

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayelech/ Shabbat Shuva
October 1, 2022 * 6 Tishrei, 5783**

Vayeleich in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3098/jewish/Vayelech-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The Parshah of Vayelech (“and he went”) recounts the events of Moses’ last day of earthly life. “I am one hundred and twenty years old today,” he says to the people, “and I can no longer go forth and come in.” He transfers the leadership to Joshua, and writes (or concludes writing) the Torah in a scroll which he entrusts to the Levites for safekeeping in the Ark of the Covenant.

The mitzvah of hak’hel (“gather”) is given: every seven years, during the festival of Sukkot of the first year of the shemittah cycle, the entire people of Israel—men, women and children—should gather at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where the king should read to them from the Torah.

Vayelech concludes with the prediction that the people of Israel will turn away from their covenant with G-d, causing Him to hide His face from them, but also with the promise that the words of the Torah “shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their descendants.”

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/566239/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is known as Shabbat Shuva or "Shabbat of Return (Repentance)." The name is a reference to the opening words of the week's haftarah, "Shuva Israel — Return O Israel." This haftarah is read in honor of the Ten Days of Repentance, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The prophet Hosea exhorts the Jewish people to "Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d," encouraging them to repent sincerely and ask for G-d's forgiveness. Hosea urges the Jews to put their trust in G-d, not in Assyria, powerful horses or idols. At that point, G-d promises to remove His anger from Israel, "I will be like dew to Israel, they shall blossom like a rose." The prophet then goes on to foretell the return of the exiles and the cessation of idol-worship amongst the people. The haftarah concludes with a brief portion from the Book of Micah, which describes G-d's kindness in forgiving the sins of His people. "He does not maintain His anger forever, for He is a lover of kindness. He will have mercy on us, He will grasp our iniquities and cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." Micah concludes with an enjoiner to G-d to remember the pacts He made with the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Food For Thought

Torah as Song – Vayelech by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayelech/torah-as-song/>

Moses' long and tempestuous career is about to end. With words of blessing and encouragement he hands on the mantle of leadership to his successor Joshua, saying “I am a hundred and twenty years old now, and I may no longer be able to enter and to leave, since the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’” (Deut. 31:2)

As Rashi notes, it is written, “shall not”, although Moses is still physically capable. He is still in full bodily vigour, “his eyes had not grown dim, nor his vitality fled.” (Deut. 34:7) But he has reached the end of his personal road. The time had come for another age, a new generation, and a different kind of leader. But before he takes his leave of life, God has one last command for him, and through him, for the future.

“So now write down this Song and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouths, that this Song may be My witness against them.” Deut. 31:19

The plain sense of the verse is that God was commanding Moses and Joshua to write out the song that follows, that of Ha’azinu (Deut. 32:1-43). So Rashi and Nahmanides understand it. But the Oral Tradition read it differently. According to the Sages, “So now write down this Song” applies to the Torah as a whole. Thus the last of all the 613 commands is to write – or at least take part in writing, if only a single letter – a Torah scroll. Here is Maimonides’ statement of the law:

Every Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, “Now therefore write this song,” meaning, “Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song,” since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll.[1]

Why this command? Why then, at the end of Moses’ life? Why make it the last of all the commands? And if the reference is to the Torah as a whole, why call it a “song”?

The Oral Tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, “We received the Torah from Moses,” or “from our parents.” We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the

evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now – but not without our making the effort to write it again.

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: nachalah and yerushah/ morashah. They convey different ideas. Nachalah is related to the word nachal, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

A yerushah / morashah is different. Here the verb is active. It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort. The Israelites received the land as a result of God's promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, their nachalah, but they nonetheless had to fight battles and win wars. Lehavdil, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work. Torah is a morashah, not a nachalah. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

And why call the Torah a Song? Because if we are to hand on our faith and way of life to the next generation, it must sing. Torah must be affective, not just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in *Descartes' Error*[2], though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the affective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke, and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of humankind.

Music has a close association with spirituality. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it:

Words still go softly out towards the unsayable.

And music always new, from palpitating stones

Builds in useless space its godly home.[3]

Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we daven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward Heaven. Nor do we read the Torah. Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studies; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon, or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival, or one of the High Holy Days. There are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the Ketuvim, 'the writings'. Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires

to the spiritual it modulates into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. If we are to make Torah new in every generation, we have to find ways of singing its song a new way. The words never change, but the music does. A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great rabbinic Sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: when it came to seudah shlishit, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs. His message was clear. Without an affective dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of God.

Some years ago, one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the “missing Jewish children” of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christians families and brought up as Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organised a large banquet and placed advertisements in the Polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* (‘Raisins and Almonds’) the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all that is left of Jewish identity is a song.

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829-1908) in the introduction to the *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Choshen Mishpat*, writes that the Torah is compared to a song because, to those who appreciate music, the most beautiful choral sound is a complex harmony with many different voices singing different notes. So, he says, it is with the Torah and its myriad commentaries, its “seventy faces”. Judaism is a choral symphony scored for many voices, the Written Text its melody, the Oral Tradition its polyphony.

So it is with a poetic sense of closure that Moses’ life ends with the command to begin again in every generation, writing our own scroll, adding our own commentaries, the people of the book endlessly reinterpreting the book of the people, and singing its song. The Torah is God’s libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung God’s Song. We are the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, because words are the language of the mind but music is the language of the soul. [1] *Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah*, 7:1 [2] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, London, Penguin, 2005. [3] “Sonnets to Orpheus,” book II, sonnet 10.

The Courage to Hope: Vayelech/ Rosh Hashana/ Shabbat Shuvah/Yom Kippur by
Ayelet Cohen

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-courage-to-hope/>

Head of the Year:

*It is not too late. It is early
and about to grow. Now
is the time to do what you
know you must and have feared
to begin.*

Marge Piercy

—Marge Piercy

Shabbat Shuvah represents the place between hope and fear; between transformation and unrealized aspirations. We may have made big promises on Rosh Hashanah, resolving to make significant changes in our lives, entering the year with a sense of excitement and optimism. But as Yom Kippur draws closer, we become more attuned to our own shortcomings. So much is beyond our control. Changing old patterns is arduous, the path uncertain. Confronting our own limitations, we can feel afraid and alone. The spiritual work of this moment lies in discerning the difference between acknowledging our limitations and succumbing to fear.

In Parashat Vayeilekh, the Israelites stand on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. Like us, they are full of possibility and trepidation. Moses is running out of time. Without him, the Israelites will have to confront the challenges ahead without their constant guide and intermediary to God. We might imagine them, along with Joshua, who is poised to become their leader, feeling untethered and afraid. Moses offers them comfort and reassurance: they are not alone. Joshua and the Israelites are entering a changed world but, Moses assures them,

ה' אֶל־לְקִיךָ הוּא | עֲבַר לְפָנֶיךָ

God will cross over before you. [Deut. 31:3](#)

Ha'amek Davar, the 19th-century commentary of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), points out the difference between the phrasing of this verse and a similar verse as the Israelites first left Egypt ([Exod. 13:21](#)): וְה' הִלֵּךְ לְפָנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמֹּד עָנָן "And God went lifneihem (ahead of them) by day in a pillar of cloud to guide them along the way." The language in Exodus, according to the Netziv, communicates that the Israelites followed behind passively as God split the Red Sea, whereas "God will cross over before you" means that God's action is entwined with the Israelites' action. Once they cross into the Promised Land, the Israelites will actively determine their own destiny, as partners with the Divine. If we are to create real change in our lives, we cannot wait passively for the change to happen to us. Despite loss and disappointment, we must move forward, repairing what is broken in our relationships and our world. In their first steps out of

enslavement, the Israelites followed behind an enormous pillar of cloud. Now, as we begin this new year, we must chart our own journey—just as the Israelites did when they prepared to enter the land. We must seek the Divine inside ourselves. Like the Israelites, as we navigate the challenges of an uncertain future, entering the New Year in yet a new stage of the pandemic, a time of geopolitical and planetary turmoil, an era of significant change for the Jewish people as a whole and, closer to home, for JTS as an institution, we don't always feel the presence of God. The consciousness of our own limitations and of the very real obstacles in our way can undermine our confidence that we can transform, that we can enter the Land. Fear and self-doubt encroach, making it difficult to remember that we are not alone. Like the Israelites, who when overwhelmed by doubt and fear wished for a moment that they could return to Egypt, there are always those who will wring their hands, saying that our best days are behind us, that we cannot repair what we have broken and move forward.

Moses seems to have understood this. Facing his own death, and the awareness that he would not reach the land himself, he summons his most powerful rhetoric, leaving Joshua and the Israelites—and us—with a message that continues to accompany us and guide us. He reassures and exhorts:

חֲזַקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוּ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי י' ה' אֶל־לִקְיָךְ הוּא הַהֲלֵךְ עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ:

Be strong and courageous, do not fear or dread them; for it is indeed your God who marches with you: [God] will not fail you or forsake you.

Deut. 31:6

Strength and courage take many forms. According to the 12th-century Midrash Lekah Tov, חֲזַקוּ וְאַמְצוּ refers to being strong in Torah and mitzvot, and taking courage in ma'asim tovim (responsible and ethical deeds) and derekh eretz (treating others with dignity and respect).

Moses emphatically repeats these key words to Joshua in the next verse, reassuring him and the Israelites.

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לַיהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזַק וְאַמְץ

Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: “Be strong and courageous.” Deut. 31:7

We repeat these words, in [Psalm 27](#), throughout the Days of Awe, a kind of mantra that can steel us and comfort us as we encounter the unavoidable fears and doubts that accompany all new beginnings.

קוּזָה אֶל־ה' חֲזַק וְאַמְץ לַבֹּרֵךְ וְקוּזָה אֶל־ה':

Turn to God; be strong and take courage, and turn to God.

The repetition of “turn to God,” which bookends this verse, draws the attention of the commentaries and the midrash. They admit that we repeat these words at the beginning and end of this verse because sometimes we pray and our prayers are unanswered. The experience of fearing our prayers are unheard, that our path to change and renewal is blocked, is clearly familiar to both classical and

contemporary commentators. They tell us to try again. To look deeper. Not to give up hope.

As we stand in this liminal moment, in these in-between days that are filled with awe, in its dual meaning of fear and wonder, each of us can consider the ways in which we can fortify ourselves with hope as we move toward our promised lands. The lesson of Shabbat Shuvah is to have the courage to keep returning. This season calls us to search for God, not ahead of us, like a pillar of cloud providing obvious and easy markers on our path, but inside of us. We search for all that is entwined within us: for God, for the strength we can draw from our ancestors, and for the courage to change. Only then can we move forward, knowing that change is possible and that we are not alone. *(Ayelet Cohen is the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership at JTS)*

[Well-Practiced at Punishment: Shabbat Shuva by Rabbi Benjamin Zober](https://truah.org/resources/benjamin-zober-shabbat-shuvah-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/benjamin-zober-shabbat-shuvah-moraltorah/>

Imagine aliens do exist, and they send a team to Earth. And then we kill them. This could be quite an interplanetary diplomatic disaster, but when it happened on an episode of the 1960s television show “The Outer Limits,” it turned out differently. The human characters learned that these beings could not kill their own, so they sent them to the “practiced executioners” of Earth. They knew exactly what we would do.

We excel at punishment. We have punished ourselves, our fellow humans, even the Earth. Where we need practice is in accepting teshuvah, return. As we observe this Shabbat known as *Shabbat Shuvah*, or the Shabbat of Return, we must confront how we treat those in need of return.

Our punishments are often unending. We sentence people to death – a ghastly and irreversible sanction, allegedly reserved for the “worst of the worst” but mainly borne by the poorest and most disenfranchised. No matter that many innocent people sit on death row. No matter that many more have done what we know as teshuvah – we do not let them return. There is no return from a death sentence. We do not allow or care for teshuvah.

While those who pay the ultimate price are denied the fulfillment of their teshuvah, many more who have lesser sentences are also stymied, innocent and guilty alike. For those who do the work and are to be set free, we still do not release them. We continue to punish for crimes long after the sentence ends. We deny people the right to vote, the privacy and promise of a new life, and ensure that people who have made mistakes continue to suffer for them. Every sentence is a life sentence when we do not allow people to be freed. There is no teshuvah when we do not let people return.

On Yom Kippur, we symbolically punish ourselves. We list sins and beat our breasts, even if we ourselves did not do everything mentioned. And in our seats,

we forgive ourselves for these sins, the ones we committed and those we did not. But outside of the synagogue, we continue to hold others, who actually seek teshuvah for many of those same sins, forever in chains. Endless, unforgiving punishment does not comport with the values we aspire to on Yom Kippur. We face the idea of endless punishment this Shabbat Shuvah, as we read Parshat Vayeilech. In it, we are reminded that for Moses there is no teshuvah. His angry, impetuous, faithless sin of striking the rock will not be forgiven. His punishment is not that he is kept in, but kept out – of Israel. We read this and consider the unfairness, the injustice that his one act will not be forgiven, that he cannot make teshuvah. It resounds as one of the most unfair moments in the Torah. As we confront it during this season, let it remind us of the unfairness we inflict on those whom we keep unforgiven.

Even as the gates of repentance truly never close, our opportunities to free others are not limited to once a year. In our daily liturgy, we are reminded again and again that people err, people make mistakes, people fall. In reciting the Amidah, we pray to God who "supports those who fall, heals the ill, frees the imprisoned, and keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust..." We close that prayer: Blessed are you Adonai, who revives the dead. Rabbi Roni Handler teaches that this is a recognition of return – that to be sick, to be downtrodden, and to be imprisoned is like death. It is a recognition that all are conditions from which we can return. And we can *allow* people to return. As attorney and author Bryan Stevenson wrote, "I believe that each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done." Moses is denied the realization of his life's work because of one thing that he did. We feel his isolation and know how haunting it is for something we have done to be considered beyond teshuvah, beyond help.

Teshuvah must always be possible. "Rabbi Meir would say: Great is teshuvah, for if even one individual [truly] accomplishes it, [the heavens] forgive the entire world." (Talmud, Yoma 86b) One person atones, and we are all forgiven by God. And yet we, as humans, struggle to forgive other people.

We are well-enough practiced in punishment. Now it is time to practice return. If we are to heal the world, ourselves included, we must honor teshuvah, and let those who seek it return to life and to peace. *(Rabbi Benjamin Zober is a criminal justice reform advocate and former death row attorney. He is the co-rabbi of Temple Sinai in Reno, NV, with his wife, Rabbi Sara Zober.)*

[The Prairie and the Wilderness Vayeilech by Ilana Kurshan](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OefU3PF3fzZNYxuuEPbTAQj1N6RMB-yh/view)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OefU3PF3fzZNYxuuEPbTAQj1N6RMB-yh/view>

Over the course of the past year I read my children the entire series of Little House on the Prairie books, in which Laura Ingalls Wilder chronicles her childhood on the frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth century. My kids were fascinated by the

one-room schoolhouse, by the long winters that buried the prairie in snow, and by the Indians with their scalp-locks and eagle's feathers. But above all they were fascinated by the concept of autobiography, and they kept returning to the same questions: How could Laura be both the author of the books and the main character in them? Did she really remember every single word that every person said? What about when she wrote about her husband Almanzo – how did she know exactly what happened to him in childhood, before she met him? How can someone write autobiographically about what they cannot possibly remember?

I answered my children by invoking this week's parashah, Vayelech. "It's like Moshe," I told them. We read in this week's parashah that Moshe wrote the entire Torah: "[Moshe] put down in writing the words of this Torah to the very end" (31:9) The Ramban understands this verse as indicating that Moshe wrote the entire Torah, from the beginning of Genesis until the end of Deuteronomy, which concludes with an account of Moshe's death and his burial by God on Mount Nevo. But what about those moments he could not possibly remember, like his own death, described in the final eight verses of our parashah, which bring the Torah to a close?

The Talmudic rabbis consider this question in tractate Bava Batra (14b), amidst a discussion about the authorship of the various books of the Bible. We learn that Joshua wrote his own book, except for the account of his death, which was written by his son Elazar, or perhaps by Pinchas. Likewise Samuel wrote his own book, except for the account of his death, which was recorded by Gad, the seer and Natan, the prophet. But what about the Five Books of Moses? How much of the Torah did Moshe write, and who recorded the account of his death?

The rabbis posit that Moshe wrote three parts of the Bible: He wrote his own book, understood to be a reference to the Five Books of Moses. He also wrote the portion of the Bible about the prophet Balaam, who was considered the only other individual whose prophetic abilities matched those of Moshe. And he wrote the story of Job, who, according to the rabbis, may have existed at the time of Moshe or at various other historical periods, or perhaps, as one anonymous talmudic rabbi contends, "Job never existed and never was created, but his story was a parable." That is, if Moshe didn't know Job personally, he might have invented his story, perhaps as a way of working through his own struggles with the cruelties of fate after he was told that he would not be allowed to enter the promised land.

When it comes to the account of Moshe's death in our parashah, the rabbis disagree. According to Rabbi Yehuda, Moshe wrote the entire Torah up until this point, and then Joshua took over with the verse, "So Moshe the servant of the Lord

died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord” (34:5). As Rabbi Yehuda argues, “Could it be that Moshe died and wrote ‘So Moshe the servant of the Lord died?’” Surely these verses had to be written by Moshe’s successor. Just as Moshe passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua, he also passed on to him the task of completing the writing of the Torah. But Rabbi Shimon is troubled by this solution. After all, as we read in our parashah, once Moshe finishes writing the Torah, he hands it to the Levites, charging them to “take this book of the Torah and place it in the Ark of the covenant” (31:24-25). How could Moshe have written and handed the Levites an incomplete Torah? As Rabbi Shimon puts it, “Could it possibly be that the Torah was missing even a single letter?”

Rabbi Shimon therefore proposes another solution. He argues that until this point—until the verse that describes Moshe’s death—God spoke the words of the Torah, and Moshe repeated them and then wrote them down. But when it came to the last eight verses, God spoke the words and Moshe, unable to repeat them, wrote them down “with his tears.” Moshe’s fate was quite literally dictated to him, and the end of the Torah was written not in ink but in tears – presumably tears of sorrow and resignation. Unlike the start of Deuteronomy, where Moshe raged against the dying of the light in pleading with God to let him enter the promised land, now at the end of Deuteronomy, Moshe goes gentle into that good night.

As this Talmudic discussion reminds us, there are ways we can tell our own stories even if we can’t possibly remember every detail. But ultimately we are not entirely in control of the narrative. Even if we are fortunate, like Moshe, to live to the age of 120 with our eyes undimmed and our vigor unabated, ultimately the account of our lives will be shaped by the later generations who tell and retell our stories. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s story continues to be told by historians who question the perspective and biases reflected in the Little House books, especially Wilder’s depiction of Native Americans. Moshe’s story continues to be told by all who interpret and find new meaning in the Torah. Like Moshe, we cannot fully control how our stories will be told; others may add chapters of their own or reinterpret the words we have written about ourselves. We can only strive to live in such a way that later generations will be inspired to revisit, retell and continue our story.

גמר חתימה טובה

