

September 28, 2010

## For Simhat Torah: Why Joshua?

By Meir Soloveichik

"And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there." This one-line description of a death in the desert (Deuteronomy 34:5) succinctly summarizes the tragedy of a dream denied, the end of the life of a leader whose hopes of entering the Holy Land would never be fulfilled. It is a terribly sad verse—which happens to be read on one of Judaism's happiest days of the year, Simhat Torah: the day the annual reading of the Torah is completed. But at least the *haftarah*, the reading from the Prophets recited immediately following the Torah portion, appears to be on point: it is the first chapter in the book of Joshua, picking up where Deuteronomy leaves off and beginning: "And it was after the death of Moses."

There is only one problem. The Talmud stipulates a different prophetic reading entirely: a selection from the book of Kings in which Solomon blesses the people following the celebration of Sukkot. This choice, too, seems appropriate enough, not only because we are at the end of Sukkot but also because the preceding Torah portion records Moses' blessing of Israel just before his death. But the Talmud appears to have lost the battle: already by the Middle Ages scholars were lamenting the widespread custom of reading from Joshua in blatant contravention of halakhah. Their criticism went unheeded; today, one cannot find a single synagogue that has reverted to the portion listed by the Talmud.

An explanation for the shift may lie in the additional Torah reading that came to be amalgamated to the ritual of Simhat Torah. As celebrations of this day evolved, it became customary to cap the reading of the very end of the Torah with a reading from the very beginning. Those chosen to recite the respective passages were given honorific titles: Bridegroom of Torah for the one completing Deuteronomy, and Bridegroom of *B'reishit* for the one beginning Genesis.

What, then, is truly celebrated on *Simhat Torah*: the fact that the Torah has been completed, or that its reading begins again? In answering this question, we might dwell for a moment on the term Jews use to designate study of the Torah; they call it "learning." The choice of words is theologically significant, indicating that one who studies Torah seeks not

merely to review what has already been absorbed but rather to glean something new. As the rabbis said about the study of the law more generally: "One who has studied his portion a hundred times cannot be compared with one who has done so for the hundred-and-first."

Thus, the celebration known as a *siyyum*, meaning completion, held upon finishing the close study of a talmudic tractate, is all about beginnings rather than endings. Speaking to the completed book as if it were a cherished friend, the celebrants intone: "*hadran alakh*, we will return to you!" Thus, too, while the honor of "Bridegroom of Torah" is generally the most prized in synagogues today, some noted rabbis have believed that the honor more to be cherished is that of "Bridegroom of *B'reishit*." The aim in studying Scripture is not to complete our quest for knowledge and wisdom but to seek more.

Could this then be why Joshua is read on Simhat Torah—as a parallel to *B'reishit*? On a day of beginnings, when the Five Books of Moses are opened afresh, how appropriate to read from another beginning, the first chapter of the first book in the prophetic corpus. If that was indeed the reason for the change in *haftarot*, it was an action undertaken not in defiant dismissal of the Talmud but in accordance with a more basic rule: that the prophetic portion ought to be linked to the most important Torah reading of the day: in this case, not Deuteronomy but Genesis.

The same perspective enables us to understand the seemingly awkward juxtaposition of the tragedy of Moses' death with a day devoted to joy and dancing with the Torah, a day, to use Harvey Cox's felicitous phrase, of "gamboling with God." Moses may not have made it to sacred soil, but his book will be opened and read reverently from start to finish again, and again, and again. Therein lies his immortality.

*Meir Soloveichik is associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.*