

Parshat Vayelech
A Change in Perspective
Leah Fine - Class of 2024

...בן שלשים לכת, בן ארבעים לבינה, בן חמשים לעצה, בן ששים לזקנה,

...at thirty, the peak of strength, at forty, wisdom, at fifty, able to give council,
at sixty, old age...(Avot 5:21)

When Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi approached his sixtieth birthday, he internalized Rabbi Judah ben Tema's description of the milestone: *at sixty, old age*. A driving force behind the Jewish Renewal Movement, Reb Zalman dreaded what he thought of as the decrepit road ahead, eventually leading to a lonely life in a nursing home. Depressed and frightened, Reb Zalman realized that he had to change his "curse of old age" to a blessing.

Through intense introspection, Reb Zalman imagined a new approach to aging and wrote *From AGE-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (1995). With a change of perspective, one could become a spiritual elder and mentor young people. Like a mountain climber, observing from a lofty vantage point, sages can, he believed, survey their lives and understand the patterns of struggles and triumphs, which may provide deeper meaning to the purposeful view of the road ahead.

Reb Zalman's mountain metaphor was all too real for Moshe, our Teacher. In *Parshat Vaetchanan* (Devarim 3:23-27), Moshe pleaded, prayed and begged to enter the Land of Israel. Hashem allowed Moshe to climb to the highest point of Mount Nebo and only permitted him to gaze across the Jordan at the land that he could not enter. How painful this must have been!

By *Parshat Vayelech*, Moshe seems to have made peace with God's decision. According to the Italian commentator Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475–1550), Moshe emphasizes his advanced age, so that the people wouldn't be so saddened by his death. Sforno suggests that Moshe wanted Bnei Yisrael to internalize that by the laws of nature, a man of 120 years was *no longer fit to go on living*. Furthermore, Sforno adds,

לא-אֹכֵל עוֹד לְצִאת וְלָבוֹא, *even if I were still able, I would not be able to function physically as a leader should. I will not be able to lead you in the conquest of the Land of Israel. as I am suffering from symptoms of old age.*

Don Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1508) quotes the Ramban (R. Moshe b. Nahman, 1194-1270) to explain how important it was for Moshe to honor and say good-bye to his people. Both Abarbanel and the Ramban understood the pain of departing from loved ones, as they, themselves, were both exiled from Spain. Abarbanel wrote:

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה... וכדי לכבדם הלך ממחנה לוייה אשר היה יושב שמה כדברי הרמב"ן אל מחנה ישראל כאדם הרוצה ללכת מן העיר אל מקום אחר והולך לבית חבירו להפטר ממנו ברשותו להיותו חביב אצלו.... והלך בפרט אצל כל שבט ושבט להודיעם שהוא מת ולהפטר מהם לאהבתו אותם. והיו דבריו אלה כדי לנחמם ולדבר על לבם שלא יתקשו על מיתתו יותר מדאי כי הוא מפאת ימיו שהם מאה ועשרים שנה הגיע קצו

Moshe went from the camp of the Levites to the camp of the Israelites in order to show them honor, as the Ramban said, like someone who wishes to take leave of his friend and comes to ask permission of him. He went to each tribe to inform them that he was dying and leaving them and he loved them. And Moshe's words comforted the people; he spoke to their hearts so they wouldn't take his death too hard because he reached the end of his days which were one hundred and twenty years.

Moshe has planned the transition of power carefully. He gives the people a pep talk before introducing Joshua as the new leader (Deut. 31:6). Moshe emphasizes why the people should be *strong and resolute*, for it is indeed your God who marches with you, כִּי יְקִיֵּץ אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא הַהֹלֵךְ עִמָּךְ.

Moshe goes beyond Hashem's command in *Parshat Vaetchanan* (3:28) וַיִּצַּו אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ to imbue Joshua with strength and courage. In *Parshat Vayelech*, Moshe presents Joshua to the people publicly, so that all of Israel can see his support of their new leader:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לַיהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל חַזַּק וְאַמֵץ כִּי אַתָּה תִּבּוֹא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְקִיֵּץ לְאַבְתֶּם לָתֵת לָהֶם וְאַתָּה תִּנְחַלְלֶנָּה אוֹתָם:

Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and resolute, for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that Hashem swore to their fathers to give them, and it is you who shall apportion it to them." (Devarim 31:7)

In our *parsha*, Moshe becomes an empowering mentor. In fact, Micah Goodman, an Israeli public intellectual, asserts that Joshua scrupulously followed his mentor's

teaching – so scrupulously that it was as *if* Moshe himself had entered the Promised Land (הנאום האחרון של משה 2014)

At age sixty, Reb Zalman viewed aging as a curse. Over time, though, he reframed his understanding of this stage of life. He devised exercises on repairing relationships, forgiving others, and acting as spiritual elders. Zalman taught thousands of people a new, wise approach to aging.

On this *Shabbat Teshuva*, may we learn to turn our own weaknesses into our strengths, accepting and celebrating our life situations, mindfully “in the sight of all Israel.”



Leah Fine is a third year student at Maharat. Leah holds an MA in Modern Jewish History from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and teaching credentials in elementary and special education from California State University. She studied at Pardes, Drisha and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Leah was director of Jewish Family Programming at Beth El-Baltimore, a pioneering integrated multi-generational Jewish studies experience. As a result, she was awarded the prestigious Melton Senior Educators Fellowship at the Hebrew University. Leah has taught and innovated curriculum within a wide range of formal and informal settings, with a particular passion for including people with special needs into all aspects of Jewish communal life. She is co-author of Where God Dwells: A Child's History of the

Synagogue and is currently completing a children's book about Samaritan folktales.

Leah is excited about participating in the i-Fellows program this year to help shape the future of Israel education.