

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Sh'lach, Numbers, Chapters 13-15 | June 29, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Joshua, Truman, and the Destiny of Leadership

My favorite scene in one of my favorite books, David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman, is the moment when Truman is rushed from Capitol Hill to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue after Franklin Roosevelt's death:

At the White House, the long black car turned off Pennsylvania, through the northwest gate, and swept up the drive, stopping under the North Portico. The time was 5:25.

Two ushers were waiting at the door. They took his hat and escorted him to a small, oak-paneled elevator, more like an ornate cage, that had been installed in the Theodore Roosevelt era and that ascended now very slowly to the second floor.

In the private quarters, across the center hall, in her sitting room, Mrs. Roosevelt was waiting. With her were Steve Early and her daughter and son-in-law, Anna and John Boettiger. Mrs. Roosevelt stepped forward and gently put her arm on Truman's shoulder.

"Harry, the President is dead."

Truman was unable to speak.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he said at last.

"Is there anything *we* can do for *you*," she said. "For you are the one in trouble now."

Even Truman, it seems, did not immediately absorb what the moment meant for him: now he would be overseeing a world war, and the future of civilization. Not long before, he had been a senator, sent to Washington by the Missouri political machine, attempting to resist the desire of the DNC to place him on the Democratic ticket. Now, he was president; and if he was stunned, many Americans, McCullough tells us, were even more so.

"Good God, Truman will be President," it was being said everywhere. "If Harry Truman can be President, so could my next-door neighbor." People were fearful about the future of the country,



fearful the war would drag on longer now. “What a great, great tragedy. God help us all,” wrote David Lilienthal, head of TVA [the Tennessee Valley Authority]. The thought of Truman made him feel physically ill. “The country and the world don’t deserve to be left this way. . . .”

As for the generals overseeing the war, McCullough tells us that they too lacked confidence in Roosevelt’s successor:

In a house at Marburg, Germany, three American generals, Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton, sat up much of the night talking about Roosevelt and speculating on the sort of man Truman might be. All three were greatly depressed. “From a distance Truman did not appear at all qualified to fill Roosevelt’s large shoes,” Bradley wrote. Patton was bitter and more emphatic. “It seems very unfortunate that in order to secure political preference, people are made Vice President who are never intended, neither by Party nor by the Lord, to be Presidents.”

The man in Moses’ shadow was Joshua, and many of us, studying the stories in which he appears, might not have assumed that it would be he who would lead Israel after Moses’ death. But he was indeed destined for leadership . . .

Patton, of course, was wrong; if anything, the utterly unlikely nature of Truman’s rise to power, and the way in which he wielded it, leaves a religiously minded student of history to think that, in fact, he was indeed intended by the Almighty to be president. And the episode is instructive, because there was a man who lived in the shadow of a leader—a leader named Moses who was the greatest Jew who ever lived. The man in Moses’ shadow was Joshua, and

many of us, studying the stories in which he appears, might not have assumed that it would be he who would lead Israel after Moses’ death. But he was indeed destined for leadership—and this tells us something about leadership itself.

Joshua is introduced to us in our reading as one of the twelve spies sent to scout out the Holy Land. His name in Hebrew, “*Y’hoshua*,” means “God will save.” But his original name, we are told, was “*Hoshea*,” a similar appellation, but without reference to the Almighty. The new name was bestowed by the leader he served:

And Moses called Hoshea son of Nun *Y’hoshua*. (Numbers 13:16)

When was his name changed? The simplest explanation, offered by some commentators, is that this occurred shortly after the Exodus, when Amalek attacked and Joshua rallied the Israelites to war. The name reflected the salvation God provided at this moment:

Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel at Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand. So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up



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to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. (Exodus 17:8–11)

This is the first appearance of Joshua in the Bible. That Joshua has courage is clear; but he acts at the orders of Moses, not on his own. Indeed, the very fact that his name has been changed by Moses can be seen as a sign that his entire identity has been molded by his mentor. He is known in the Bible as “*m’sharet Moshe*,” “Moses’ servant,” or, perhaps, “he who ministers to Moses.” In last week’s reading, he makes manifest this aspect of his identity when other prophets appear in Israel and his immediate reaction is concern for the glory and dignity of the man he serves:

And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, My lord Moses, imprison them. But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them! (Numbers 11:27–29)

With this in mind, let us examine Joshua’s appearance in our *parashah*. The twelve spies scout out the Holy Land, and return to the Israelite encampment. They describe the land’s many virtues, and then announce that it is unconquerable.

It is shocking to read of men who have already witnessed the miraculous manifestation of the Almighty suddenly lacking all confidence. In Bible 365, we mentioned the story of the Union general George McClellan, who led a massive army, and whose intelligence operatives had alerted him to Lee’s plan prior to the battle of Antietam, also known as the battle of Sharpsburg. With all of his advantages, McClellan lacked the confidence to act. Perhaps the best line about McClellan was uttered by a soldier on the other side of that battle, an aide to Robert E. Lee:

There was a single item in our advantage, but it was an important one. McClellan had brought superior forces to Sharpsburg, but he had also brought himself.

McClellan let his every anxiety come to the fore in exercising leadership, and it hindered him profoundly. Likewise, the scouts were, according to the Torah, “*kulam anashim, rashei b’nei Yisrael*,” “all men of prominence, heads of the children of Israel” (Numbers 13:3). Yet their fears get the better of them, and their fear proves infectious.

Only two of the scouts resist, insisting that Moses can be trusted, and that God was with Israel: Joshua, and Caleb of the tribe of Judah. Yet a careful reading of what unfolds next indicates that it is Caleb, rather than Joshua, who seizes the initiative. At first, it is only Caleb who speaks:

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once . . . (Numbers 13:30)

Only later does Joshua also join in:



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Then all the congregation raised a loud cry; and the people wept that night. . . . And they said to one another, Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel.

And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, rent their clothes; and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. (Numbers 14:1–8)

God punishes the Israelites, dooming them to wander in the desert for 40 years; and originally the Almighty Himself singles out only one man as an exception, saying to Moses:

None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers; and none of those who despised me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. (Numbers 14:22–24)

It is a striking description of independent leadership; Caleb, we are informed, “has a different spirit.” The phrase is intended to emphasize the inner compass which marks the leader, a compass that is not a mere weathervane directed by the zeitgeist, by the “spirit of the times.” Only afterward does the Almighty add a reference to Joshua:

Not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun. (Numbers 14:30)

Both Caleb and Joshua resist the fear of the other scouts, but it is Caleb who seems to radiate leadership potential at this moment, with his “different spirit.”

Forty years later—as we shall read several weeks from now—Moses will ask the Almighty to appoint his successor, and he will echo God’s words here by beseeching Him to choose a leader based on his inner spirit:

Moses said to the Lord, Let the Lord, the **God of the spirits of all flesh**, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep which have no shepherd. (Numbers 27:15–17)

We may well expect the Almighty at this point to designate Caleb as the next leader, and we are, perhaps, meant to be surprised when it is Joshua who is designated. But God’s language is noteworthy:

And the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, **a man in whom is the spirit**, and lay your hand upon him. (Numbers 27:18)



It is as if the Almighty is informing Moses, 40 years later, that the independent spirit that was found in Caleb is manifest in Joshua as well.

To study history from a biblical perspective is to see providence.

What are we to make of this? It is Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin who, drawing on rabbinic writings, compares Moses and Joshua to the sun and the moon. The moon's light is both essential and inspiring; but in the presence of the sun its light is not noticed. Joshua's devotion to Moses meant that so long as the greatest of prophets was alive, so long as Joshua basked in Moses' prophetic glow, Joshua's love for, and loyalty to, Moses kept him from independent action. Some leaders emerge naturally from the beginning; but others need to be placed in positions of power for their extraordinary gifts to reveal themselves. The poignant fact about Joshua's life is that for 40 years he faithfully ministered to Moses; for him to emerge as a leader, the man to whom he ministered had to pass away.

Our *haftarah* takes us to the time during which Joshua leads the people of Israel. The sun that is Moses has recently set; and the moon that is Joshua emerges in all its luminousness. And it is thus revealed that the original name bestowed by Moses, "God will save," is a reference not only to Joshua's battle against Amalek, but to Joshua's life and leadership after Moses' death, to the providential path paved in history itself.

To study history from a biblical perspective is to see providence. Another one of my favorite passages in McCullough's book describes the DNC's Bob Hannegan visiting Roosevelt in Chicago before the 1944 convention and emerging with a letter on White House stationary:

Dear Bob:

You have written me about Harry Truman and Bill Douglas. I should, of course, be very glad to run with either of them and believe that either one of them would bring real strength to the ticket.

Always sincerely,
Franklin Roosevelt

McCullough then adds this fascinating passage, citing Grace Tully, FDR's secretary:

Whether it had been written earlier in Washington or was produced to order that day is not certain. Grace Tully, however, said Hannegan had come out of the President's sitting room with a letter in his hand naming two acceptable running mates, William O. Douglas first, Harry Truman second, and that Hannegan told her the President wanted it retyped with the order of the names reversed. To her, the reason for the switch seemed obvious. "By naming Truman first it plainly implied . . . that he was the preferred choice of the President." Hannegan would later deny making any such switch, and since the first copy of the letter was thrown away by another secretary who did the actual typing, there was no way to confirm or disprove the story.



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Could the simple reversal of two names have shaped the presidency, and the affairs of history that followed, including the founding of the state of Israel? Perhaps, and if so, we can marvel at the way in which these events unfolded. What is clear is that, while of course biblical and modern leadership are in many ways very different, there were those who sensed the inner spirit of political leadership in Truman at the very moment when the presidency was thrust upon him. McCullough tells us:

There were some . . . who, facing the prospect of a Truman presidency, felt confident the country was in good hands. They knew the man, they said. They understood his origins. They had seen how he handled responsibility and knew the inner resources he could draw on. As before and later in his life, confidence in Harry Truman was greatest among those who knew him best.

“Truman is honest and patriotic and has a head full of good horse sense. Besides, he has guts,” wrote John Nance Garner to Sam Rayburn, who was himself assuring reporters that Truman would make a good, sound President “by God,” because, “He’s got the stuff in him.” To arch-Republican Arthur Vandenberg, writing the night of April 12, Truman was “a *grand person* with every good intention and high honesty of purpose.” Could Truman “swing the job?” Vandenberg speculated in his diary. “I think he can.”

Asked years later what his feelings were when he realized Truman was President, John J. McCloy, the Assistant Secretary of War, said, “Oh, I felt good. Because I *knew* him. I knew the kind of man he was.”

Perhaps most revealing of the testimonies McCullough cites were the words Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote to his son about the impression he had formed of the new president:

He was straightforward, decisive, simple, entirely honest. He, of course, has the limitations upon his judgment and wisdom that the limitations of his experience produce, but I think that he will learn fast and will inspire confidence. It seems to me a blessing that he is the President and not Henry Wallace.

It was indeed a blessing; and as we study in our *parashah* the early story of a man who will lead ancient Israel after Moses, we ponder the twists and turns of providence, and pray that it makes itself openly manifest again in our own age.

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