



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

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The Crown All Can Wear

Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." (Num. 27:15–17)

Moses was in sight of the Angel of Death. Miriam had died. So had Aaron. And God had told Moses "you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was." (Num. 27:12–13), so he knew he was not fated to live long enough to cross the Jordan and enter the land. Who would be his successor? Did he have any thoughts on the matter?

With profound attentiveness, the Sages noted the immediately previous passage. It is the story of the daughters of Tzelophehad, who claim their rights of inheritance in the land, despite the fact that inheritance passed through the male line and their father had left no sons. Moses brought their request to God, who answered that it was to be granted.

Against this background, the Midrash interprets Moses' thoughts as he brings his own request to God, that a successor be appointed:

What was Moses' reason for making this request after declaring the order of inheritance? Just this, that when the daughters of Tzelophehad inherited from their father, Moses reasoned: The time is right for me to make my own request. If daughters inherit, it is surely right that my sons should inherit my glory.

The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to him, "He who keeps the fig tree shall eat its fruit" (Prov. 27:18). Your sons sat idly by and did not study the Torah. Joshua served you faithfully and showed you great honour. It was he who rose early in the morning and remained late at night at your House of Assembly. He used to arrange the benches and spread the mats. Seeing that he has served you with all his might, he is worthy to serve Israel, for he shall not lose his reward.¹

This is the unspoken drama of the chapter. Not only was Moses fated not to enter the land, but he was also destined to see his sons overlooked in the search for a successor. That was his second personal tragedy.

¹ Numbers Rabbah 21:14.

But it is precisely here that we find, for the first time, one of Judaism's most powerful propositions. Biblical Israel had its dynasties. Both Priesthood and, in a later age, Kingship were handed down from father to son. Yet there is a staunchly egalitarian strand in Judaism from the outset. Ironically, it is given one of its most powerful expressions in the mouth of the rebel, Korach: "All the congregation are holy and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you (Moses) set yourselves above the congregation?" (Num. 16:3).

"There is a staunchly egalitarian strand in Judaism..."

But it was not only Korach who gave voice to such a sentiment. We hear it in the words of Moses himself: "Would that all the Lord's people were Prophets and that the Lord would put His spirit on them" (Num. 11:29).

We hear it again in the words of Hannah when she gives thanksgiving for the birth of her son:

The Lord sends poverty and wealth;

He humbles and He exalts.

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

He seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour. (I Sam. 2:7-8)

It is implicit in the great holiness command: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy'" (Lev. 19:2).

This is not a call to Priests or Prophets – a sacred elite – but to an entire people. There is, within Judaism a profound egalitarian instinct: the concept of a nation of individuals standing with equal dignity in the presence of God.

Korach was wrong less in what he said than in why he said it. He was a demagogue attempting to seize power. But he tapped into a deep reservoir of popular feeling and religious principle. Jews have never been easy to lead because each is called on to be a leader. What Korach forgot is that to be a leader it is also necessary to be a follower. Leadership presupposes discipleship. That is what Joshua knew, and what led to him being chosen as Moses' successor.

The tradition is summed up in the famous Maimonidean ruling:

With three crowns was Israel crowned – with the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Kingship. The crown of Priesthood was bestowed on Aaron and his descendants. The crown of Kingship was conferred on David and his successors. But the crown of Torah is for all Israel. Whoever wishes, let them come and take it. Do not suppose that the other two crowns are greater than that of Torah.... The crown of Torah is greater than the other two crowns.²

This had immense social and political consequences. Throughout most of the biblical era, all three crowns were in operation. In addition to Prophets, Israel had Kings and an active Priesthood serving in the Temple. The dynastic principle – leadership passing from father to son – still dominated two of the three roles. But with the destruction of the Second Temple, Kingship and a functioning Priesthood ceased. Leadership passed to the Sages who saw themselves as heirs to the Prophets. We see this in the famous one-sentence summary of Jewish history with which Tractate Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) begins: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, who handed it on to the elders, the elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the men of the Great Assembly" (Mishnah Avot 1:1).

² Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:1.

The Rabbis see themselves as heirs to the Prophets rather than to the Priests. In biblical Israel, the Priests were the primary guardians and teachers of Torah. Why did the Rabbis not see themselves as heirs to Aaron and the Priesthood? The answer may be this: Priesthood was a dynasty. Prophetic leadership, by contrast, could never be predicted in advance. The proof was Moses. The very fact that his children did not succeed him as leaders of the people may have been an acute distress to him but it was a deep consolation to everyone else. It meant that anyone, by discipleship and dedication, could aspire to Rabbinic leadership and the crown of Torah.

Hence we find in the sources a paradox. On the one hand, the Torah describes itself as an inheritance: “Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance [*morasha*] of the congregation of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4). On the other hand, the Sages were insistent that Torah is not an inheritance: “R. Yose said: Prepare yourself to learn Torah, for it is not given to you as an inheritance [*yerusha*]” (Mishnah Avot 2:12).

The simplest resolution of the contradiction is that there are two kinds of inheritance. Biblical Hebrew contains two different words for what we receive as a legacy: *yerusha/morasha* and *nachala*. *Nachala* is related to the word *nachal*, “a river.” It signifies something passed down automatically across the generations, as river water flows downstream, easily and naturally. *Yerusha* comes from the root *yarash*, meaning “to take possession.” It refers to something to which you have legitimate title, but which you need positive action to acquire.

A hereditary title, such as being a duke or an earl, is passed from father to son. So too is a family business. The difference is that the first needs no effort on the part of the heir, but the second requires hard work if the business is to continue to be worth something. Torah is like a business, not a title. It must be earned if it is to be sustained.

“Torah is like a business, not a title. It must be earned if it is to be sustained.”

The Sages themselves put it more beautifully: “Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance [*morasha*] of the congregation of Jacob’ – read not ‘inheritance [*morasha*]’ but ‘betrothed [*me’orasa*]’” (Berachot 57a). By a simple change in pronunciation – turning a *shin* [=“sh”] into a *sin* [=“s”], “inheritance” into “betrothal” – the Rabbis signalled that, yes, there is an inheritance relationship between Torah and the Jew, but the former has to be loved if it is to be earned. You have to love Torah if you are to inherit it.

The Sages were fully aware of the social implications of R. Yose’s dictum that the Torah “is not given to you as an inheritance.” It meant that literacy and learning must never become the preserve of an elite:

And why is it not usual for scholars to give birth to sons who are scholars?

Yosef said: So that it should not be said that the Torah is their inheritance. (Nedarim 81a)

The Sages were constantly on their guard against exclusivist attitudes to Torah. Equality is never preserved without vigilance – and indeed there were contrary tendencies. We see this in one of the debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai:

“Raise up many disciples” – The school of Shammai says: A person is to teach only one who is wise, humble, of good stock, and rich.

But the school of Hillel says: Everyone is to be taught. For there were many transgressors in Israel who were attracted to the study of Torah, and from them sprang righteous, pious, and worthy men. To what

may it be compared? “To a woman who sets a hen to brood on eggs – out of many eggs, she may hatch only a few, but out of a few [eggs], she hatches none at all.”³

One cannot predict who will achieve greatness. Therefore Torah must be taught to all. A later episode illustrates the virtue of teaching everyone:

Once Rav came to a certain place where, though he had decreed a fast [for rain], no rain fell. Eventually someone else stepped forward in front of Rav before the Ark and prayed, “Who causes the wind to blow” – and the wind blew. Then he prayed, “Who causes the rain to fall” – and the rain fell.

Rav asked him: What is your occupation [i.e., what is your special virtue that causes God to answer your prayers]? He replied: I am a teacher of young children. I teach Torah to the children of the poor as well as to the children of the rich. From those who cannot afford it, I take no payment. Besides, I have a fish pond, and I offer fish to any boy who refuses to study, so that he comes to study. (Ta’anit 24a)

It would be wrong to suppose that these attitudes prevailed in all places at all times. No nation achieves perfection. An aptitude for learning is not equally distributed within any group. There is always a tendency for the most intelligent and scholarly to see themselves as more gifted than others and for the rich to attempt to purchase a better education for their children than the poor. Yet to an impressive – even remarkable – degree, Jews were vigilant in ensuring that no one was excluded from education and that schools and teachers were paid for by public funds. By many centuries, indeed millennia, Jews were the first to democratise education. The crown of Torah was indeed open to all.

Moses’ tragedy was Israel’s consolation. “The Torah is their inheritance.” The fact that his successor was not his son, but Joshua, his disciple, meant that one form of leadership – historically and spiritually the most important of the three crowns – could be aspired to by everyone. Dignity is not a privilege of birth. Honour is not confined to those with the right parents. In the world defined and created by Torah, everyone is a potential leader. We can all earn the right to wear the crown.

Shabbat Shalom

“Everyone is a potential leader. We can all earn the right to wear the crown.”

Jonathan Sacks

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³ Avot DeRabbi Natan, version 2, ch. 4.