

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(office@etzion.org.il)

When Did Moshe Pass the Mantle of Leadership to Yehoshua?

By Rav Elchanan Samet

a. Presentation of the problem

(27:12) "And God said to Moshe: Ascend this Mt. Avarim and see the land that I have given to Bnei Yisrael.

(13) You shall see it and [then] you, too, shall be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother was gathered.

(14) As you rebelled against My command in the wilderness of Tzin, when the nation quarreled - to sanctify Me with the water, before their eyes; these were the waters of dissent of Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin."

Among his questions on our parasha, Abarbanel asks:

"The ninth question concerns God telling Moshe, 'Ascend this Mt. Avarim and see that land,' concluding with the words, 'And you, too, shall be gathered to your people AS AHARON YOUR BROTHER WAS GATHERED' - but Moshe did not die upon receiving this command! Aharon, upon being commanded to die, ascended the mountain and died. Likewise Moshe, in the parasha of Ha'azinu (Devarim 32:48-52, 34:1-5). But here, why does God command him [to ascend Mt. Avarim] if the day of his death has not yet arrived?"

A great distance separates Parashat Pinchas, where we find ourselves, and the parashot of Ha'azinu and Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha, where Moshe is commanded once again to ascend Mt. Avarim to die, and he does so. Admittedly, from a chronological point of view the distance in time is not great - only a few months - but those final months of Moshe's life were full of momentous events, as attested to by the end of Sefer Bemidbar and all of Sefer Devarim.

It is therefore impossible that at this very early stage, with many very important tasks still awaiting Moshe, that he would be told that his time has come to die, before completing his life's mission. What, then, is the point of the verses quoted above?

b. "No chronological order in the Torah" - a solution and its rejection

The great similarity Bemidbar 27:12-14 and Devarim 32:48-52 gives the impression that the Torah is describing the same command. This would tempt us to answer that "there is no chronological order in the Torah," and the command appears here before its designated time. However, this answer is impossible, as we shall see shortly.

Yehoshua's appointment as Moshe's successor appears in our narrative as the crux of the story. Moshe requests that God appoint "a man over the congregation, who will go out before them and come before them," and he makes no mention of any specific person. Only in God's response to Moshe, introducing the second half of the story, do we find the big news:

(18) "Take for yourself Yehoshua bin Nun, a man of spirit, and place your hand upon him."

We may conclude that up until this point it is not clear who will succeed Moshe in the leadership role.

Now we ask: where in the Torah is there any clear indication (by Moshe or by God) of Yehoshua as the next leader of Israel? Such indications are found in several places in the Torah, starting in the final parashot of Sefer Bemidbar and continuing through Sefer Devarim (e.g., Bemidbar 32:28-29; 34:16-19; Devarim 1:37-38; 3:21; 31:3; etc.).

If the command to Moshe at the end of parashat Ha'azinu to ascend Mt. Avarim to die there (32:48-52) is the same command given in our parasha, then it is that command that causes Moshe to ask God to appoint him a successor, and only then does God notify him that Yehoshua will be the next leader. But this does not sit well with all the sources in which we discern that Yehoshua was already recognized as Moshe's successor from the time of the events described at the end of Sefer Bemidbar, even before Moshe launches into his great and final speech.

We must therefore conclude that the command in our parasha is located in its proper chronological place. Moshe's request that a successor be appointed, and God's response, revealing Yehoshua as his successor, apparently took place after the census in the plains of Moav (chapter 26) and before the war against Midian (chapter 31). Indeed, nowhere prior to our narrative is there any mention of Yehoshua as Moshe's successor.

But if this is so, then not only Moshe's request for a successor appears in its proper place, but also the motive that leads him to request this - the command that he ascend Mt. Avarim and die - appears in its place and at its time, and not in accordance with the principle that "there is no chronological order in the Torah". This brings us back to Abarbanel's question: "But Moshe did not die upon receiving this command... Why does God command him if the day of his death has not yet arrived?"

c. Ramban's solution: an event in the present that is entirely concerned with the future

Whether for the reasons above or out of a fundamental objection to the principle of "no chronological order in the Torah" when not absolutely necessary, the Ramban attempts to explain God's command to Moshe (as well as the continuation of the story) in keeping with the chronological context. The solution proposed by Ramban for our verses (12-14) is that they were indeed told to Moshe here and now, at the time of the events narrated at the end of Sefer Bemidbar. However, they are not actually a command, "for if they had been, Moshe would have been obliged to ascend [Mt. Avarim] immediately," but rather a notice concerning the future.

Ramban's approach solves the difficulties mentioned previously. Without relying on the principle of "no chronological order in the Torah," Ramban manages to relate God's words here to His words at the end of parashat Ha'azinu. They are indeed the same words, but they are uttered twice, at different times and for different purposes. In our parasha they are only a notification as to the future, while at the end of parashat Ha'azinu they are uttered as a command that must be fulfilled immediately.

The indication of Yehoshua as Moshe's future successor similarly appears in our parasha as notification about the future. From now on, Moshe and all of Israel know that Yehoshua will inherit Moshe's leadership position, even though the actual transfer of power will take place just before Moshe's death. This, then, is the reason Yehoshua's appointment as Moshe's successor is a known fact starting from the final parashot of Sefer Bemidbar.

Thus, Ramban maintains that the dialogue between God and Moshe in our parasha takes place at the time of its location in the text. It follows the census described previously, but this dialogue in its entirety concerns the future. God's notification to Moshe that he will die on Mt. Avarim, Moshe's request that a successor be appointed, and God's response - all of these pertain to the future, when Moshe's day of death arrives. Why, then, in Ramban's view, does this dialogue about the future take place at such an early stage? Ramban explains:

"Since God commands him [right before this], 'To these shall the land be divided' (26:53), He notifies him, 'It will not be divided by you, for you will ascend Mt. Avarim... and die there, and will not get to the land, but only see it.'"

Ramban's explanation for the Torah dealing with the decree of death for Moshe in our narrative, such a long time before his actual day of death, does not solve the issue of why the Torah must also mention Yehoshua here - which, according to Ramban's own explanation, is also a matter that will become real only in the future. It appears that Ramban was not troubled by this question because he maintained that the discussion regarding Yehoshua's appointment was a secondary result of the notice about Moshe's death in the future, rather than the whole reason for this parasha.

This gives rise to another difficulty. The majority of our story (nine out of twelve verses) is devoted to the discussion of

Yehoshua's succession. From the point of view of literary structure and the internal proportion between the various parts of the parasha, we must deduce that the notice of Moshe's impending death appears to be less central aspect the story. It seems to appear here only as the pretext for Moshe's subsequent request that a successor be appointed. This is especially true if we accept (unlike the Ramban) that God's command to Moshe to appoint Yehoshua, and Moshe's fulfillment of this command, pertain to the actual time when our story takes place, rather than to some time in the future.

d. Abarbanel's solution: The command that Moshe ascend Mt. Avarim pertains to the present

Abarbanel attempts to interpret the imperative style of God's words to Moshe in their literal sense, but not as an instruction to Moshe that he go to die upon Mt. Avarim immediately:

"In this utterance, although God commands him to ascend the mountain and see the land, it is not in order that he die there immediately. This [command] is not identical to the narrative at the end of Ha'azinu, and the action described there is not the same as the one described there, as Ramban thought. For this reason it is not written here, 'And die upon the mountain,' as it says there. Rather, God commands that he ascend the mountain that is before them - i.e., several times, and view the land from there. For whenever he ascends there, he will lift his eyes to the hills in order to see the land, every day."

Thus far, Abarbanel has interpreted verse 12, "Ascend this Mt. Avarim and see the land," which is literally a command, and pertains to this moment in time. He now begins to address verse 13, "You shall see it and you, too, shall be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother was gathered":

"When God says now, 'You shall see it, and you shall be gathered to your people,' it is to teach that now Moshe will see the land himself, as much as he is able to see, but he will see a different view of it again at the time of his death, as is mentioned there (in parashat Ha'azinu). This is the meaning of, 'You shall see it' - i.e., in the future tense [as opposed to the imperative - re'eh - in the previous verse, which refers to the present tense; the 'vav' at the beginning of the word 've-ra'ita' changes the tense from past to future]. Then, 'you will be gathered to your people' - at that time, after that final viewing, 'as Aharon your brother was gathered.' Thus, Moshe was not commanded that he would die right now, but rather was being told to ascend the mountain regularly and to view the land from there, for his death was not far away. God gives the reason for his being gathered to his people in the wilderness, without entering the land, by stating that it is in accordance with their sin [verse 14]."

Abarbanel interprets all the imperative expressions in our narrative as regular commands pertaining to the immediate situation. Only verse 13 - "You SHALL SEE (ve-ra'ita) and you SHALL BE GATHERED (ve-ne'esafita) to your people" - is treated by him as notification about the future. The verbs in this verse do admittedly allow such an interpretation, for they are future-tense verbs. The transition from verse 12, commanding Moshe to ascend Mt. Avarim immediately, to verse 13, notifying him about the final viewing, following which he will be gathered to his people - is likewise exegetically reasonable.

But Abarbanel's interpretation is not altogether plausible from the thematic perspective. The very idea that God is commanding Moshe to ascend Mt. Avarim "several times... for whenever he ascends there he will lift his eyes to the hills in order to see the land, every day" is a new idea that makes no sense. The command to Moshe to ascend Mt. Avarim on the day of his death is a command with a purpose: this ascent is meant to make the moment of death easier for him to bear, because he will have feasted his eyes upon the promised land. A further difficulty that arises from Abarbanel's interpretation is that if God is commanding Moshe to ascend Mt. Avarim NOW, where is this command fulfilled? The absence of any description of the fulfillment of the command to ascend Mt. Avarim proves the Ramban's view, or one similar to it. As the Ramban notes, what Moshe is told in verse 12 "is not a mitzva that the Holy One commands him to fulfill right now, FOR IF THIS WERE THE CASE, HE WOULD BE OBLIGED TO ASCEND IMMEDIATELY!"

e. A NEW SUGGESTION

Our discussion of the possibilities raised by the various commentators allows us now to propose an interpretation that will solve the difficulties we have encountered (while in turn creating new ones).

I propose that God's words to Moshe in verses 12-14, "Ascend this Mt. Avarim and see the land," be wholly identified with their parallel at the end of parashat Ha'azinu, as the great similarity between the two sources would seem to suggest. This being so, the appearance of this utterance by God in our parasha is indeed an instance of "there is no chronological order in the Torah" - but the same is not true of the continuation of the story.

At the time where we find ourselves, in the middle of parashat Pinchas, a few months prior to Moshe's death, these words are not told to Moshe - neither as a command that must be fulfilled immediately (Abarbanel) nor as notification of what will occur in the future (Ramban). These words are destined to be said to Moshe only on the day of his death, as recorded at the end of parashat Ha'azinu. But in parashat Pinchas the Torah gives us this preview, to fill a need not of Moshe's, but of ours - the readers.

What makes this preview necessary? It is Moshe's request of God: "Let God appoint... a man over the congregation," and the ensuing discussion. This request by Moshe comes in the midst of his routine activity as leader of the nation. Therefore, it would hit us like a bolt of lightning, without any psychological preparation on our part and without any introduction in the text, were it not for the Torah's prior notification that the day of

Moshe's death is drawing near. This also hints that Moshe himself is conscious of this fact.

From a thematic point of view, this interpretation is close to the Ramban's definition of the function of verses 12-14: as notification of what is destined for Moshe on the day of his death. The difference is that the Ramban sees them as NOTIFICATION BY GOD AS ACTUALLY GIVEN TO MOSHE AT THIS TIME, which forces him to interpret the imperative form of God's commands as regular future tense. According to my suggestion, verses 12-14 should be regarded as NOTIFICATION BY THE TORAH TO THE READERS OF THE STORY, taking the command in Ha'azinu and introducing it in our parasha, relying on the principle that "there is no chronological order in the Torah."

If verses 12-14 are not God's actual speech to Moshe, notifying him of his impending death, what prompts Moshe to request that a successor be named? In general we may answer that his motivation is his awareness that his death is drawing near and that he must take care of the issue of a successor. Moshe needs no reminder of this. He knows that the decree that has been passed upon him (20:12), "You shall not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them," will be fulfilled. His brother has already died as a result of this decree, just a short while ago, and the nation is already in the final stages of preparation for entering the land. If Moshe does not attend to the appointment of a successor now, when will he do it?

But we, the readers of the Torah, need a reminder of that decree. The multiplicity of events, of which Moshe is always at the center, may lead us to forget that Moshe's death is drawing near. We may therefore be taken by surprise by his request of God to appoint a successor when he is still functioning at full strength, fulfilling his role as leader with no signs of weakening.

f. the census and Yehoshua's appointment

This interpretation changes our perception of the crux of the story. Verses 12-14 can no longer be considered the main thrust of the story; they are merely a necessary technical introduction to assist us in understanding the rest. It is the continuation, regarding the appointment of Yehoshua, that is therefore the essence of the story. The fact that these verses represent a technical introduction is borne out by the very fact that our parasha is not their proper place; they appear here only as a preview.

Because these words were not actually spoken by God to Moshe at this time, we need not ask why God chooses specifically this moment to notify Moshe of his impending death. Likewise, there is no need to find any significance to the juxtaposition of the census, or the discussion of the inheritance of the land, to these verses. Verses 12-14 are not related to what precedes them; rather, they are a necessary preamble to what follows them.

The question we must ask is a different one: why does Moshe ask of God to appoint a new leader specifically at this time? According to the literal text, it would seem that the motivation for his request right now is the preceding census. Moshe knows that this was his census of farewell from the nation, and the

population that he counted must now be entrusted to a new leader. This leads him to ask God to appoint such a person.

The root "p-k-d" appears twenty times in chapter 26. Let us review the concluding verses of this census (mifkad) together with Moshe's request and God's response to it:

(26:63) "These are the people numbered (pekudei) by Moshe and Elazar the kohen, who counted (pakdu) Bnei Yisrael in the plains of Moav at the Jordan, near Yericho.

(64) But among these there was not a single man of those counted (pekudei) by Moshe and Aharon and kohen, who counted (pakdu) Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness of Sinai.

(65) For God had told them: They shall surely die in the wilderness. And not a single man remained of them, except for Kalev ben Yefuneh and YEHOShUA BIN NUN...

(27:16-17) "Let God, Lord of the spirits of all flesh, appoint (yifkod) a man over the congregation... that God's congregation not be like sheep that have no shepherd.

(18) And God said to Moshe: Take for yourself YEHOShUA BIN NUN..."

The concluding verses of the census themselves indicate that this is Moshe's farewell census. These verses contrast the two censuses that frame Sefer Bemidbar: the census conducted in the wilderness of Sinai in the second year, and the present census, conducted in the plains of Moav in the fortieth year. The first census was conducted by Moshe and Aharon - the leaders of the generation that left Egypt. The present census is carried out by Moshe and Elazar the kohen. Those originally counted have all been replaced - "not a single man remained of them." Even Aharon himself has been replaced by his son, Elazar. Only Moshe remains as the tangible link between the two censuses. But it is nevertheless clear from this census that Moshe is not the natural leader of the new generation.

Who, then, will be the leader of this generation? The answer is hinted at quite dramatically in the fact that the larger literary unit describing the census - sixty-five verses in length - concludes, surprisingly, with the name of Yehoshua bin Nun, seemingly quite unnecessarily. This conclusion hints that it is Yehoshua who will be entrusted with the leadership of these people.

Let us now turn to Moshe's request of God, opening with the word "yifkod" ("Let [God] appoint..."). The meaning of the word here is "appoint" and not "count," but it is certainly no coincidence that both the root "p-k-d" and the root "m-n-h" are related both to leadership and to counting. It appears that there is a fundamental connection between these two actions: the leader is one who counts his nation; the "mefaked" (leader, commander) counts (poked); the "memuneh" (appointed one) numbers (moneh).

Likewise, Moshe's words further on - "that God's congregation not be LIKE SHEEP THAT HAVE NO SHEPHERD" - appear to have their source in the census that has just been completed. Counting the sheep is one of the regular tasks of the shepherd as he ends his day's work and returns the flock to the owner. Similarly, Moshe - the faithful shepherd - counts his flock before taking leave of them, and therefore he is concerned that that flock not be left without a shepherd.

Following all of this we come to God's response to Moshe, revealing the name of the next leader who will guide the flock: Yehoshua bin Nun, whose name concluded chapter 26 - the chapter recounting the census of Bnei Yisrael.

Translation by Kaeren Fish

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