



Why Joshua?

Or: In (Ambivalent) Praise of Hesitancy

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As the book of Deuteronomy draws to a close, the Israelites are at last ready to cross the Jordan. But their leader, Moses, cannot go with them (Deuteronomy 31:2). “The crossing is dangerous enough; it is even more so without Moses, upon whom Israel has relied so heavily. Moses must make provision and give assurances for this journey he himself cannot take.”¹ He promises Israel that God will be their leader: “The Lord your God will cross over before you; and He Himself will wipe out those nations from your path and you shall dispossess them... Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or dread of them; for the Lord your God Himself marches with you: He will not fail you or forsake you” (31:3,6). It is crucial to understand what happens here: Moses’ first response to the people’s anxiety over the imminent loss of their leader is not to appoint a successor but to assure them that “the primary pattern of the past will continue: God will be there with [them] and will deliver [them].” What underlies Moses’ words is the realization that “without the power of God at work, the question of a new human leader is moot.”²

God will not lead the people alone.



¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (2001), p. 271.

² Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (1990), p. 218.



But for all that, God will not lead the people alone. The very same verse that declares that “the Lord your God Himself will cross over before you” then adds that “Joshua is the one who will cross over before you” (31:3). As Bible scholar Patrick Miller observes, “Deuteronomy always affirms the interaction of divine and human activity in the accomplishment of [God’s] purposes... God’s leadership and guidance will [therefore] be through the agency of a new leader.”³ Having assured the people of God’s ongoing providential care, Moses now appoints Joshua to succeed him: “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. And the Lord Himself will go before you. He will be with you; He will not fail you or forsake you. Fear not and be not dismayed’” (31:7-8). Earlier, Moses had offered similar encouragement to his loyal servant in private (3:22); here Moses repeats his charge in public, “making his appointment known to all.” Seeking to emphasize that the choice of Joshua is “divinely authorized,”⁴ God too appoints him:⁵ “And He⁶ charged Joshua the son of Nun, ‘Be strong and resolute, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land

³ Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 219.

⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (2003), pp. 291, 293.

⁵ Dennis Olson observes that in 31:7-8, Moses commands Joshua; in 31:14-15, God commands Moses and Joshua; and in 31:23, God commands Joshua, “but no mention is made of Moses.” Over the course of this subtle progression, “Moses literally moves off the stage. He has reached the end of his power, his leadership, and soon his life.” Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (1994), pp. 134-135.

⁶ Although the Septuagint understands Moses to be the subject of this verse, most interpreters maintain that God is the subject. In other words, v. 23 continues vv. 14-15 rather than v. 22. See, for example, the comments of R. Saadia Gaon (882-942), Rashi (1040-1105), and Nahmanides (Ramban, 1194-1270) to Deuteronomy 31:23 (but cf. the comments of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089, 1167) to 31:15); cf. also Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 296; and A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (1979), p. 378.



that I promised them on oath, and I will be with you” (31:23). In endorsing Moses’ commission of Joshua, God “appears in the Tent [of Meeting], in a pillar of cloud, the pillar of cloud having come to rest at the entrance of the tent” (31:14). As Richard Nelson explains, the “direct theophany removes any doubt over Joshua’s authority.”⁷

The Torah reiterates the commissioning of Joshua as Moses’ successor again and again;⁸ Joshua’s crucial role “is [thus] given great emphasis by sheer repetition.”⁹ All of this

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raises a simple question: Why Joshua? What is it about this man in particular that earns him the honor (and the burden) of leading Israel?

When Moses sends spies to scout the land of Canaan, they return with a thoroughly discouraging report. The land, they admit, is rich and bountiful; “it does indeed flow with milk and honey.” But they quickly add that “the people who inhabit the land are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large” (Numbers 13:27-28). Although the spies do not at first say so explicitly, it is clear that they are in favor of abandoning plans to conquer the land. Caleb, “a minority of one,”¹⁰ courageously demurs: “Caleb hushed the people before Moses

⁷ Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (2002), p. 360. Brueggemann adds that the Tent of Meeting is “the special place of presence and disclosure that is presided over by Moses (Exodus 33:7-11). Thus Joshua is admitted to a place where only Moses can go, in order to give ‘sacramental’ force to Joshua’s new role... Joshua is given the marks of authority previously monopolized by Moses.” Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, p. 273. Brueggemann does not appear to intend the term “monopolize” pejoratively.

⁸ Cf. Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:21, 28; 32:3, 7-8, 14, 23; 34:9

⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (2003), p. 295.

¹⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (1990), p. 104.



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and said, ‘Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it’” (13:30). Dismissing Caleb’s words, the spies “spread calumnies about the

land” (13:32); dispirited, the people begin to weep and to rail fiercely against Moses and Aaron (14:1-2). They mutiny. Moses and Aaron, surprisingly, do not defend themselves. Instead they “fall on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites” (14:4-5).¹¹ Stepping into the breach, “Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rend their clothes¹² and exhort the whole Israelite community”: The land is good, they say, and if God so desires, God will give it to us. There is no reason to fear the inhabitants of the land, “for they are our prey... the Lord is with us” (14:5-9).

Note how the story begins: When the spies first begin to undermine Israel’s confidence, it is Caleb, and Caleb alone, who stands against them. Only when the situation deteriorates further does Joshua stand with Caleb in opposition to the spies—and, on some level, to the people as a whole. Like Caleb, Joshua now displays great bravery. But why does he remain silent when the negative report first emerges? Joshua’s reticence does not go unnoticed: When God first condemns the whole unfaithful generation to die in the wilderness, God singles out Caleb as the sole exception: “But My servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me—him I will bring into the land that he entered,

¹¹ For speculation about the precise meaning of this gesture, cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 108.

¹² Milgrom explains that the gesture is a manifestation of “grief and distress because of the humiliation heaped on Moses and particularly because of the implied rebellion against God.” Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 108.



and his offspring shall hold it as a possession” (14:24).¹³ Here, God makes no mention of Joshua. Oddly, however, just a few verses later, God speaks of Caleb and Joshua as a pair: “Not one [of the men over age twenty] shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you,” God says, “save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun” (14:30).

When Moses later recounts the story of those horrible days, the same tension plays itself out. Moses reports on God’s vow that no member of the sinful generation would see

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the land of promise, “none except Caleb son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his descendants will I give the land on which he set foot, because he remained loyal to Me” (Deuteronomy 1:36). Moses says that God was angry at him, too, because of the people’s rebelliousness, and that therefore he, too, would be excluded from the land. In his place, God announces, “Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Imbue him with strength, for he shall allot it to Israel” (1:38). Caleb alone, it seems, merits seeing the land, yet it is Joshua who will lead the people into it. This anomalous passage brings our question into sharper focus: If Caleb is the one who stood valiantly on the side of God, why is he not appointed leader? And conversely, if Joshua hesitated, at least at first, why is he rather than Caleb designated Moses’ heir?

Traditional Jewish commentators subtly probe Joshua’s reticence, which they connect to an odd passage about Joshua’s name: Reporting on Moses’ sending of the spies, the Torah relays

¹³ Cf. Joshua 14:8, where Caleb describes himself as having been loyal to God, but says nothing about Joshua having done the same.



all of their names, but then adds, strangely, that “Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua” (Numbers 13:16). What is the meaning of this name change, and why does it happen—or, in any event, why do we learn about it—at precisely this moment?

A Talmudic Sage explains that in changing Hosea’s name to Joshua (*Yehoshua*), Moses was praying on his behalf before the rebellion of the spies: “May God save you (*Yah Yoshi’akha*) from the designs of the spies” (BT, Sotah 34b). What was it about Joshua that made Moses worry? Targum Yonatan comments tantalizingly that “when Moses saw Joshua’s humility, he called him Joshua [i.e., May God save you].” In the face of widespread sin and corruption, some righteous people are fearless and bold; convinced of the justness of a cause, they unflinchingly take a stand—even if the whole world is against them. But others, the Hasidic Master R. Menahem Mendel of Rimanov (1745-1815) observes, are so humble and self-effacing that they step aside when conflict arises. Moses worries that Joshua was diffident in just this way; such timidity, the Rimanover Rebbe hints, can have disastrous consequences¹⁴ (Ilana De-Hayyei, *Shelah*, s.v. Va-Yikra).

What is the meaning of this name change?

We could perhaps add another dimension to this. Many leaders want desperately to be loved—and religious leaders are certainly no

exception. To take a stand against the rest of the community—and to do so immediately, audaciously, unhesitatingly—is extraordinarily difficult. For many people—for many *profoundly good* people—the kind of unpopularity this would entail is simply an intolerable

¹⁴ The Rimanover associates this type of humility with the Sage R. Zechariah b. Abkulas, whom the Sages blame for the destruction of the Temple and the exile. See BT, Gittin 56a, and T Shabbat 16:7.



prospect. Perhaps Moses worries that Joshua is too reticent and unassuming to resist the plans of the other spies; perhaps, too, he fears that Joshua does not want to be loathed—and so will hold his peace. Whatever the exact nature of Moses' worry, it proves prescient. In the first moment of truth, at least, while Caleb speaks, Joshua falls silent.

So the question arises again, only more sharply: If Caleb is so heroic and stout-hearted—if, like Abraham, he is willing to stand on one side while the whole world stands on the other (Genesis Rabbah 42:8)—why does God pass him over when it is time for a new leader? And if Joshua is—at times at least—halting and indecisive, why does God choose him to succeed Moses?

In appointing Joshua rather than Caleb, God teaches us a powerful—and enormously subtle—lesson: Not every hero is meant to be a leader. There are moments in life when intrepidity can be a great boon, but there are also times when it can cause significant harm. In a leader utterly unafraid to go it alone, confidence can easily give way to over-confidence, and boldness to brashness. A leader utterly certain that he is right—even when everyone around him disagrees—can do great things, but he can also cause tremendous damage. In a time of acute crisis, the moment may call for a resolute, even brazen leader; but to lead the people over time, a leader willing to pause, however briefly, is to be preferred.¹⁵ As God's choice of Joshua indicates, sometimes a little

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¹⁵ Cf. what I have written about the necessity of self-doubt for good leadership in “Why Moses? Or: What Makes a Leader?” Parashat Shemot 5774, available [here](#).



hesitancy can go a long way.¹⁶

Consider also the task placed before Joshua: He is to lead the people in conquering the land. Overconfidence is a danger in any leader, but it is all the more perilous in a military one. An abundantly self-assured leader may not flinch in the face of danger—which can, in different circumstances, be either a blessing or a curse. God’s judgment, it seems, is that in the next stage of Israel’s journey, with battles ahead, a degree of tentativeness may actually be a good and necessary thing.¹⁷ Remember: Joshua is not lacking in courage. At great personal danger, he does stand up against the will of the people (Numbers 14:10). But the moment’s hesitation he displays, so problematic in one context, may be invaluable in another.

Shabbat Shalom.

See Shai Held’s other *divrei Torah* on parashat Va-Yelekh (and Nitzavim):

- [5774 – *Returning to Sinai Every Seventh Year: Equality, Vulnerability, and the Making of Community*](#)

¹⁶ R. Tamir Granot offers a different (but potentially complementary) approach to the differences between Joshua and Caleb: Whereas Joshua thinks of himself as Moses’ faithful servant whose leadership is a reflection of that of his master, Caleb is a totally independent spirit. According to Granot, Caleb’s independence allows him to rise to the occasion in confronting the spies but also disqualifies him for long-term leadership because, Granot maintains, only one who “needs Moses” can properly succeed him. This last point requires clarification. See Tamir Granot, “Between Caleb and Joshua in the Story of the Spies” (Hebrew), available [here](#).

¹⁷ I am not certain about this last step I have taken. God’s instructions that Joshua be “strong and resolute” (Deuteronomy 31:23) and Moses’ charge that Joshua “not fear or be dismayed” (31:8) could be taken as making no space at all for tentativeness in the military battles about to unfold. And yet the choice of someone who by nature has a (small) degree of hesitancy still seems salient. God could choose Caleb, who might well need no reassurance, but instead appoints Joshua, who does. All of this requires further investigation.

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