



Regarding Leadership and Spirit

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Parashat Pinhas 5777

What are the required qualities of a leader? What makes a good leader? How is a retiring leader supposed to designate a successor? Our *parashah* suggests surprising and complex answers to these questions.

One of the most dramatic moments in this week's Torah reading is when God informs Moshe how he will die, and reminds him why he will not be allowed to continue to lead the people as they enter into the land of Israel:

במדבר כז, י"ב – י"ד

עֲלֵה אֶל הַר הָעֵבְרִים הַזֶּה וּרְאֵה אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וּרְאִיתָהּ אַתָּה וְנָאֲסַפְתָּ אֶל עַמִּיךָ
גַּם אַתָּה כְּאֲשֶׁר נֶאֱסַף אֶהְרֹן אֲחִיךָ: כְּאֲשֶׁר מְרִיתָם פִּי בְּמִדְבַר צֹן בְּמַרְיַבַּת הָעֵדֻה לְהַקְדִּישְׁנִי בַּמַּיִם
לְעֵינֵיהֶם הֵם מִי מְרִיבַת קֹדֶשׁ מִדְבַר צֹן:

BeMidbar 27:12-14

¹²“Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. ¹³When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was. ¹⁴For, in the wilderness of Zin, when the community was contentious, you disobeyed My command to uphold My sanctity in their sight by means

of the water.” Those are the Waters of Meribath-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin.

Later on, in the book of Devarim, Moshe begs for clemency. But here, in our *parashah*, Moshe seems to resign himself to his fate and turns his focus to the future. Moshe requests that God appoint a replacement for him: “Let YHVH, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint (*yifkod*) someone over the community” (BeMidbar 27:16).

Every word in this request is fascinating and loaded; we will here address just a few points.

The word “appointment” (*yifkod*) here comes from the root *pkd*. Indeed, it is common in the Bible for this verb to be used when people are assigned to positions of authority. For example, the Torah describes how Yoseph was assigned a position of authority by Potiphar:

בראשית לט, ד'

וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף תָּן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׁרֶת אֹתוֹ וַיִּפְקְדֵהוּ עַל-בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל-יִשְׁלֹוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ:

Bereishit 39:4

He took a liking to Yoseph. He made him his personal attendant and appointed him (*vayafvideihu*) to be in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned.

However, the root *pkd* can also invoke the sense of Divine presence and intervention. In the very next verse of the Yoseph story, we hear how this appointment affected Joseph and Potiphar's household:

שם לט, ה'

וַיְהִי מֵאֲזַי הַפְּקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלֹוֹ וַיִּבְרָךְ ה' אֶת-בֵּית הַמִּצְרִי בְּגִלְגַּל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בִּרְכַּת ה'
בְּכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלֹוֹ בַּבַּיִת וּבַשָּׂדֶה:

Bereishit 39:5

And from the time that the Egyptian appointed him to be in charge of his household and of all that he owned, God blessed his house for Yoseph's sake, so that the blessing of God was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside.

Even more directly, the root *pkd* is used by Yoseph himself when he tells his brothers about a future redemption to take place at God's hands:

שם נ, כ"ד

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲנֹכִי מֵת. וְאֱלֹהִים פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם וְהַעֲלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת:

Bereishit 50:24

At length, Yoseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice (*pakod yifkod*) of you and bring you up from this land to the land...."

In light of this linguistic connection, we can suggest that Moshe's request is not merely that God appoint a functional successor, but rather that this appointment carry with it Divine presence and involvement—both for the leader and the people—as was the case in Moshe's life. Indeed, God goes above and beyond the call in responding to Moshe's request by choosing a man whose qualities are identical to Moshe's understanding of God's own qualities:

במדבר כז, ט"ו – י"ח

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לֵאמֹר: יִפְקֹד ה' אֱלֹהֵי הָרוּחַת לְכָל בָּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל הָעֵדָה: ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶ�ה קַח לְךָ אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן נּוּן אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ בּוֹ...

BeMidbar 27:15-18

Moshe spoke to God, saying, “Let God, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint (*yifkod*) someone over the community...And God answered Moshe, “Single out Yehoshua son of Nun, a man imbued with spirit, and lay your hand upon him...”

The God of spirits appoints a man imbued with spirit.

In early *midrashim* from the period of the Mishnah, we find two dueling narratives that base themselves on the expression “God of spirits” used here to describe God. In Sifrei BeMidbar, God is described as One who is responsible for all spirits—a ruler and master over the lives of all people: “Let God, God of the spirits of all flesh—Here Scripture clarifies that there is no spirit that does not emerge from God” (Sifrei BeMidbar Pinhas #139).

The Sifrei’s description proceeds to connect the phrase “God of spirits” to the root *pkd*: “R. Eliezer the son of R. Yose Hagelili says:...As long as a person is alive, his souls is entrusted (*pekudah*) to his maker, as it says...‘I will entrust my spirit in His hand.’” In this description, God is the “God of spirits” in account of being responsible for the spirits of human beings who entrust their spirits to God.

But the explanation of a parallel *midrash* in Sifrei Zuta reveals a different perspective. There, the God of spirits is described as a God who can contain a variety of spirits, a diverse range of people. The emphasis here is not on God’s authority but God’s capacity:

ספרי זוטא פרק כז פסוק ט"ז

יפקוד ה' אלהי הרוחות לכל בשר – האל שהוא יודע דעת ורוח של כל אחד ואחד איזו בגבוה איזו בנמוכה איזו הימנת' ואיזו קפדנית [וכן הוא אומר היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל מעשיהם (תהלים לג, ט"ו) ואומר ותוכן לבות ה' (משלי כא, ב')]:

“Let God, God of the spirits of all flesh—The God who knows the thoughts and spirit of each and every person, who is tall and who is short, who is measured and who exacting. [And so it says: “The One who fashioned their hearts together and understands all of their ways” (Psalms 33:15). And so it says: “God probes hearts” (Proverbs 21:2).]

Different *midrashim* then also connect God’s nature as a “God of spirits” to the selection of Yehoshua.¹

Sifrei Zuta, as we saw, describes God as one who understands what is distinctive about each and every human being. This text goes on to connect this divine quality with Moshe’s request:

ספרי זוטא פרק כז פסוק י"ח

ויאמר ה' אל משה קח לך את יהושע", לפי שאמר משה יפקוד ה' אלהי הרוחות אמר לו המקום משה הרי מה שבקשת נתון לך: — ... "איש אשר רוח בו", שיהא הולך עם הקפדנים כפי דעתן ועם המתונים כפי דעתן:

Sifrei Zuta 27:18

“God said to Moshe: Take Yehoshua”—Since Moshe said: “Let God, God of the spirits of all flesh,” the Omnipresent said to Moshe: Your request has been granted... “A man imbued with spirit”—he will know how to engage those who are exacting as well as those who are measured.”

This is a fascinating midrash, for a few reasons. First, as we noted, it aligns Moshe’s description of God as “God of spirits” with God’s description of Yehoshua as “a man

¹ Rabbeinu Bahya, in his commentary on BeMidbar 27:16, sees Moshe’s understanding of God’s nature described here as directly related to his request. According to R. Bahya, Moshe asks God to use the Divine insights about human beings in order to arrive at an appropriate choice: “Let God, God of the spirits of all flesh”—You who know the spirit of each and every person and which of them is worthy to be their leader.

imbued with spirit.” Second, it suggests that Yehoshua himself was a man who could embrace diverse people and engage with them. Third, the *midrash* suggests that God understood from Moshe’s mere description of the Divine, that Moshe was seeking a replacement imbued with the very qualities captured by that description.

Rashi clarifies and sharpens all of this for us:

רש"י במדבר פרק כז פסוק ט"ז

"אלהי הרוחות" – למה נאמר? אמר לפניו: ריבוננו של עולם גלוי וידוע לפניך דעתו של כל אחד ואחד ואינן דומין זה לזה, מנה עליהם מנהיג שיהא סובל כל אחד ואחד לפי דעתו:

Rashi on BeMidbar 27:16

“God of spirits”—What is the point of this phrase? Moshe said to God: Master of the Universe! Everyone’s unique and diverse thoughts are revealed and known to you—Appoint a leader for them who will be able to bear each and every one of them.

And so, Moshe’s request and hope is for a leader who will be able to embrace the multivocality of the community and the diverse and varied individuals who comprise it.

I will end with a note from an adjacent section of our *parashah*, and a suggestion that these two are connected. Right before Moshe requests a successor, we hear about the request of the daughters of Tzelofhad: “Give us an inheritance among our father’s brothers” (BeMidbar 27:4). Moshe does not give them an immediate and direct answer, rather he refers the matter to God: “Moshe brought their claim to God.” The divine response is unambiguous: “God said to Moshe as follows: Indeed, the daughters of Tzelofhad speak

justly” (BeMidbar 27:5,7).

God here is able to embrace the statements and claims of the daughters of Tzelofhad, to proclaim them as just, even when their words push beyond mainstream thinking of the day. I would like to suggest that it is Moshe’s experience of God here that inspires him to turn to God as the “God of spirits,” the God who is capable of hearing many different voices and of bringing them into the divine realms of truth and justice. Perhaps this is how we should understand Moshe’s request for a “man imbued with spirit”—someone who understands the spirits of different people. Perhaps Moshe understands and has internalized his own shortcomings. He was not able (on his own) to fully embrace all of the “spirits” and to accept the words of the daughters of Tzelofhad. He therefore hopes for a new leader who will succeed him and who can attain these divine heights.