

MOONLIT LEADERSHIP: A MIDRASHIC READING OF JOSHUA'S SUCCESS

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The Book of Joshua represents one of Israel's ideal eras: *Israel served the Lord during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the elders who lived on after Joshua, and who had experienced all the deeds that the Lord had wrought for Israel* (Josh. 24:31). Joshua guided his nation into the Promised Land and offered spiritual leadership in addition to political direction.

Given the nation's propensity toward complaint and rebellion throughout Moses' tenure, it is striking that it remained entirely loyal to God and to Joshua. Only one man – Achan – sinned, and the people never complained to Joshua, even after their demoralizing loss at Ai. In this study, we will consider Joshua's characterization in the Torah and in the Book of Joshua. With a careful survey of the narratives in which Joshua appears, several rabbinic statements serve as catalysts in explaining the roots of his phenomenal success as a leader.

THE BATTLE AGAINST AMALEK

Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, 'Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand.' Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. . . . Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!' (Ex. 17:8-14).

The first time Joshua is mentioned in the Torah he appears without introduction. The reader does not know who Joshua is, or why Moses chose him to serve as military commander in the battle against Amalek. Curiously, the Book of Chronicles reports that Joshua was the grandson of Elishama son of

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Ammihud, the leader of the tribe of Ephraim at the time of the Exodus (I Chr. 7:26-27, cf. Num. 1:10). The omission of this information in the Torah and in the Book of Joshua implies that his noble pedigree was not a significant factor in his being chosen. Clearly, Moses had detected some outstanding qualities in his disciple.¹

At the conclusion of this episode, God instructed Joshua to continue the battle against Amalek after the nation enters the Land. This occurred during the first year in the wilderness, when Moses still expected to be the one to lead his people into the Land of Israel. Why, then, did God give the message to Joshua? Rashi, following the *Mekhilta*, views this as subtly foreshadowing that Joshua, and not Moses, would in fact lead the nation into the Promised Land. Alternatively, according to Ibn Ezra, God could have issued this directive to Joshua at the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, but in the text it was placed with the Amalek narrative because of the thematic connection. If so, Joshua had already been selected to lead the people into the Land. In either case, readers learn from their first introduction to him that Joshua is Moses' intended successor.

ATTENDANT OF MOSES

Joshua is first introduced as a military general, and then he begins to appear as a close spiritual disciple of Moses. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, he left the people in the care of Aaron and Hur (Ex. 24:14). Joshua, however, separated himself from the people and faithfully waited for his master at the base of the mountain (24:13). When Moses later descended to confront the Golden Calf, he encountered his disciple:

When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, 'There is a cry of war in the camp.' But he answered, 'It is not the sound of the tune of triumph, or the sound of the tune of defeat; it is the sound of song that I hear!' (32:17-18).

The first time Joshua is quoted in the Torah, he spoke in error; Moses had to correct him. Joshua then disappeared from the scene for the duration of the Calf narrative, confining himself to the Tent of Meeting: *The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. And he would then return to the camp; but his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth, would not stir out of the Tent* (33:11).

ELDAD AND MEDAD

When Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp during Moses' leadership crisis in Numbers 11, Joshua again reacted before his master:

A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, 'Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!' And Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, 'My lord Moses, restrain them!' But Moses said to him, 'Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!' (Num. 11:27-29).

This second time that Joshua is quoted in the Torah, he again errs in his judgment! Detecting this surprising pattern, one midrash expresses concern with Joshua's future role as the nation's leader:

There were two statements of Joshua which Moses did not find favorable. One was [regarding] the appointment of elders, and the other was at the Golden Calf. . . . Regarding the Golden Calf . . . Moses said, 'Joshua, who will one day lead 600,000 people, is unable to distinguish between different types of voices!' (*Ecc. Rabbah* 9:11).

Although *Joshua . . . would not stir out of the Tent* (Ex. 33:11), there is more to preparation for communal leadership than spiritual growth in isolation. His distance from the nation appears to have created a barrier between himself and those he was being groomed to lead.

THE SPIES

During the debacle with the spies, Joshua was one of the two faithful among them, along with Caleb. However, it is noteworthy that only Caleb spoke out in the first round of the debate (Num. 13:30), whereas Joshua joined him only after the people were irreversibly demoralized (14:6-10). Why was Joshua initially silent? Perhaps, since he had been mistaken before in his judgment, he now waited for Moses to act. Perhaps he believed that the people would not listen to him anyway, since he was Moses' disciple.

Perhaps more germane to the issue, the episode of the spies is prefaced by a reference to Joshua's change of name: *Those were the names of the men whom Moses sent to scout the land; but Moses changed the name of Hosea*

son of Nun to Joshua (13:16). When did this renaming occur – at the time of the spies, or earlier prior to the battle against Amalek where Joshua already is called by his new name?² Ramban on Exodus 17:9 assumes that Moses must have changed Joshua's name earlier, demonstrated by the occurrence of the name Joshua in the Amalek narrative. If so, the literary inclusion of his renaming with the later spies episode is particularly significant.

Following these textual cues, the Talmud states: "[*Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua, saying, 'May God save you from the [wicked] counsel of the [bad] spies [Yah yoshiakha me-atzat meraglim]*"]" (*Sotah* 34b). Did Moses worry about the faith of his disciple? Did he suspect that Joshua would succumb to the counsel of the majority? Perhaps he (or the Talmud) recognized that Joshua may have partially shared the fears of the other spies. This would explain his initial silence, though he eventually did join with Caleb. It appears that Joshua's ambivalence during the episode of the spies is indicative of an unusual personality that subsumed both sides of seemingly irreconcilable views. He had internalized Moses' resolute faith in entering the Land, but also the people's fears and insecurities about the formidable dangers ahead.

MOSES' SUCCESSOR

When God informed Moses that he would not bring the people into the Promised Land, Moses pleaded for a new leader. God responded:

Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey (Num. 27:18-20).

Of course, Joshua was the natural successor by virtue of his being Moses' disciple, but until now he had spoken twice incorrectly (on the Calf and on Eldad-Medad), and had remained silent when it would have been appropriate to speak (on the spies). Capturing this negativity, the sages express further concern with Joshua's upcoming leadership: "*Invest him with **some** of your authority – but not **all** of your authority. The elders of that generation said, 'Moses' face is like the sun and Joshua's like the moon. Alas, for such shame! Alas for such reproach'*" (Bava Batra 75a).

BE STRONG AND RESOLUTE!

The growing uncertainties over Joshua's leadership spiral in Deuteronomy. God ordered Moses to encourage Joshua, and Moses obeyed. The result is a litany of encouragement, yielding the impression that Joshua sorely needed it:

*Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. **Imbue him with strength**, for he shall allot it to Israel (Deut. 1:38).*

*Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with **strength and courage**, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see (3:28).*

*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 the Lord swore to their fathers to give them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them' (31:7).*

*And He charged Joshua son of Nun: '**Be strong and resolute**: for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them on oath, and I will be with you' (31:23).*

These fears are carried over into the Book of Joshua. After Moses died, God encouraged Joshua to be strong and resolute three times in four verses:

***Be strong and resolute**, for you shall apportion to this people the land that I swore to their fathers to assign to them. But you must **be very strong and resolute** to observe faithfully all the Teaching that My servant Moses enjoined upon you . . . I charge you: **Be strong and resolute**; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go (Josh. 1:6-9).*

Even more remarkably, the leaders of the eastern tribes echoed this sentiment: '*Any man who flouts your commands and does not obey every order you give him shall be put to death. Only **be strong and resolute!**' (1:18). By contrast, it is difficult to imagine anyone addressing Moses in this manner. Would Joshua be able to lead a stiff-necked people and guide them during crises?*

SUN VS. MOON LEADERSHIP

Despite the fears that nation and reader may have experienced concerning Joshua's abilities to lead, he became one of Israel's most effective leaders. The only recorded sin of his period was that of Achan (7:1). More impressively, a nation that persistently complained throughout Moses' 40 years of leadership grumbled only once in the Book of Joshua – to the **elders** (and not to Joshua) after they mistakenly struck a treaty with the Gibeonites (9:18). Most remarkably, even after their hearts *sank in total dismay* following their defeat at Ai (7:5), they did not complain to Joshua.

Paradoxically, it may be that the people had more confidence in Joshua than in Moses, precisely because Joshua himself was terrified after the loss at Ai:

'Ah, Lord God!' cried Joshua. 'Why did You lead this people across the Jordan only to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites, to be destroyed by them? If only we had been content to remain on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say after Israel has turned tail before its enemies? When the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land hear of this, they will turn upon us and wipe out our very name from the earth. And what will You do about Your great name?' (7:7-9).

Joshua sounded exactly like the majority of the spies and their followers in the wilderness (Num. 14:1-3; Deut. 1:27). At the same time, however, Joshua made an appeal similar to that of Moses in that episode, that God should be concerned with His reputation among the nations of the world (Num. 14:13-16). Thus, the talmudic passage cited above regarding Joshua's name change (Sotah 34b) has captured Joshua's complex spirit. Joshua first remained silent in the episode of the spies as a result of his fears; subsequently, he courageously joined Caleb against the faithless people. At this time, he shared in elements of both sides, thereby making him uniquely qualified to bring the teachings of Moses to an apprehensive nation.

In contrast, it may have been difficult for the people to trust the ever-resolute Moses. Although the elders may have complained that "Moses is like the sun, Joshua like the moon" (Bava Batra 75a), there was a benefit to Joshua's being like the moon. Moses objectively was superior, but **literally** was like the sun – his people could not even look at him, so he had to wear a veil (Ex. 34:29-35). Moses was privileged to speak with God face to face (Num.

12:8), but the people were unable to speak to Moses face to face! This tension is captured by another talmudic passage:

R. Hanina further said: Everything is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven, as it says, *And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to revere* (Deut. 12:10). Is the fear of heaven such a little thing? . . . Yes; for Moses it was a small thing; as R. Hanina said: To illustrate by a parable, if a man is asked for a big article and he has it, it seems like a small article to him; if he is asked for a small article and he does not possess it, it seems like a big article to him (Berakhot 33b).

Thus, Moses' unparalleled awe of God was so great that he simply could not fathom why his people did not trust God also. Ironically, then, Moses' incomparable faith may have been precisely at the root of his struggles in leading the Israelites. In contrast, the people never rebelled against Joshua, because they detected his fears and therefore viewed him as one of them. Thus, Joshua was able to bridge the world of Moses with their world.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, the author of *Sefat Emet*, offers a further contrast between Moses and Joshua. Unlike the sun, which dominates the sky, the moon allows others, that is, stars, to shine.³ From the very opening of the Book of Joshua, Joshua immediately shared his leadership, turning to the officials of the people (Josh. 1:10). When crossing the Jordan, Joshua gave the orders, but the tribal delegates, priests, Ark, and officials dominate the narrative. The same is true with the encircling of Jericho and the ceremony at Mount Gerizim-Ebal: Joshua was the leader, but the people had a far more active and prominent role than they had under Moses. Moses' brightness in the Torah narratives largely eclipsed their participation. It appears that this further element of Joshua's moon-style leadership empowered many among the people, so that they actively supported and joined in Joshua's efforts.

ONE SANDAL ON, ONE SANDAL OFF

Malbim (on Exodus 3:5) contrasts the parallel scenes between Moses at the Burning Bush and Joshua with the angelic commander outside of Jericho:

And He said, 'Do not come closer. Remove your sandals [na'alekha] from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground' (Ex. 3:5).

The captain of the Lord's host answered Joshua, 'Remove your sandals [na'alkha] from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.' And Joshua did so (Josh. 5:15).

Standing on holy ground, both prophets were commanded to remove their sandals for their respective revelations. However, Malbim observes that in the Hebrew, Moses was commanded '*shal na'alekha* [the plural form for "sandals"] *me'al raglekha,*' whereas the commander ordered Joshua, '*shal na'alkha* [the singular form for "sandal"] *me'al raglekha.*' Ibn Caspi (on Joshua 5:15) does not think that there is any difference on the level of *peshat*, and his approach has been adopted by the NJPS commentary, which translates both as "sandals."

Malbim, however, offers a midrashic-conceptual interpretation. Shoes symbolize human involvement in the world.⁴ Having reached the most exalted level of revelation, Moses was completely elevated to the realm of the metaphysical in his prophecy. Therefore, he was ordered to remove both sandals. In contrast, Joshua removed only one sandal while leaving the other on. In this manner, he entered the metaphysical realm prophetically, but simultaneously remained rooted in this world. Malbim's analysis of Joshua's "one sandal on, one sandal off" leadership is a perfect depiction of his relationship to Moses and to the people. He had one foot in Moses' ideal world of prophecy, but at the same time kept the other with his people.

One may extend Malbim's argument: Moses led the nation in the wilderness, where God provided for His nation directly and supernaturally. In the wilderness, the nation needed a Moses, with "both sandals off," to lead them. Indeed, Joshua's efforts at leadership in the wilderness largely were ineffective, with the notable exception of his military campaign against Amalek, where he led the natural side of the battle while Moses spiritually led the people from atop the hill. Joshua's "one sandal on, one sandal off" leadership, however, would be more appropriate in the natural setting of the Land – he was uniquely qualified to bridge God's continued supervision with human efforts at cultivating a real society.

Joshua's unique combination of Moses' prophetic faith and the people's fears diminished his objective greatness in relation to Moses. His prophecy did not reach the level of Moses'. Joshua's fears concerned Moses to the point where the master renamed Joshua to encourage him to have faith in God's promises and not be swayed by the other spies; similarly, God, Moses, and the people joined in a chorus of encouragements for Joshua. These shortcomings, however, enabled Joshua to succeed as a leader in a manner even his master could not. Similarly, they enabled Joshua to understand the doubts of the people. Precisely these weaknesses may have engendered additional trust among the people. As a result, Joshua was able to bring Moses' teachings to the people, guiding a once stiff-necked and rebellious people to unrivaled faithfulness as they entered the Promised Land.

NOTES

1. Joshua's connection to his tribe of Ephraim in the Book of Joshua is even less pronounced than in the Torah. Other than his inheritance (Josh. 19:49-50) and burial (24:30), we would not have known his tribal origins. He is cast as the leader of the entire nation and as Moses' disciple. Cf. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Joshua* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970) p. 4.
2. Other than one reference to "Hosea" at the end of the Torah (Deut. 32:44), Joshua is always referred to by the name Moses gave him.
3. *Sefat Emet*, vol. 4 (*Bemidbar*), *Parashat Pinehas* 5657.
4. Jews are required to remove their shoes at the Temple and on Yom Kippur to elevate themselves to the level of angels. At the other end of the spectrum, mourners remove their shoes as a sign of degradation. For further discussion of the symbolism of shoes, see Hayyim David Halevi, *Mekor Hayyim ha-Shalem*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Organization for the Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, 1966) pp. 32-34.