



5 steps

in leadership succession

You could say that Deuteronomy 31 presents a 'blueprint' for leadership succession. (See the five steps outlined below.) Discuss this as a 'table topic' with family and friends, drawing on the biblical text and your life experience.

1. Make it clear that you're leaving. Moses announces his coming retirement (31:2). He gives people a chance to process the fact that the one who has shepherded them for forty years will no longer be with them in this new and critical phase ahead as they make a home in the promised land.

2. Choose a replacement who has earned the people's trust. Joshua certainly fits the bill. He has handled some tough assignments in the past (e.g., recall the story of the spies in Numbers 13-14) and shown himself to be a faithful servant of God, following in the footsteps of Moses.

3. Name the new leader and show confidence in him/her. Moses does this for Joshua in 31:3,7.

4. Commission the new leader in a public ceremony (Joshua is commissioned in 31:23)...**and allow him/her to lead.** There is a Talmudic saying: *Two kings may not use the same crown.*

5. In all this, walk with the Lord. Moses' greatness as a leader lies in his closeness to God who is the ultimate source of authority and guidance for Israel. Recall how Moses would speak to God 'face to face' like a friend (Exodus 33:11).

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

During the Jewish High Holy Day period, the Sabbath which falls between *Rosh HaShanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* ('Day of Atonement') is called *Shabbat Shuvah*. In Hebrew, *shuvah* means 'return,' suggesting the return to one's pure origins. From here comes the Hebrew word for 'repentance:' *teshuvah*.

As Jewish communities enter into the penitential spirit of this liturgical season, we Christians can draw near in prayerful solidarity, aware of our own need for repentance. Reconciliation has been a key theme in Jewish-Christian relations of the past fifty years, in view of the poor treatment of Jewish communities by Christians over many centuries. In the words of Cardinal Edward Cassidy (speaking in Prague, 1990), "*The fact that anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and practice calls for an act of 'teshuvah' (repentance) and of reconciliation on our part.*"

In its own way, may *Light of Torah* contribute to this path of reconciliation by bringing Christians to a deeper awareness and appreciation of Jewish interpretative traditions.



Deuteronomy 31:1-30

Vayelekh:
'he went'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 31:1-30

We are drawing near to the end of our Torah journey, and to the end of Moses' story as he passes the reins of leadership to Joshua and prepares to die. Read all thirty verses of this week's Torah portion, then let's start our discussion with the opening verses.

Tasting Torah

The LORD said to me, 'You shall not cross the Jordan.' The LORD, your God: *He* is crossing in front of you... Joshua: *he* is crossing in front of you, as the LORD has spoken. (Deut. 31:2-3, Friedman)

The italics used with certain pronouns above are those of the translator.¹ The Hebrew text invites this emphasis by including a pronoun which from a simple grammatical point of view could have been omitted. That is, we might wonder why the text wasn't written as: "The LORD your God is crossing..." but in fact reads: "The LORD, your God: *He* is crossing..." Likewise, we might wonder why it wasn't written as 'Joshua is crossing...' but rather reads 'Joshua: *he* is crossing...' [Note: the NRSV translates v.2, 'The Lord himself will cross over...' Compare this with your bible.]

What difference does this emphasis make to your interpretation of this Torah text?

Touching Torah

The text states clearly that Moses is *not* to cross the Jordan (v.2). Then the italicized words make clear exactly who is taking the people across the Jordan and where the eyes of the Israelites should be directed: first and foremost to God, and then to Joshua as Moses' successor. When you consider how essential Moses has been to the life and survival of the people for 40 years, his departure as Israel's shepherd is an enormous step. Ponder this.

Depthing Torah

The biblical story continues...

And Moses called Joshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, "Be strong and be bold, because *you* will come with this people to the land that the LORD swore to their fathers to give to them, and *you* will get it for them as a legacy" (31:7).

Here Moses publicly expresses his confidence in Joshua as the new leader, and later in v.23 the Lord utters similar words when commissioning Joshua in the Tent of Meeting.

Further, Moses declares his trust in divine guidance in all that lies ahead:

"And the LORD: He is the one who is going in front of you. He will be with you. He won't let you down and he won't leave you. You shall not fear..." (31:8).

Note too that Moses is made aware by God that there will be "many bad things and troubles" ahead for the Israelites (v.21). Yet he is still called to surrender his role. Even a leader as great as Moses can't protect the people indefinitely. He must step aside for the next stage of God's mighty plan to unfold.

Doing Torah

Continue to explore this text, for what it can teach us about Moses and about leading those entrusted to us by God, including the necessary steps in 'letting go.' Consider the passage too through the eyes of Joshua, the people, and God. If you were to compose a midrash, what story would you tell?



Faith & Life

Stepping down from an important role can be extremely difficult. The imaginative stories of the midrash describe how Moses' willingness to relinquish his authority, like his willingness to accept death, is not instant acceptance but a gradual letting go. The sages speak of the fragile side of Moses, as one who is envious of Joshua and struggles to accept God's plan. But accept it he does, and what we see in the biblical text at hand is the endpoint of what in fact was a process of personal struggle.

Reflect: In what way has Moses' dilemma been yours too?

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 2001); Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Vermont, 2000); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* Vol. 5 (NY, 1995).

1. Scripture: translation by Richard Friedman.