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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF POSSIBLY RADICAL CHANGE

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Endings are hard, and I don't believe that the collective wisdom of humanity will ever determine whether gradual or abrupt endings are easier to bear. Jewish tradition will not help either. The Rabbis tell us that illness entered the world when Yaakov prayed for a transition toward death. But Mosheh Rabbeinu dies in defiant full possession of his faculties, "his eye undimmed and his moisture not fled".

Transitions are also hard. Mosheh Rabbeinu was a political leader, and he and G-d seem to agree on the need for a political transition. The Rabbis tell us that Mosheh was the sun and Yehoshua the moon, so Yehoshua needed Mosheh to shine on him. The problem is that Yehoshua must become visible while Mosheh is still shining, and then remain visible when Mosheh's radiance has ceased. One can play with the metaphor and suggest that for Mosheh, death means only sinking behind the horizon, but this solution seems cute rather than compelling.

Mosheh himself seems to tell the Jews – against the narrator's later assertion – that he has become aged. "I am aged 120 years as of today; I will no longer be able to go out and in", apparently meaning that he can no longer lead the Jews in battle, and thus must be replaced. But this is an unconvincing argument, for two reasons: First, Yehoshua led the Jews in their very first battle, with Amalek, while Mosheh prayed behind the scene, so why can't that be the ongoing practice? Second, it seems likely that Mosheh's vigorous delivery of this speech would put the lie to his claim (just as no one reading his eloquent initial attempt to refuse G-d's initial mission could believe that he was genuinely כבד לשון = heavy-tongued.)

On Sotah 13b, Rav Shmuel bar Nachmeni in the name of Rabbi Yonatan suggests that Mosheh here is referring to

מלחמתה של תורה, the battles of the Beit Midrash. "to go out and come in – regarding Torah matters". Why could he no longer lead these battles? "נסתתמו ממנו שערי חכמה" - the gates of wisdom were closed off from him".

Rabbi Yonatan did not mean to suggest that Mosheh lost his overall intellectual acuity, or that he forgot his Torah knowledge. Rather, as the late Lubavitcher Rebbe noted, Rabbi Yonatan is walking a delicate line. He needs Mosheh to remain the sun, and yet must also make clear that the sun is setting. So "gates of wisdom" must refer to a specific and bounded disability.

The problem (also noted by the late Rebbe) is that the text of Rabbi Yonatan's statement is itself unstable. Shitah Mekubetzet reports that other manuscripts had מסורת חכמה = the tradition of wisdom. Manuscripts of the Ein Yaakov had מעינות החכמה = the springs of Wisdom. Rashi to our verse has מסורות ומעינות החכמה = the traditions and springs of Wisdom.

It seems plausible that each of these different versions reflects a different approach to the delicate line Rabbi Yonatan seeks to walk. What capacities can a Torah leader lose that will leave them radiant, and yet point to the need for replacement, and allow for successors to become visible?

The text as we have it – שערי חכמה – suggests that a leader can lose their flexibility, their capacity to learn new things. Having myself sat willingly in the shiurim of at least two great scholars at that point in their careers, I find this an eminently reasonable suggestion. There was no question that they were the sun, and we students at best aspiring moons, and yet it was also clear that they could no longer make vital practical decisions for a community.

Flexibility is a necessity. Effective generals do not *always* fight the last war, and effective poskim (halakhic decisors) do not always pasken the last sheilah.

The version reading “springs” makes a somewhat stronger claim. It is not enough to be able to learn new things – you have to be able to adjust previous conclusions in light of new evidence. A leader who learns, but can no longer be creative, will just end up fighting one of several previous wars. Perhaps there is nothing objectively new under the sun, but no individual life is ever broad enough to preclude subjectively new experiences.

But it is very challenging to imagine Mosheh Rabbeinu, or lehavdil any great scholar, maintaining their identity when they have lost access to their traditions of wisdom. For this reason among others the Rebbe zt”l suggested narrowing this term to traditions that have no point of origin in the text of *chumash*, the *halakhot leMosheh miSinai* that G-d for His own inscrutable reasons whispered to Mosheh at Sinai. Without access to those traditions, Moshehh remained great but was no longer irreplaceable.

Rashi, however, was satisfied with none of these. He believes that Moshehh had to lose both the traditions and the spring – both the past and the future – if Yehoshua were to succeed and thrive.

Why? Perhaps Rashi, better than any other version, truly does justice to Rabbi Yonatan’s task. Mosheh had to lose access to the past, or else Yehoshua could not become visible. But he also had to lose access to the future, so that Yehoshua could become a sun in his own right. There had to be a recognizable limit to the questions Mosheh could answer, so that Yehoshua could be recognized as a contributor and not merely as a sustainer.

The truth is that just about every halakhic decisor over time ossifies in both these ways. Initial intuitions become hardened into formal concepts and rulings, and new cases are more and more easily categorized as minor variants on established precedents. All this has salutary impact with regard to predictability and accuracy, which are virtues of great significance, especially in stable communities and environments. But Bnei Yisroel were about to experience an enormous discontinuity as they crossed into Israel.

The problem is that in just about every generation there are those who see radical discontinuities, and those who see fundamental stability. To take examples from our own day: Is postmodernism a dead-end fad or a seismic philosophic shift? Does/will the routine participation of women fundamentally change the nature of halakhic discourse? Do contemporary roshei yeshiva (be they from RIETS, YCT, or Bnei Brak) consistently relate to their lay communities differently than did the leading halakhic decisors of past decades and centuries?

I hope it is clear that the question of whether these changes are radical, or not, does not settle the question of whether they are positive or negative. But it nonetheless matters a great deal how we answer that question. As a simple example: If postmodernism is a noxious but passing cloud, we should not make painful sacrifices to combat it. If it is a healthy but passing cloud, we should not build our theologies on it. But if it is healthy and enduring, or noxious and enduring, then such sacrifices and constructions can be justified.

Perhaps we can argue further that in every generation there are radical discontinuities, but there are also exaggerated claims of discontinuity.

I am tempted to assimilate this suggestion to the classic rabbinic categories of repentance. Radical discontinuities, like repentance out of love, turn past vices into virtues, while minor discontinuities, like repentance out of fear, at most allow us to correct and overcome those vices.

But few things are more dangerous than a **mistaken** claim that a past vice is newly virtuous.

Note: This Dvar Torah is a version of a Dvar Torah published in 2015.

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