



After Leadership • Parshat Nitzavim-Vayeilekh

This week's sedra, *Vayeilekh*, means literally 'and he went,' but ironically opens with Moses' confession to the Israelites that he could no longer go on: "He said to them: I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active" (Deut. 31:2). Moses, for the past four books of the Torah, was always on the move. But at 120, he told his followers that he was unable to continue. Rashi explains that this was his announcement that the end of their journey and the end of his days would coincide: "Today my days and my years become full." Moses was to die on the seventh of Adar, the same day that he was born (BT *Sotah* 13b).

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explains that Moses was telling the people he could no longer go out to war. There comes a time in every leader's life when the glories and triumphs of old are no longer possible. But this was not, Rashi reminds us, because Moses did not have the physical strength, as one might assume to be true of someone of his advanced years. In the last chapter of Deuteronomy, we are told outright that Moses had his physical capability intact: "His eyes were undimmed, and his strength was undiminished" (Deut. 34:7).

This is a touching portrait of aging, captured by an observation Rabbi Jonathan Sacks made when visiting seniors as the Chief Rabbi. He met a woman who was 103 and retained her liveliness. He asked her for the secret of her youth and the delight she had in being alive. "With a smile she

said, 'Never be afraid to learn something new.'" Rabbi Sacks, in *Lessons in Leadership*, concluded that, "If you are prepared to learn something new, you can be 103 and still young. If you are not prepared to learn something new, you can be twenty-three and already old."

If Moses was still sprightly, then why couldn't he continue leading? According to Rashi, he was not *permitted* to continue. His leadership position was being taken from him and given to Joshua. God had determined that the time had finally come. The same passage of Talmud that identified his birth and death date offers another distressing reading of Moses' vulnerability at this moment. Moses could no longer teach the people because he no longer had the wisdom he once had.

Nahmanides challenges this reading. He explains that the wisdom that was taken from Moses at this time was a miracle and a kindness to prevent him from being unsettled and upset about the transference of power to Joshua. No matter how much he believed he found a fit successor for leadership, Moses had to be devastated to lose his authority. His identity was wholly wrapped in his leadership. Who was Moses without his role?

I've spoken to many people who completed terms as presidents, CEOs, or executive directors of organizations and to lay leaders who served as chairs, to find out what leadership is like in the

days, weeks, and months after they step down. Some have described it as relief tinged with sadness. They are relieved to get their normal lives back and the many hours a day they spent managing people and managing crises. The day-to-day wear and tear of leadership can be exhausting. They appreciated the time to recover and the freedom to spend more time with family.

But they also missed the excitement. They missed the decision-making and the people. They missed being needed or valued for their experience and expertise. Many shared with me the hurt that although they often knew more about the inner workings than almost any other person in an organization, they were rarely consulted for their knowledge and experience. This left them feeling undervalued by the very institutions they sacrificed years of their lives to sustain and improve.

They tried to give space to the next leader to establish a distinct platform and offered an open door to help with problems, but more than one person shared that the phone never rings. Once gone, leaders can feel that they never existed. A woman told me she even wrote a poem about it! What they fail to teach you when you take the most senior role in leadership is what it's going to feel like one day after leadership. It's clear we need to create a different, more ennobling exit ramp for professional and volunteer leaders.

In "The CEO's Guide to Retirement," Bill George writes that it's important to know when to leave and how to plan for what's next (*Harvard Business Review*, Nov-Dec 2019). He understands the dilemma. A leader's "self-worth is often connected to their work, and the questions they face go to the heart of their self-image: How can I remain vital and relevant? Will people still respect me without my title? Where should I live now that I'm not tied to headquarters? How will I fill my days? Without an organization to lead, how can I continue to make a difference in the world?"

He advises leaders to finish strong and leave

before they are asked to leave. He recommends meeting with a career coach or therapist a year before retiring to discuss fears, expectations, and directions. It's important to discuss transitions with family to think about adventures, hobbies and activities that were not possible because of work. Say meaningful goodbyes, make a clean break, and only come back when you're invited. He suggests a hiatus of 6-12 months to explore options before making new commitments. For those looking to stay engaged, find ways to mentor, to serve on other boards, to teach, and to write.

This stepped approach to leaving is not only about a change of role but, as we mentioned earlier, it's about a change of identity. Sensitivity to this is evident in the Torah in a verse from an earlier book. In Numbers, we read that Levites begin their work at the age of 25 and "at the age of fifty they shall retire from the work force and shall serve no more" (Num. 8:24-25). Fifty is a bit young to retire. The very next verse, however, softens the change: "They may assist their brother Levites at the Tent of Meeting by standing guard, but they shall perform no labor. Thus you shall deal with the Levites in regard to their duties" (Num. 8:26).

Rashi explains that at 50 the Levites no longer had to carry the parts of the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary, when the Israelites changed encampments. But they were still allowed to sing and to help load the sacred vessels on to wagons. No doubt, they "assisted their brother Levites" by helping novices understand the roles and responsibilities of the office, thus mentoring a new generation of Israel's spiritual leaders.

What have you done to show gratitude to a leader who has retired or finished a role? How can you learn from his or her wisdom?