

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30; Hosea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20) September 10, 2021
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We have entered that liminal part of the Jewish year, a time of ending and preparing for new beginnings, a time of reflection and return. The Shabbat that falls between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of return. Our Haftarah portions urge us to return to HaShem, Who acknowledges sincere repentance with mercy. Our Torah reading, which is often read as a double parashah with Nitzavim, is the shortest parashah in the Torah, consisting of a single chapter. Nearing the end of his life, Moses speaks to the people, and then, for all to hear, he addresses his chosen successor Joshua. To the people, he reiterates HaShem's promise to destroy the nations now occupying the land they are to inhabit, and admonishes them to follow the commandments as they proceed. He tells them, "Be strong and courageous! Neither fear nor be dismayed of them [the present inhabitants], for the Lord your God, He is the One Who goes with you. He will neither fail you, nor forsake you." (31:6) And to Joshua he says, "Be strong and courageous! For you shall come with this people to the land which the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them. And you shall apportion it to them as an inheritance. The Lord, He is the One Who goes before you; He will be with you; He will neither fail you, nor forsake you. Do not fear, and do not be dismayed." (31:7-8) Later, in verse 31:23, Moses reiterates his commandment to Joshua, this time in the name of HaShem: "Be strong and courageous" For you shall bring the children of Israel to the land that I have sworn to them, and I will be with you." The two commandments to Joshua sound similar, but our sages see a profound difference between coming with and bringing. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 8a) contains a pithy interpretation of what Joshua's leadership should entail: "Rabbi Yochanan reconciled the difference between these two charges and said, "Moses said to Joshua in the first verse, 'You and the elders of the generation will enter into Eretz Yisrael with the people, i.e., the elders will assist you in the leadership.' In the second verse, the Holy One Blessed be He, said to Joshua. 'You yourself must bring the people: Take a rod and strike the people upon their skulls.' There must be one clear and authoritative leader for the generation, and there may not be two or more leaders for the generation." In other words, there is to be a single leader, but that leader must respect the opinions of, and work with the leaders under him. Moses had learned from his own father-in-law (Parashah Yitro) that no leader can do everything alone. Yitro taught him to set up a chain of command and enable responsible people to share power under his leadership. Leadership is difficult, often lonely, and rarely without some opposition. It is not about being popular, but rather, about having the confidence to determine and enact what is best for the people. Success depends on choosing a good team and making wise decisions based on their advice. Moses speaks from the fullness of his 40-year experience leading this diverse and fractious group of people out of slavery into freedom and autonomy. Joshua must listen to and work with the elders, but the ultimate responsibility is his alone. Indeed, he will need a strong chain of command and trustworthy advisors, not only during the initial phase of conquering and settling the land, but also – and more importantly – during the process of establishing a society based on the life-sustaining principles of Torah. Of course, there will be disagreements, complaints, setbacks, and a host of other unforeseen difficulties. Leadership requires enormous patience and finely tuned discernment. No wonder "Be strong and courageous" is repeated so often! Finally, leadership entails knowing when to step down and how to do so with grace and dignity. Moses not only passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua he also completes writing the Torah and passes it to the priests to be safeguarded for the people. This Torah is to be brought out during Sukkot at the end of every 7 years – i.e., the year of *shmitah*, and read to all the people – to everyone: men, women, children, and alien residents. All are to hear the words and learn how to observe the commandments they contain. Rashi teaches that "this Torah" refers only to Deuteronomy, which recapitulates the statutes and ordinances. The Temple is long gone and our people are scattered over the entire globe. But whenever we gather to read and study Torah together, we are carrying on this tradition. We have just entered the *shmitah* year, the year of sabbatical for the land of Israel. In this era of global climate change, we are urgently called upon to take the Torah's overarching message to heart. Every time we recite the second paragraph of our *shema Yisrael* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21), we learn anew that our lives and the lives of every creature on this earth depend on our willingness to live within healthy boundaries. We have been egregiously careless with our earth's resources, heedlessly pursuing the gods of our own interests with little thought to the future. The concept of *shmitah* inspires us to rethink our rampant consumerism. Ready or not, the climate crisis is bringing us into a new paradigm, driving the message home with drought and flood, storms and fire. It is time for us all to "be strong and courageous," to heed the warnings in our Torah and from climate experts, and to adapt our lifestyle to help the earth heal and ensure that our progeny will be able to live healthy lives on a healthy planet.

Shabbat shalom!