

Life After Moses

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For four seasons, the HBO television series *Succession* captivated me with its crackling writing, strong performances, and the promise of a resolution to the question of who would succeed patriarch Logan Roy as the CEO of his media empire. This satire of the mega-wealthy was must-see-TV for me and my friends as we were drawn into the lives of various Roy siblings who hoped to succeed their father (all of whom were pretty much terrible people). You see, in his unwillingness to cede power, Logan had violated a cardinal rule of the corporate world: always have a plan for handing over the reins.

Tucked away at the conclusion of this week's parashah is another narrative of succession, one that appears smooth and uncomplicated by comparison. In chapter 27, God announces Moses's impending death and Joshua is appointed successor. Like his brother Aaron before him, Moses is instructed to ascend a mountain and view the Promised Land. Moses too will not enter the land because of a transgression (in his case the striking of the rock). But there is one key difference in God's announcements to the brothers of their impending deaths. To Aaron, God explicitly commands the passing of the priesthood to his son Eleazar, a process marked by the stripping of Aaron's priestly garments and their transfer to his son. But Moses must initiate the appointment of his successor. Why would God announce a successor to Aaron and not Moses? Did God not have a plan for Moses to hand over the reins?

Looking closely at what Moses says, we can see that the Torah text is drawing attention to God's reticence. The passage begins: "Moses spoke to Adonai saying," which is a reversal of the usual and more frequent phrasing we encounter, that "God spoke to Moses saying . . ." Something is amiss. Moses continues:

Let Adonai, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, *so that Adonai's community may not be a sheep without a shepherd.* (Num 27: 15–17)

The final line suggests that Moses believes God does not intend to appoint another leader after his death. Without a successor, B'nai Yisrael will scatter like sheep and not make it "home" to the promised land. He is urging God to see that the consequences to God's plan would be disastrous.

Why would God be reluctant to appoint a successor to Moses? The Israeli Biblical scholar Elie Assis explains that "the conception behind this is that Israel's exclusive leader is God himself. The ideology is that God is sovereign over the world, and placing a single human leader at the head of the nation diminished God's sovereignty."¹ Moses was a necessary bridge to creating a relationship with B'nai Yisrael, but God has no intention of institutionalizing this leadership role

Joshua's succession is thus not a *fait accompli*. Moses has to convince God that the people's very existence and the fulfillment of their destiny is dependent on having a leader.

The two positions presented here can be understood in terms of the very real tension between ideology (one's principles or core beliefs) and practicality that we regularly encounter in political life. How often do we hear the complaint that some public figure or another is too

¹ "Divine Versus Human Leadership: An Examination of Joshua's Succession." *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity* ed. Poorthuis and Schwartz, 2003. 34.

“ideological”—they are so wedded to the purity of their ideas that progress is unachievable. And yes, rigidly adhering to ideology can make it harder to develop effective solutions to real problems. But practical decisions, the promises to “get things done,” when not grounded in principle can lead to actions that are amoral or unethical. Ideology can provide a moral compass and a sense of meaning, while practicality can help ensure that goals are achievable. Moses demonstrates how important it is to find the balance between the two.

Joshua and his leadership are presented in a way that suggests his unique ability to serve as a compromise figure. As Assis further argues, the language used to describe Joshua in the Torah and in the Book of Joshua suggests that he is to be regarded not as a leader in his own right but as a second Moses. Joshua had always been close to Moses, presented elsewhere in the Torah as Moses’s “attendant from his youth” (Num. 11:28) and his personal valet (Rabeinu Bahya on Exod. 33:11). Their intimacy is further exemplified in the rite of succession where Moses lays his hands over Joshua. God commands Moses to transfer something of himself, *v’natanah mehodekha*, to invest Joshua not with the external signs of leadership (a title, a garment) but with some of Moses’s authority (Num. 11:20). Many of Joshua’s actions in the book that bears his name mirror actions that Moses had taken. He makes less of an impression as a distinct individual; rather when one sees Joshua, one is to think of Moses.

Moses recognizes the real needs of B’nai Yisrael—they will be in crisis after his death and in Joshua they are given someone close to Moses who can help them cope with the trauma of their loss. And God accepts this, but we are also to not lose sight of the distinctive idea that guides B’nai Yisrael—that there is one God and God alone is the sovereign.