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DOES SEFER DEVARIM HAVE A CONCLUSION?

by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Parshat Nitzavim appears to take place, as its name suggests, with the entire Jewish people standing before Mosheh. There are no explicit scene changes. Nonetheless, Parshat Vayelech appears to open, as its name suggests, with Mosheh needing to go somewhere else in order to speak to "all Israel". This difficulty can be dealt with in isolation; or it can affect our understanding of the overall architecture of Sefer Devarim.

Seforno IMHO offers the most creative local solution.

וַיִּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה = הִתְעוֹרֵר לָזֶה,
כְּמוֹ
וַיִּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֹוִי (שְׁמוֹת ב:א)
וַיִּלֶךְ וַיַּעֲבֹד (דְּבָרִים יז:ג)
וְדוֹמִיָּהִם.

וְזֶה שֶׁאִסָּר שֶׁהַשְּׁלִים עֲנִינֵי קְרִיַת הַבְּרִית,
הִתְעוֹרֵר לְנַחֵם אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל מִיתָתוֹ,
כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יַעֲרָבּוּ שְׂמַחַת הַבְּרִית הַרְאוּיָה לָהֶם
לְהוֹרֹת עַל הַיּוֹתֵם מִקְבָּלִים הַבְּרִית בְּשִׂמְחָה... .

Vayelech Mosheh – this means that he aroused himself to this, similar to

vayelech a man from the House of Levi (Shemot 2:1)
vayelech and he worshiped (Devarim 17:3)
and similar instances.

meaning that after he completed the matter of cutting the covenant,

he aroused himself to comfort Israel regarding his death, so they would not be conflicted about their appropriate joy regarding the covenant;

which shows that they indeed accepted the covenant joyously...

Seforno begins with the lexicographical move of defining *vayelech* as referring to emotional arousal or awareness rather than to physical motion. I concede that the two cases he cites as evidence for this definition indicate that *vayelech* can mean something other than physical motion. However, I'm not sure they prove anything more specific; at most they also involve overcoming an inertia: In Devarim 17:3 the sinner may be abandoning his natural position within G-d's covenant; in Shemot 2:1 Amram can be understood as overcoming his reluctance to have children while persecuted and enslaved.

But these details are speculative backformations from context, and therefore I don't think they're evidence for Seforno's interpretation. All I see is a collection of anomalous *vayelechs*, all with unclear definitions.

If Seforno is correct, here too we must infer the cause of arousal from the ensuing action. Here, the ensuing action is speech (Devarim 31:2)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם
בְּרִמָּאָה וְעִשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲנֹכִי הַיּוֹם
לֹא-אֶחָבֵל עוֹד לָצֵאת וּלְבֹא
וַיִּקְרָא אֶמֶר אֵלַי
לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה:

He said to them:

I am 120 years old today

I am no longer able to go out and come in
and Hashem said to me:

You will not cross this river.

Seforno deduces that Moshe saw the Jews being sad about his situation. Yet why would Mosheh feel compelled to interrupt this sadness? Seforno answers that Mosheh felt that sadness was inappropriate because of the just-cut covenant. However, he brings no evidence that joy was openly expressed before or after this covenant, only verses that might or might not indicate that joy is a possible reaction to covenanting. I therefore find it very hard to accept his approach.

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi, cited by Midrash Tanchuma, wonders why Mosheh could not reassemble the people via the silver trumpets made for that purpose. His answer is by way of Kohelet 8:8: *there is no dominion on the day of death* - the trumpets were hidden away on that day. If they were hidden permanently, that suggests a note of consolation for Mosheh, that he could not be fully replaced. The verse in Kohelet indicates that it is also a note of harsh transition – death becomes more acceptable once the trappings of authority are removed. Moved to our context, the image is tragic and simultaneously glorious, because Mosheh responds by walking without a fanfare to where the people are in order to speak to them.

Netziv conveys the same idea by suggesting that Mosheh's voice had previously been Divinely amplified so as to be heard throughout the camp.

The theme of walking toward death is most clearly stated in a midrash cited by Tur, which has Mosheh going to tell Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov that G-d's promise to them will finally be fulfilled. How does he know? Because he is dying, and that must mean that the people are about to cross the Jordan. But this midrash has minimal textual connection.

But Tur also asks: How can Mosheh tell the people (31:2) that he is no longer able *to go out and come in* while demonstrating his physical fitness by walking to them? One can say that it's a matter of degree; but Scripture also testifies that Mosheh died with undimmed eye etc.! One standard answer is that Mosheh means that G-d will no longer permit him to lead the people out to and back from battle, not that he is physically incapable. But then why does Mosheh lead with his age, *I am 120 years old today*?

One might try to evade some of these difficulties by disconnecting this verse, and section, from its context. For example, many commentators note that G-d doesn't tell Mosheh "Behold your day of death is near" until 31:14. If we assume that Mosheh has no other way of knowing his death-date, it follows that this episode must not be written in chronological order. One might respond, though, that he got the hint from the missing trumpets.

A more radical disconnection from context might look like this. The book of Devarim opens:

eileh hadevarim asher dibber Mosheh el kol Yisrael
these are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel,

while our verse (31:1) reads

vayelekh Mosheh vayedaber et hadevarim haeileh el kol Yisrael
Mosheh went and spoke these words to all Israel.

Perhaps our verse should be read as a summation that follows directly from that opening. It just brings the narrative up to date. It has no direct connection to what Mosheh says in the verses or chapters immediately before or after, or to his location immediately before or after.

This approach would of course require us to explain why the summation occurs here. The simple but valuable answer might be that Mosheh's pedagogic mission is now complete – everything that follows is about accomplishing the transition to Yehoshua. That might significantly affect our understanding of the Song of Haazinu and the Blessings of the Tribes.

Alternatively, we can lean into local context. In 31:14, G-d informs Mosheh that he will soon die **and** commands him to call to Yehoshua, and then ***vayelekh Mosheh v'Yehoshua*** – they go together, whereas previously *vayelekh Mosheh* – alone. Perhaps G-d needed to call because Mosheh had been unwilling to acknowledge the transition. This would probably require reordering the chapter so that verses 7-8, which appear to show Mosheh spontaneously calling Yehoshua before the people in order to acknowledge him as successor, occur after verse 14.

Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman points us to 32:44-46, immediately after the Song of Haazinu:

וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה
וַיִּדְבֹר אֶת־דִּבְרֵי הַשִּׁירָה־הַזֹּאת בְּאָזְנוֹי הָעָם

הָיָא וְהוֹשַׁע בִּרְגָוִן:
וַיִּבֹל מֹשֶׁה לְדַבֵּר אֶת־כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:
וַיֵּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם . . .

Mosheh came (=vayelekh)

He spoke all the words of this song in the ears of the people he and Yehoshua bin Nun.

Mosheh concluded (=vayekhal) speaking all **these words to all Israel**.

He said to them . . .

Perhaps *vayelekh* and *vayavo* from an envelope structure. But it's not clear then where Mosheh went, or what he had to say to whom before returning to recite Haazinu.

The verb *halakh* can also function as a grammatical marker – it makes the action of its companion verb continuous. So alternatively, or supplementarily, perhaps *vayekhal*'s inversion of *vayelekh* forms the envelope. Moshe went on speaking *all these words* for forty years, and yet there was something left to say before saying "in conclusion", and of course "In conclusion" is an introduction not an ending, and unless the speaker is fully satisfied with what he or she spoke, can often turn into a new beginning.

So in conclusion – The structure of Sefer Devarim is unclear, especially at its end. Are Haazinu and the Blessings included in the *eileh hadevarim* of the opening verse, or are they summaries, *envois*, or appendices? Examining *Vayelekh* closely raises these issues without in any way resolving them.

However, It is worth noting that while the book's end deals extensively with Mosheh's death, his birth and childhood from Exodus are not recapitulated, nor IIRC is there much if any mention of Mosheh's role in the Exodus (like the Haggadah?).

So in conclusion – perhaps Mosheh's leadership in Egypt is not a model that Yehoshua should emulate? The transition from revolutionary movement to government is always challenging, and the 40-Year Wandering is a fascinating if unrepeatable model for that kind of political transition.

Shabbat shalom!