

This week's Parsha Vetchanan is rather extraordinary, and somewhat intimidating—it includes storytelling and history, the Ten Commandments, and the first paragraph of the Shema. Always read on Shabbat Nahamu, the “Shabbat of Comfort” following Tisha B’Av, it is a fitting parsha to read as we begin to really dig in and prepare for the coming weeks of reflection and soul-searching as we head towards Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It opens, with a deeply personal individual story. Moses gives a farewell speech to the Israelites, telling them how he pleaded with God, asking please let me go into Israel. God refuses, and Moses tells the Israelites, “the Lord was wrathful with me on your account, and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, ‘Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again.’” And he tells Moses to go up to Mt Pisgah, and look out, because he can see Israel but not go in. Then, he tells Moses, “Give Joshua his instructions and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see.”

One interpretation of this interaction is that Moses is asking God for a gift as a source of comfort for all he has done, and God says, “I’ve done enough for you. Leave space for others, because there will never be an end and if you enter Israel, you will only want more.” God is telling Moshe to appreciate the abundance of what he already has, see the land, be grateful for what you already have. [Mychal Springer, quoting the Bekhor Shor, the French Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac]

Others have interpreted the reason as punishment—Moses did not live up to God’s rules for him all of the time, he struck the rock, and as a consequence, could not be rewarded.

Stephen Garfinkel, a scholar at JTS, takes this a step farther, saying Moses’ humanity as a leader is seen in the language he uses, blaming the people Israel—“God was angry with me *on your account*”, instead of taking responsibility for mistakes he has made as a leader. This is an indicator that Moses perhaps has

peaked in his leadership, losing his balance and letting leadership go to his head; no longer fit to lead, and time to pass on responsibility to someone that will assume it with humility. But he also offers an alternative—the people needed a change in leadership so that they would not be too accustomed to one person, they were going to a new place and a new place would require a different perspective.

I think we can take this lesson and apply it to our own sense of leadership and teaching, what is our responsibility in a world in which we pass through but are not permanent? As someone in their mid-40s that sits in leadership in a number of organizations, I sit in between two generations that seem regularly at odds over leadership and responsibility. Millennials and Baby Boomers. Each is easily offended by the other. Millennials simply cannot understand why Baby Boomers will not adopt their point of view, how they can be so dug in at a different point. Why they won't hand over the reins completely. Baby Boomers feel totally unappreciated for the decades of work they have done that goes unrecognized, offended by the moral certitude of young people when it's hard to even understand them sometimes. It's like they speak a completely different language and I'll admit I frequently sit in the middle, totally befuddled about why these generations, which both include people I really adore, who are committed and passionate about their lives and work, wrestle so much.

And they do. In many issues of the day, it's striking how completely different the experiences of these two generations are. I saw an interpretation of national security recently by Millennials that stopped me cold—I realized that some of our leaders in their 20s were around 5 years old when 9/11 occurred. I think about how my experiences of how threats were perceived in the 1980s are just an experience that was never had by someone a generation younger.

At the same time, there are ways in which the next generation knows more. I had a very full Jewish life growing up, I went to camp, I was attentive in Hebrew school. But in the synagogue where I grew up, teaching was very rote, and girls were not allowed to do certain things—I never learned to read Torah because it wasn't allowed, and there wasn't time to dig deep into Torah study. My kids go to Lerner and the fact is, they know more than me in all things Torah related. Sometimes I don't even realize the depth of their thinking and what they've absorbed because I don't even have the right questions to ask.

Two weeks ago, wandering around with Avery in a quiet week between camps, I told him I was doing this D'var. We had been talking about mundane things, video games and the NBA, and I didn't really expect to start a discussion. Out of nowhere, he says-- People have all kinds of theories about why Moses couldn't go into Israel, but I think it's because no one is a G-d. Moses had to pass on leadership so that people knew the difference between humans and G-d, so that people wouldn't worship Moses or let go of their own responsibility. This is extraordinary insight into Jewish continuity. And an example of how the young perhaps have something to teach us, can know more than we even realize, if we give them the opportunity to talk and lead.

What would it be for us to learn from this parsha about how to maintain Jewish continuity? There are really two lessons here. One is the importance of letting go. That we are all human, that we can get off balance, and that there is something absolutely necessary in letting a new leader step in and fit for the people and the times. At the same time, that as we go, we should share the key lessons we have learned to maintain continuity. Moses does that in several ways that exemplify leadership through continuity.

Moses starts by telling an vulnerable, almost embarrassing, story about himself, leading in spite of his pain and disappointment, sharing his own weakness as a way of appealing to the Israelites.

Before he passes on leadership, however, Moses continues, by laying out the core values and concepts he needs to leave behind. “Give heed to the laws and rules I am instructing you to observe, so that you can enter and occupy the land that God is giving you.”

Beautiful line, “But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children.”

He reminds the Israelites of when they stood at Mt. Sinai and how difficult it was to believe, but how important it is. And then proscribes the 10 commandments. Over and over throughout the passage, Moses appeals first to personal, individual experience, reminding Israelites of their own experience and telling them to study the law and follow it or be subject to serious consequences. But over and over he also asks them to “impress upon your children,” “teach your children,” answer your children’s questions and tell them their history. Tells us to put physical reminders on our doorposts —signs around the house of who we are and where we come from. [But there is also a trust](#)—rely on the rules, the Shema, the constancy of our values and our expression of those values, and the next leaders will know intuitively how to apply them to their current circumstances.

Transitions are painful, but necessary, and we can mitigate how hard it is by passing on lessons of history and values. The Haftorah carries this theme of consolation to a perhaps more poetic place. It notes that all flesh is grass,

goodness like flowers--- “grass withers, flowers fade”....Time passes, moves past us. Our finite lives are contrasted with God’s power and infinity; with nature in the world that continues, a poetic consolation for letting go.