



Light of Torah

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Stepping down

As we come to Deuteronomy 31 we are drawing near to the end of the story of the Israelites' wilderness 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 chapter 31, then let's start our discussion with the opening verses.

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)

The italics used with certain pronouns above are those of the translator, Richard Friedman. 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, it 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 the translation in your bible.]

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

The text first 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. Creatively ponder this part of the story with a friend.

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, 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 withdraw for the next stage of God's mighty plan to unfold.

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.

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.' If you were to compose a midrash, what story would you tell 'between the lines' of the biblical text? •

Sources: 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).

Scripture: Friedman's translation is used here with a modification: 'the LORD' replaces the Tetragrammaton.