

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayelech)

One of the great challenges in life is knowing when to lead and when to follow. This is especially true in the military, as witness the different philosophies of the role of officers in the field, in different military doctrines.

The Israeli army, almost since its inception, has trained its commanders to lead by example. Many attribute the birth of this concept to the battle for Latrun in 1948.

Latrun sits on top of one of the most strategically important crossroads in Israel, on a hilltop overlooking the main highway from the coastal plains to Jerusalem, and it commands the entrance to the valley through which one must travel to Jerusalem.

Every army that ever wanted to take this holy city had to pass beneath this hill, which is why it is not only the site of many ancient fortifications, but was used by the British as a prime location for one of their Taggart fortresses.

In 1948, when Israel was fighting its war of Independence, the British handed control of this fortress to the Jordanian Legion, and Israel was left with the near impossible challenge of trying to take this fortress from below.

To compound this difficult situation, most of the Israeli men fighting in this battle were refugees fresh off the boats from the DP camps and the horrors of Europe. One could barely call them soldiers; they were taken off the boats when they arrived, asked to volunteer, taught how to hold a rifle and shoot a few bullets, and sent to the front lines.

Israel was fighting a war for its very survival, and with the echoes of six million dead ringing in her ears, had no choice but to commit every available man and woman to the battle. Many of these 'soldiers' could not even speak the same language as their commanders, let alone function as a cohesive unit, and soon found themselves completely overwhelmed, under the expert guns of the British-trained men of the Jordanian legion atop Latrun.

So what do you do if you are an officer charged with taking such a hilltop, commanding men who do not understand what you are saying, much less have any idea of what you want from them and how they are supposed to get to the top of that hill?

There is only one thing you can do in such a situation: you have to lead by example. And so, somewhere on the dark hills of Latrun, overlooking the ancient battlegrounds of Joshua and David, a single anonymous officer, most probably overcome with emotion and frustration, no longer able to watch his new recruits being cut to pieces by the Jordanian gunners, rose from his place with a single word on his lips:

“Acharai!” “After me!”

As one, these men with no military training, and no army experience whatsoever, followed their officer up the hill. And as other commanders saw this they too, yelled out the single word “Acharai!” and led their troops into battle.

Much more important than the battle itself, this philosophy of officers leading by example, became one of the backbones of Officer training in the Israeli Army, and in fact this slogan is engraved over the stone entrance of the Israeli Officers Course training base in the Negev Desert.

Although it sounds very romantic, there is a terrible price we pay for this philosophy, and it is a little too easy to assume it is always correct. The Lebanon war is a good case in point. The Russian military doctrine by which our enemies believes is that officers need to be one stage further back in the battle, from where they can get a better sense of the overall picture and command their troops more effectively. More importantly, the Israeli army loses a disproportionately large number of officers due to their policy of officers leading their men into battle.

In the Lebanon war, the central column whose mission was to reach the Beirut-Damascus Highway and cut off the Syrian supply lines, found themselves engaged primarily in Mountain warfare against a committed and heavily entrenched enemy.

On the third day of the war, the men of the 532nd tank Battalion were charged with taking control of the crossroads just outside the Arab village of Jezzin, deep in the Shouf Mountains. The only road that could handle armored movement was a snake-like path that could barely be called a road, which wound its way up to their objective.

Arab strategy is based on the Russian belief that a fixed and prepared position is always the best defense, even against a mobile enemy. In this case, they were quite correct. They had taken the turrets off a number of T-62 main battle tanks, and set them in the earth on the sides of this road. Offering a much smaller target to approaching Armor, they had situated themselves just around every bend in the road, and their guns were already loaded and targeted on the exact spot an enemy tank coming up the hill would appear. Each turret had a three-man crew of a gunner, loader, and commander (drivers obviously being superfluous), and all they had to do when the Israelis showed up was fire the cannon.

Because these turrets were both well camouflaged, as well as being such small targets to begin with, they did not attract attention from the air, which is why I have been led to understand, no air support was detailed for this mission. Worse, we had no idea what was waiting just around the bend on the road up to Jezzin. And because every Israeli armored column was always led by at least a company commander, we lost a disproportionately high number of commanders in those mountains. Eventually, the army decided that platoon commanders (Lieutenants) would lead these columns instead of Company Commanders (captains). It is impossible to describe the intensity of the emotions that fill you when you are leading an entire column up such a road. Around every bend in the road an enemy 105mm cannon might be waiting, and as you clutch the over-ride toggle controls that allow you to control the main gun, already loaded with a shell in the breech, you realize you are back in the wild west, two 'gunfighters', closing their distance, guns drawn, with whoever shooting first winning the battle.

I recall vividly the extensive debates that accompanied this decision in the battalion staff meetings at the time. On the one hand, we weren't trained to send our men into battle while we directed strategy from the rear. How could our men respect and follow us if we weren't willing to lead the way? And yet, this principle was getting a lot of commanders killed, and an army without officers is not an army, it's a rabble.

Above and beyond the question of military strategy, this is a question that accompanies us in life in so many ways. When do we need to lead by example, and when do we need to take a step back and follow others?

Three thousand years ago, on a lonely hilltop overlooking the Jordan River, Moshe and Yehoshua (Joshua) may well have had just such a moment.

This week, as we read the Portion of *Vayelech*, Moshe is preparing his final farewell to the Jewish people, and as part of this painful process he must ensure that leadership is passed on to the next generation:

“Vayikra Moshe le’Yehoshua, va’yomer eilav le’einei kol Yisrael: chazak ve’ematz, ki’ atah tavo’ et ha’am ha’zeh el ha’aretz, asher nishba’ Hashem la’avotam la’tet la’hem, ve’atah tanchilenah’ otam.”

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him: be strong and of courage, for you shall bring this people in to the land that Hashem swore to their fathers to give to them and you shall cause them to inherit it.” (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 31:7)

How painful this moment must have been for Moshe; not only will he never enter the land he has spent forty years in the desert trying to reach; not only must he bid farewell to his people who will now leave him behind, but he is actually invested with charging his successor to take his place.

And how challenging this moment must have been as well for Yehoshua, the life-long student of Moshe; the follower who must now become the leader. And there will be little guidance from Moshe and his forty years of experience, as Yehoshua leads the Jewish people into their new land, leaving his beloved mentor behind.

Interestingly, G-d Himself repeats this charge almost word for word some fifteen verses later:

*“Va’yetzav et Yehoshua Bin- Nun va’yomer: chazak ve’ematz, ki’ atah **tavi’** et **B’nei Yisrael** el ha’aretz, asher nishba’ti la’hem, ve’anochi’ e’heyeh imach.” (31:23)*

And (G-d) commanded Yehoshua the son of Nun and said: *be strong and of courage, for you shall bring the children of Israel into the land that I swore to them and I will be with you.*

Why is G-d charging Yehoshua with his mission again if Moshe has already given him this exact speech? And if indeed G-d is charging Yehoshua, then what need is there for Moshe to have done it as well? Even stranger, if both Moshe and G-d are charging Yehoshua with his mission, wouldn't one expect it to come from G-d *first*?

Rav Yochanan notes in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 8a) that there is a peculiar difference between these two verses:

*“‘Ki atah’ tavo’, u’le’halan k’tiv: ‘Ki atah **tavi**. Amar Rav Yochanan: Amar lo’ Moshe le’Yehoshua: atah ve’ha’zkeinim sheba’dor. Amar leih’ ha’Kadosh Baruch Hu: tul makel ve’hach al kodkodam; Dabar echad le’dor, ve’lo’ shnei dabarim le’dor.”*

*““For you will come (tavo’) and later (v. 23) it says you will bring (**tavi**). Said Rav Yochanan: Moshe said to Yehoshua: you and the elders of the generation (together). But G-d said to him (Yehoshua) (if need be) take a stick and hit them (the elders?) on the head. There can be only one speaker (leader) for a generation and not two speakers for a generation.”*

Rav Yochanan seems to suggest that G-d is charging Yehoshua with a mission and role that is almost antithetical to Moshe's!

Not only does this not resolve the discrepancy in these two verses it leaves us even more confused! Moshe seems to be suggesting that Yehoshua will not be alone in his leadership role; he will have the elders as his partners. Somehow, they will lead the people together. But G-d wants Yehoshua to be solely in charge, even to the point of literally knocking some sense into these elders if necessary!

Clearly, G-d is appointing Yehoshua to be the sole leader of the Jewish people. But does this mean that Moshe's suggestion or understanding has now been nixed? And if this is so, then why is Moshe's charging of Yehoshua preserved in the Torah for all time? What is its message?

Rashi in an attempt to shed light on these two verses, as well as the accompanying comment of Rav Yochanan in the Talmud, is even more puzzling:

*"...Moshe amar le'Yehoshua: zkeinim she'bador ye'hiyu' i'mach, **ha'kol le'fi da'atan ve'eitzatan**. Aval ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu amar le'Yehoshua: ki' atah tavi et ha'am ha'zeh el ha'aretz, asher nishba'ti la'hem: havi al korcham **hakol taluy be'chah'**: tul makel ve'hach al kodkodan. Dabar echad le'dor, ve'lo' shnei dabarim le'dor."*

*"Moshe said to Yehoshua: the elders of the generation will be with you; **everything (will be done) in accordance with their opinion**. But G-d said to Yehoshua...bring them (the Jewish people) against their will (if necessary) **everything is dependent on you**. (If need be) take a stick and hit them (the elders?) on the head. There can be only one speaker (leader) for a generation, and not two speakers for a generation."*

Apparently, Moshe is telling Yehoshua the elders are in charge, and G-d says it is Yehoshua who runs the show; which is it? Why would Moshe, who clearly had the support of the seventy elders throughout his 'career' as leader of the Jewish people, want to change the rules of the game and put them in charge? Is this all just high level politics?

The **Torah Temimah** (Rav Baruch Epstein d. 1940 in the Pinsk Ghetto) offers an interesting suggestion, and says that the word **tavo**, in Moshe's charge to Yehoshua implies: *"atah ve'ha'am; atah ke'achad me'hem."* Moshe is telling Yehoshua he must be with the people: *"you as one of them"*. But the word **tavi** (in G-d's charge) means that Yehoshua will bring them, as their head and leader.

Perhaps what the **Torah Temimah** is suggesting is that these are not two antithetical missions we must choose from, but rather two different roles Yehoshua must now assume, which must exist side by side.

There are times we need to learn to work together, as a team or committee. But then there are moments when someone needs to take charge. And assuming either of these roles when the other is called for can be disastrous.

Recall that these seventy elders came on the scene when Moshe could not manage to hear the cases of the entire Jewish people, even though he sat in session day and night. Ultimately lower level and mid-level judges, and even the seventy-one member Sanhedrin (Supreme Court), were created at the suggestion of Moshe's father-in-law Yitro, because sometimes, one person just cannot do it alone.

But it is more than just a practical aid of functionality. The elders represent the idea that there is sanctity in every human being, and that if Hashem (G-d) created this person, then I am not just being nice by hearing his opinion, it is actually *imperative* that his opinion be included, because without any one of us, something is missing in all of us. And this is what Moshe is telling Yehoshua: it is a heady thing to enter the land of Israel, and bear the responsibility for an entire nation. Know that you must be a part of the people, and not just above them, for that is where true leadership lies.

How often do leaders become so immersed and so blinded by their mission that they forget the people for whom that mission exists in the first place. Moshe is speaking to the true **goal** of Judaism: to be a light unto the nations and make the world a better place. And the first step in the achievement of that goal is to transform the Jewish people into an ethical role model, a light for the world to see.

Moshe is telling Yehoshua to keep his eye on the ball and remember, especially in a time of war and conquest, that no less important than what you are doing, is what you become, and that the conquest of the land is a means to achieving an ends, which must be kept in mind. The Jewish people are the goal at this point.

G-d, on the other hand, is speaking to Yehoshua as the **vehicle** to achieve that goal. And as they are about to enter the land and that period of war and conquest, it is also a time where someone has to take command, something Yehoshua has already demonstrated he can do, in the battle with Amalek (*Shemot*- Exodus 16). In this moment, as they cross the Jordan and enter essentially what becomes the battlefield, one person has to take command.

When we function as a committee, it is easier to assume that the objectively correct opinion will at least be heard, because everyone's opinion is at least included. But when one man is chosen to lead and decide, usually in times of emergency, how do we know we have the right man, and how can we be sure we will be pursuing the right path?

Perhaps this is why it is G-d who communicates this role to Yehoshua, because such things come ultimately from G-d. And this, incidentally, is why a Prophet, a Navi, is always responsible for the anointing of a king, because that role can come only from G-d.

This as well may be why it is Moshe who communicates the initial part of this mission, because that is very much the essence of our role here on earth: to give what we have been put here for to the entire community, and ultimately the world.

And of course, part of the challenge lies in remembering the one part of our role while focusing on the other.

Maybe this is why Moshe calls the Jewish people an “*Am*”(nation) which is much more anonymous, while G-d refers to us as *B'nei Yisrael* (the children of Israel). Moshe may want to ensure that while Yehoshua is focused on being part of the nation he must not forget he is also their leader, while G-d, in verse 23, calls us the children of Israel, because while focusing on his own role as leader of the Jewish people, Yehoshua must always remember that he is one of them, and he, though their leader, is not the goal; they are the goal.

And of course, this is not just a history lesson, but also something we struggle with all the time. Sometimes we need to be sharing our goals, and being sure we are accomplishing them together, while other times we find ourselves in situations where the only way something will get done, is if someone steps up to do it themselves.

Friendship, marriage, parenting, and even business partnerships all rise and fall with shared dreams and like-minded goals.

Some of the most painful conversations I have ever had focus on people who cannot seem to find the common ground necessary to build happy, successful relationships.

How critical and valuable is it, when we succeed as parents, in demonstrating to our children that we share the same goals, and how divisive and painful it becomes when we seem to completely disagree.

Perhaps the most critical ingredient to a healthy marriage is when two people share common goals, and some of the most painful experiences occur when people gloss over these differences assuming ‘Love will conquer all’. If love is all about giving, and two people want to give in completely different directions, how will they completely give themselves over to either one?

Incidentally, this is the issue, which is at the core of Judaism's negation of intermarriage. The reason Judaism prohibits a Jew from marrying a non-Jew is not because we are passing a value judgment on anyone who is different from us. After all, we are all created by the same G-d, and the Torah (unlike the Koran or the Christian testament) does not begin with the first Jew, but with the first human being.

Rather, Judaism's issue with intermarriage is about what we are put into this world for in the first place. Each of us, are put here for a reason. And just as every human being has a purpose, every nation has a purpose as well. And it is difficult enough to create a family in any religion or culture and raise children that live up to the goals and aspirations of that community. But when the partners in the marriage do not themselves even share those goals, it is virtually impossible.

And this is not to say it is all or nothing in Judaism: I have met parents who, even after divorce, succeed in communicating to their children that they share the same goals and ideals, and thus succeed in raising healthy children despite all of the challenges involved. And yet sometimes, in the same home, and around the same dining room table, people can aspire to such different dreams, and have such different aims, that everyone fails before they have even begun.

On occasion the opposite is true; it is equally important to know when we do not necessarily have time to share the same goals or objectives. Sometimes, the particular goal we are trying to accomplish is of such a high order, and so important, we need to be willing to step beyond where anyone else is, whether they agree with us or not.

Lives are most often not saved by committees, nor are wars meant to be waged in boardrooms; and when your unit comes under fire, you don't always have time to wait for all the men in the unit to agree with the course of action. Someone has to make a decision and everyone else has to follow along. Many of the great projects that are accomplished in the world often occur because one individual has stepped up to fill a need, leading the way.

Indeed, our first significant encounter with Yehoshua is when Moshe charges him with leading the Jewish people into battle against Amalek, at which point Moshe, with all of his spiritual support up on the mountain, steps aside to let Yehoshua run the show.

All of which brings us back to Moshe and Yehoshua here in *Vayelech*. Moshe is not just passing on a position of leadership; he is handing over a dream. And the challenge of fulfilling that dream, will perhaps lie in Yehoshua, (and for that matter every one of us), finding the ability to share that dream with the rest of the Jewish people and even the world. At the same time, we must know when we have to be willing to move forward on our own to live up to our own unique role in making that dream a reality.

At the start of a New Year, let us look back on all the goals we accomplished, as well as all the dreams that still seem so far away, and hope that perhaps this will be the year when together as a people, and as a world, we succeed in finding that balance that seems to have eluded us for so long.

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Chatima Tova,

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