

## SUMMARY

### THE HEREDITARY PRINCIPLE IN JEWISH LEADERSHIP

by MOSHE BEER\*

Shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jewish world began to sharply polarize on the question of qualifications for public positions, especially positions of spiritual leadership in the community. One trend that gained currency was the passing on of public positions from father to son as a legacy. This practice aroused widespread opposition, because of the very tangible dangers inherent in it — namely the creation of a class of unqualified or even ignorant teachers, judges scribes and other spiritual leaders.<sup>1</sup>

There is evidence that a counter-trend, equally innovative, gained momentum during the same period. The position of “sage-leader” began to be filled from the ranks of the lower or middle classes. These rabbis and sages fought against ancestral privilege and in favor of erudition as the “sine qua non” for positions of authority.

The Bible is not explicit as to why Moses passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua, rather than to Moses’ sons Gershom and Eliezer. The open-ended question invites equivocation, and it is likely that second and third-century commentaries dealing with this issue are of a polemic nature, and reflect the opposing sides of the

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1. See the interpretation of “And she shall mortally wound a great number” (Proverbs 7, 26) in the tractate *Sota* 21a-22a.

controversy about qualifications for leadership. We may assume that in most cases the commentator takes a side contrary to whatever practice prevailed in his particular area at the time, and that he would like to precipitate a change in the practice. The multitude of interpretations, and their sharp divergence one from another, testify to the fact that the debate was spirited and protracted.

Chronologically, the first commentary dealing with the inheritance of Moses' role is that of Rabbi Nathan, who was active in the middle of the second century. Expounding upon the verse, "Take thee Joshua, a man in whom there is spirit, and place thy hand upon him," (Numbers 27, 18) Rabbi Nathan says the following:

Moses was sorrowed by the fact that neither of his sons was selected to succeed him. The Lord said to him: "Why are you downcast about your sons' not succeeding you? Your brother Aaron's sons are like your own sons to you, and any man whom I place over Israel will go and stand on Elazar's threshold." To what situation can this be likened? To that of an earthly king who had a son not worthy of the throne. The king transferred the right of inheritance to the son of his bosom companion, and told the king-elect: "Although I have granted you greatness, go and stand on the threshold of my son." Similarly, the Lord told Joshua that although he had been granted greatness he would have to stand on Elazar's threshold, as it says, "And he shall stand before Elazar the Priest." (Numbers 27, 21)<sup>2</sup>

We see that Rabbi Nathan believes that at the time Moses turned to God, he expected his sons to take his place. The Lord, after rejecting Moses' initiative, pacified him with the stipulation that Joshua would have to stand on the threshold of Moses' nephew. Another commentator adds that, "Moses even rejoiced, content with the role his nephew would play."<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Nathan's approach emphasizes family connections. It is taken for granted that sons inherit a father's position — provided, of course, that the sons are sufficiently well-learned. In the event that the sons are clearly unworthy, they are still granted a special status in the transference-of-power rituals.

Other commentators take issue with the assumption that Moses addressed God in the expectation of his sons' inheriting his role. One anonymous commentary states the following: "Dedicate yourself to Torah learning, since the Torah is not passed on by inheritance. What support do we find for this? When Moses saw that his sons, in line to inherit him, were lacking in Torah knowledge, he wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and immersed himself in prayer. Then he besought the Lord to tell him who would go before the people as their leader."<sup>4</sup> It is clear that this commentator sees Torah knowledge as the essential quality for any son who aspires to succeed to his father's position.

The debate over qualifications for succession was taking place in the Christian world of the second century as well. In a polemic against the evidently prevailing

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2. Sifrei-Deutoronomy, passage 305.

3. Sifrei-Numbers, passage 141.

4. *Avot of Rabbi Nathan*, 56a, section 17 (Schechter ed., p. 65).

nepotism in the Christian community with regard to positions of spiritual leadership, Origenes praised Moses' modesty: "Moses asked the Lord: 'Let the Lord set a man over the congregation!'" (Numbers 27, 16). The Lord responds in wonderment: 'Are Gershom and Eliezer not the sons of a great and renowned man? Why do you not ask for their appointment as leaders?'"<sup>5</sup> The Christian sage goes on to charge the populace to emulate Moses' example when they appoint leaders of their sect. It is nearly certain that Origenes took his idea from a Jewish scholar, but whatever the case, we see that at the end of the second century, or at the beginning of the third at the latest, parallel problems had evolved in both the Jewish and the Christian communities (the latter having been influenced by the former).

Still other commentators, while perhaps agreeing with Rabbi Nathan about Moses' expectations for Gershom and Eliezer, focus their attention not on Moses, but on God's rejection of the sons, and selection of Joshua. The verse, "And thou shall set of thine honor upon him so that the entire congregation will hearken." (Numbers 27, 20) is expounded upon in Yalkut Shimoni<sup>6</sup> as follows:

So that they will honor and fear him as they do you. – Because Moses, under the impression that his sons would inherit him, asked the Lord' "Let the Lord set a man over Israel." (Numbers 27, 21). The Lord replied, "Moses, it is not as you think. Your sons shall not inherit you. You know that Joshua has served you long and well, and has paid you much honor. In early morning and in evening he used to arrange the benches and spread the mats in the house of your council. He will succeed you, as it says, "He who minds the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof" (Proverbs, 27, 18).

This commentator, then, sees the act of serving wise men not only as proper and edifying, but also as a vital part of qualifying for positions of leadership.

The same opinion is enunciated in the following exegesis:

And Moses spoke to the Lord saying, "Let the Lord set a man, etc." What prompted Moses to inquire as to the line of succession? Since the daughters of Zelophehad had inherited their father's position, Moses decided that the time was right for him to ensure his own family's right of succession. "If the daughters inherit, it is only fair and lawful for my own sons to do so." But the Lord told him, "He who minds the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof." (Proverbs 27, 18) Your sons sat idly, rather than engage in the pursuit of Torah wisdom. Joshua has long served you and long paid you honor. It is fitting for him to lead Israel, so that he will not be deprived of his rightful reward."<sup>7</sup>

Here the forensic lines are obvious. Against the exponents of family privilege, this commentator stresses that insufficient Torah expertise disqualifies anyone from leadership.

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5. Homilia XXII 4, ed. W.A. Baehrens, Origenes Werke, II. Teil, Homilien zu Numeri etc., Bd. VII, Leipzig 1921 in *Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Bd. 30.

6. Interpretation 776.

7. *Bamidbar Rabbah*, 27, 14.

Joshua, then, comes to symbolize the non-pedigreed leader. Remarks about Joshua as a leader are likely to reflect the commentator's stance on the pedigree issue. One textual problem lingers for those who emphasize that Joshua had earned the right to succeed Moses. If Joshua had demonstrated his worthiness, then why was he made to gain final approval through the mediation of Elazar the Priest? as the passage in Numbers explicitly states? In order to minimize Elazar's personal role, one commentator analyzes the passage in Numbers in the light of verses from other Books of the Bible:

"He who minds the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof," refers to Joshua, who had served Moses, as it says, "And his minister, the lad Joshua, never departed from the tent." (Exodus 33, 11) What is meant by "shall eat the fruit thereof"? The fruit of Torah, of political power, and of service, as it says, "Through me kings shall reign, and nobles pass their just decrees; Through me princes shall rule, as well as judges." (Proverbs 8, 15-16) And this was the case with Joshua, who, rather than Moses' sons, succeeded to Moses' position, as it says, "Take thee Joshua the Son of Nun," "And he who waits on his master shall be honored" (Proverbs 27, 18) refers to Joshua, who served Moses day and night, and was therefore honored by the Lord. What was the honor God paid to Joshua? He said to him, "...and he shall stand before Elazar the Priest, who shall inquire for him in the trial of Urim." (Numbers 27, 21) Because he had served his master, Joshua was deemed worthy of becoming a holy man and walking in the spirit of God, as it says, "And after the death of God's servant Moses, the Lord said unto Joshua the Son of Nun, Moses' minister." (Joshua 1, 1) Why does the text add the description, "Moses' minister? To tell you that because he served in this capacity he merited the role of Prophet."<sup>8</sup>

Joshua, then, was selected on the basis of his qualifications, and the ceremony with Elazar was carried out only as an additional tribute.

On the other hand, some commentators hold Joshua up to ridicule. One of Joshua's detractors is quoted in the following commentary, which does, however, go on to refute the charges made against Joshua:

"A sizeable treasure and oil are found in the dwelling of the wise, and a foolish man shall swallow them up," (Proverbs 21, 20) refers to Joshua, who was not a Torah scholar! And Israel call him a fool! But it was because he served Moses that he merited Moses' position. For he honored him and spread the sheet on his bench and sat by Moses' feet, and therefore the Lord said that He would not deprive Joshua of his just reward, as it says, He who minds the fruit tree shall eat the fruit thereof." (Proverbs 27, 18)<sup>9</sup>

The strong antipathy towards Joshua, which has no basis in the Bible, testifies to the fervor of the dispute over qualifications for leadership.

The forensic methodology of the commentator quoted above is typical. He quotes an opposing view, and then disposes of it. Another typical forensic technique is to use an opposing commentator's own words against him. Here the pejorative label

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8. Ibid. 12, 9.

9. *Yalkut Shimoni*, interpretation 959.

placed on Joshua is converted into a badge of honor: “And a foolish man shall swallow it up” refers to Joshua the Son of Nun, who turned himself into a fool in front of Moses — prodding him for bits of knowledge day and night, until he had learned the entire Torah, and had earned the right of leadership, as it says, ‘And the children of Israel hearkened unto him!’”<sup>10</sup>

The Torah’s reticence with regard to Moses’ sons in a section dealing at length with the delegation of Moses’ authority opens itself up to various interpretations. The abundance of the interpretations and the sharp contrasts among them testify to the extent to which the Jewish communities in the second and third centuries were split on the issue of a spiritual leader’s qualifications. Debate over this issue existed in the Christian world as well. On one hand, commentators such as Rabbi Nathan, the son of the leader of the Babylonian community and himself a member of the aristocracy, argued in favor of succession on the basis of pedigree. This aristocratic system prevailed in the Roman Empire, especially in its Eastern provinces. But a more democratic approach, that of selection on the basis of merit, was upheld by the *amoraim* in Israel. It is probably because of these *amoraim* that the more democratic approach — as represented by the commentaries laudatory towards Joshua and critical of Moses’ sons — is dominant in rabbinic literature.

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10. Midrash Tanaim to Deuteronomy, Hoffman edition, p. 227; Midrash Hagadol to Deuteronomy, Fish edition, p.790.