

Parashat Pinchas פִּינְחָס

Torah: Numbers 25:10–30:1

Haftarah: 1 Kings 18:46–19:21

Why was the Torah likened to a fig tree? Because, while the fruit of most other trees — the olive tree, the vine, and the date tree — is gathered all at once, that of the fig tree is gathered little by little; and it is the same with the Torah. One gathers little learning today and much tomorrow, for it cannot be learned in a year nor in two years (Bamidbar Rabbah 21.15).

The Appointment of a New Leader

General Overview

In this parasha, we are now back in the camp, instead of up in the Moabite mountains listening to Balaam. The Guardian and Protector of Israel has just thwarted a potentially major catastrophe in the spiritual realm by stifling the curses of Balak and causing the evil Balaam to utter blessings toward Israel. Now, the Holy One has some unfinished business to attend to in order to fully prepare the new generation to take possession of the Land. That is the thrust of the remaining parashiyot in Numbers.

Exposition

We will analyze Parashat Pinchas utilizing this outline:

- I. The Aftermath of the Baal-Peor Incident (25:10–18)
- II. The Accounting of A New Generation (26:1–27:11)
- III. The Appointment of a New Leader (27:12–23)
- IV. The Additional Offerings (28:1–30:1)

In this excerpt from Parashat Pinchas, we will focus on section III, The Appointment of a New Leader.

III. The Appointment of a New Leader (27:12–23)

True to His Word, God reminded Moshe that because of the events at Kadesh Maribah, he was not going to lead the people into the Promised Land. Instead, the Lord told Moshe to climb a high mountain and look into the Land, but not enter it. At this point, rather than musing about why he could not enter, Moshe's mind turned to the care of his people, Israel. He asked the Lord about appointing a new leader. Notice, however, that Moshe did not suggest any of his own sons or relatives. His mind and heart were strictly on the will of the Almighty. Indeed,

There, Moshe exemplified the merit of the righteous who at the time of their death do not concern themselves with their personal deeds but with the deeds of the community.¹

¹ Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 234.

God's response was to choose Joshua, the son of Nun, Moshe's right-hand man, to lead the people after him. To help facilitate this transition to the new leader, Moshe was instructed to hold a public ceremony at the Tent of Meeting, rest his hand on Joshua, and "place some of your majesty upon him" (27:20). To confirm this choice before the people, Eleazer was to consult the urim and thummim.

It would still be a little while before the actual appointment of Joshua would take place, even though it is recorded here in this passage. What we mean is that Moshe still had a little more teaching of the Torah to impart to the people. In addition, he also had the speech of Deuteronomy (the whole book) to give to them. Consequently, the appointment recorded here is actually the same one recorded at the end of Deuteronomy after all of Moshe's instructions had been given to Israel.

The first thing the text does is to list God's qualifications for who would replace Moshe. Therefore, in 27:16–17 Moshe, who was truly speaking God's heart, said to Him,

May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them ... so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.

The most outstanding qualification that was essential for a successor for Moshe was that he be a military man. This is indicated by the phrase, "go out and come in." This idiom was used to speak of army commanders. Israel's officers were "not like others ... who send out their troops first and they come last." Rather, they were to lead their troops into the battle. In fact, even to this day, "the officers of modern Israel's defense forces are noted for their battle cry '*aharai* (אהרי) — 'follow me!' "²

The next most important qualification for the one who was to walk in Moshe's sandals was that he had to be a shepherd. It is hard to picture a man who would have the strength and boldness of a general yet possess the kindness and gentleness of a shepherd. Yet, the leader for God's holy community was to be just such a person. One of the best known examples of these characteristics was King David, the shepherd king who made Israel into a formidable military power.

However, by far the best example of such a person was/is Yeshua, the Messiah. He Himself said that He is the Good Shepherd. As such He provides food, protection, community, and the comfort of His presence to guide His sheep. On the other hand, we know from Revelation 19 that this kind and tender shepherd is also the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who will come back to planet earth as the general of God's armies and wage victorious war with the enemies of the Lord.

However, in Moshe's day, in our parasha, God had a certain someone in mind even before Moshe prayed about it. Interestingly enough, he also was Yeshua, or should we say, Yehoshua — Joshua?

² Milgrom, The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers, 234.

The list of Joshua's qualifications for this enormous task is seemingly endless. One characteristic, however, stands out in the sidra. In 27:16, Moshe asks the Lord for a successor who would be a shepherd over Israel. Even though Joshua was a military man, a capable leader, and protégé of Moshe, the one characteristic Moshe was concerned about was that Joshua be a true shepherd. Accordingly, this was apparently one of the main reasons that the Lord chose him.

The Midrash develops this theme and suggests that since Joshua was a shepherd, he must have been a student of Torah. In support of this idea, the Midrash cites Proverbs 27:18,

“Who so keeps the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof.” And, remember, the Midrash says this: “Why was the Torah likened to a fig tree?” Because, while the fruit of most other trees — the olive tree, the vine, and the date tree — is gathered all at once, that of the fig tree is gathered little by little; and it is the same with the Torah. One gathers little learning today and much tomorrow, for it cannot be learned in a year nor in two years.³

What rich symbolism we see here. According to this midrash, Joshua was a great shepherd of Israel because he studied God's Word and kept it. We do not think that we needed this midrash, however, to tell us this! Ever since we first met Joshua, he was always at Moshe's side, especially at Mount Sinai. One cannot be that close to such a great Torah teacher as Moshe and not be a diligent student of God's Word. Moreover, just as his mentor was a great shepherd (both physically and spiritually) so also must his most dedicated student have been as well. We are sure that Joshua studied every move Moshe made as a shepherd of God's flock and learned his calling well.

As far as his military training is concerned, almost from the very beginning of our knowledge of Joshua, he was in the leadership of Israel's army. Now, by the time that this passage was taking place, he has had intensive military experience for over 40 years. Based on these two factors alone, no one among all of Israel had more qualifications for succeeding Moshe. However, the Holy One also sought to give him even more essential qualifications for the job. Hence, in 27:18–23, the Lord instructed Moshe to do two very special things to Joshua.

First, He told Moshe to lay his hands on him, symbolizing the fact that Moshe's authority was to now rest upon Joshua. This was done in front of all Israel so that there would never be any question that Joshua was the man whom Moshe designated to succeed him. When Moshe placed his hands on him the Lord said that it was in order to “give him some of your authority” (27:20). It is difficult to ascertain precisely how to render the Hebrew term that the NIV translates as “authority.” It is the word *hod* (הוד). This word can mean weight, authority, splendor, or majesty.⁴ Any of these translations would fit the context. Perhaps a good way to understand it is to phrase it like this: “place some of his (Moshe's) majestic authority upon him.”

Rabbi Munk tells us that the midrash compares this to “a candle lighting another candle.” He continues to explain that according to Rashi

³ Bamidbar Rabbah 21:15

⁴ הוד In *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, electronic text prepared by OakTree Software, inc. version 2.5.

Moses' face was like the sun, which is an inexhaustible source of energy. Joshua's face was like the moon which benefits from the sun's light and reflects its rays.⁵

Secondly, even though God specifically singled out Joshua and made His choice known to Moshe, nevertheless, the Lord told Moshe and Eleazar the High Priest that they were to visibly seek God's confirmation through the use of the Urim and Thummim. This was most likely done to confirm to all Israel that not only was Joshua Moshe's choice, but also that He was God's.

⁵ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 342.