox, trans. *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995). Herczeg, trans., *The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary* (New York, 2011); Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, vol. 5 (New York, 1995); Scripture: NRSV.

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