



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Vayeilech (וַיֵּלֶךְ, "and he went")**
- **Chapters: Deut. 31:1-30**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

In last week's parashah (Nitzavim), Moses formally gathered the people of Israel together to ratify their covenant with the LORD. He pled with the people to "choose life" by pursuing the path of obedience to the Torah its commandments. If the Israelites would willingly do so, they would be blessed and prosper as God's chosen nation; but if not, they would be cursed with exile, persecution, and the threat of utter destruction.

According to Jewish tradition, it was at this time that the Heavenly Voice called out to Moses, "This is your last day on earth." Moses then went to speak with the elders of Israel to bid each of them farewell. "I am one hundred and twenty years old today," he told the them, "and can no longer go forth and come in." Moreover, since the LORD had confirmed that he was soon to die, Joshua was to be ordained as his successor to lead the people into the Promised Land across the Jordan river. In the presence of the entire assembly, Moses then urged Joshua to be strong and courageous, and to place his full trust in the LORD.

Moses then committed the Law to writing and delivered the scrolls to the priests for safekeeping. He then commanded that after Israel was safely in the land, the law should be publicly recited to all of Israel every seven years at a special ceremony on the festival of Sukkot, in order that the people "may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law."

The LORD then called Moses and Joshua into the Mishkan (tent of meeting) to commission Joshua as Moses' successor. While there, the LORD foretold that the Israelites would "whore after the foreign gods" and break covenant with Him. On account of this, Moses was instructed to teach the Israelites a prophetic "song" called the Ha'azinu. Joshua was then commissioned with these words from the LORD: "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you."

After this, Moses further instructed the Levites to put the scroll of the Law beside the Ark of the Covenant to bear witness against Israel if they were to deviate from its teachings. The portion ends with Moses gathering the people together to teach them the Ha'azinu, which would again remind them of the consequences of breaking covenant with the LORD.



Parashah Questions

1. What does the phrase *vayeilech* (וַיֵּלֶךְ) mean? (Deut. 31:1) ¹
2. How old was Moses when he died? (Deut. 31:2) ²
3. What is the date of Moses' death? ³
4. Why was Moses forbidden to enter the land? (Deut. 31:2) ⁴
5. Why did God choose Joshua to be the next leader of Israel? ⁵
6. From what tribe was Joshua? ⁶
7. Why did Moses change Hoshea's name to Joshua? ⁷
8. What did Moses say to the elders about their entry into the land? (Deut. 31:3-5) ⁸
9. What were the people required to do? (Deut. 31:6) ⁹



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- ¹ Vayeilech means “and he went,” from the verb *halakh* (הָלַךְ) meaning to walk or go. Jewish tradition states that Moses went around comforting people and encouraging them even though he knew he would soon die. Note that some other sages say that these events are *not* in chronological order and that the following verses took place right after Moses was denied his request to enter the land (Deut. 3:23-ff.)
 - ² He was 120 years old. May you live to be 120 years old, plus one day!
 - ³ Moses died on his birthday, on the 7th of Adar. We know he died on this date by statements made in the book of Joshua. Joshua was told to prepare to cross the Jordan “in three days” (Josh 1:11), which occurred on the 10th of Nisan (Josh 4:10), but we know that Israel had mourned for Moses 30 days earlier (Deut. 34:8). So on the 7th of Nisan the people prepared to cross, which was 30 days after the death of Moses. Counting backwards, 30 days *before* Nisan 7 is Adar 7, which is therefore considered the date of Moses' death.
 - ⁴ Because of the sin at Meribah, when he struck the rock twice (instead of speaking to it as God commanded). Joshua was chosen to lead the people into their inheritance.
 - ⁵ Because of his primary characteristic of humility. Joshua was always studying Torah, serving Moses at the Tabernacle, and was the captain of the armies of Israel.
 - ⁶ He was from the tribe of Ephraim (a son of Joseph).
 - ⁷ Because he was afraid that Hoshea's humility would make him susceptible of being influenced by the spies. Hoshea means “YHVH has saved,” and Moses added the Yod to the front of his name to indicate that YHVH *will* save.
 - ⁸ Moses assured the elders that the LORD would go over before the people and destroy the nations presently occupying the promised land, just as He did to Sihon and Og, the Amorite kings who had territories east of the Jordan. He further told them that Joshua was their designated leader. God would subjugate these nations by cutting off their archangels who oversaw the land. The Israelites were commanded to annihilate the seven Canaanite nations and destroy all traces of their culture, idols, and “high places” of worship. Note that though warfare was necessary, the success of the Jewish people was already secured. All they had to do was “be there,” and walk in faith...
 - ⁹ They were commanded to “be strong and of good courage.” Note that this is written in the *plural* (to the nation), but the following promise, “He will not fail you nor forsake you” is written in the *singular* (to each person). God personally promised each person that God would not fail or abandon them.



10. What did Moses say to Joshua before all the people? (Deut. 31:7-8) ¹⁰
11. To whom did Moses give his scrolls of the law? (Deut. 31:9) ¹¹
12. When did Moses command that the entire nation gather together to hear the law being read? (Deut. 31:10-13) ¹²
13. When did God command Moses and Joshua to appear in at the Tent of Meeting? (Josh 31:14-ff)? ¹³
14. When God appeared at the tent as a pillar of cloud, what did he say to Moses? (Deut. 31:15-16) ¹⁴
15. What did God say he would do when the people broke covenant with Him by “whoring after” other gods? (Deut. 31:17-18) ¹⁵
16. What was the purpose of the evils and troubles that God would send upon his faithless people? (Deut. 31:17) ¹⁶
17. What was Moses told to do in response to God’s revelation? (Deut. 31:19-22) ¹⁷

¹⁰ He told him *chazak v'ematz* (חַזַק וְאַמֵץ) – “be strong and brave” – because the LORD would be with him and would not leave nor forsake him. *Lo tira v'lo techat* (לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תַחַת) “Do not be afraid or dismayed.” This is the same message Moses gave to nation and to the people just before this public commissioning of Joshua.

¹¹ Moses gave his writings to the Levites and to the elders of Israel. Jewish tradition states that Moses wrote thirteen Torah scrolls and gave one to each tribe. He placed one in (or near) the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony and as a “master version” that was consulted if any discrepancies were found in the other scrolls.

¹² Every seven years - on the 7th year of the Shemittah (Sabbatical year) – during the festival of Sukkot, when all Israel would gather to celebrate before the sanctuary, the Torah was to be read to all of Israel. This was later called the “mitzvah of hakhal,” the “gathering” of the people (the words “kahal” and “kehillah” comes from the same root). Men, women, children, and converts were required to hear the law being read in order to hold God in awe.

¹³ According to Jewish tradition, the events described in the rest of chapter 31 took place five days before Moses died, so that Joshua could be officially commissioned to lead the people. This section is therefore not chronological.

¹⁴ God said that after Moses died the people would “rise up and stray” after alien gods of Canaan and abandon the LORD. This verse introduces a series of prophecies stating that both the blessings and the curses would be fulfilled in Israel. Note that the word translated “stray after” (זָנָה) is related to the word for *prostitution* (זְנוּת) which suggests that the Israelites engaged in idolatry only as an excuse for their promiscuity.

¹⁵ God’s anger would be roused and He would “hide his face” from them (measure for measure). This is the very opposite of God’s face “shining upon you” as mentioned in the birkat kohanim (priestly blessing). Note that the phrase *hester panim* (הִסְתֵּר פָּנִים), “hiding of face” is often used when discussing the role of God in the Book of Esther. God’s plan is being fulfilled, step-by-step, even if it is hidden within the “natural” world of human beings and their (evil) choices. Despite the curses, God’s guiding hand moves in the background, ultimately for the good.

¹⁶ They were meant to awaken the people to return to the LORD. “Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?” This corresponds to the testimony of the nations when they see the retribution delivered upon Israel. In both cases, the purpose for the trouble was to give glory to God. “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things (Isa. 45:7).

¹⁷ Moses was told to write a “song” to teach to the people as a witness against them (i.e., the Ha’azinu). Note that Jewish tradition considers 31:19 to be a commandment for each Jew to write a Torah scroll (it is written in the plural).



18. When did Moses compose this song? (Deut. 31:22) ¹⁸
19. Is the book of the law mentioned in Deut. 31:24-26 the same thing as the written Torah scroll that we have today? ¹⁹
20. Where was the Book of the Law (סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה) to be placed? (Deut. 31:26) ²⁰
21. What did Moses say to the Levites after he gave them the scrolls? (Deut. 31:27-30) ²¹

Discussion Topics:

1. Why is this Torah portion always read before Rosh Hashanah?
2. What is *teshuvah*? Is it the same thing as “repentance”?
3. Paul states that to the Jews were entrusted “the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2), and in this portion God said that Moses’ prophetic song would live “unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring” (Deut. 31:21). Why would a prophetic song of judgment live unforgotten among the Jews?
4. In what ways was Joshua a “type” or picture of Yeshua?
5. Read Romans 11 and discuss how the “partial hardening” of Israel would result in the opportunity for the Gentiles to turn to God. Discuss the “olive tree” metaphor and how Christians are related to ethnic Israel...

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Ha’azinu** (Deut. 32:1-32:52)
- Read the Haftarah (2 Sam. 22:1-51)
- Read the New Testament (Rom. 10:14-11:12)



¹⁸ Moses wrote the song on the same day that he commissioned Joshua and received the revelation at the Tent of Meeting. According to tradition, this was five days before his death (and therefore was written on Adar 2). It should be noted that some of the sages think the “song” actually refers to the Torah scroll, not to the Ha’azinu...

¹⁹ It is likely that there were some scribal additions, such as this narrative (as well as the passages describing his own death), that we later appended to Moses’ original Torah scrolls...

²⁰ It was entrusted to the Levites (perhaps to the Kohanim or the Kohathites) who cared for it and placed it beside the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony to the people. It was not placed *inside* the Ark (as were the tablets of the Ten Commandments), though it was accorded the same honor as the Ten Commandments themselves.

²¹ He rebuked them for their faithlessness and foretold that they would rebel against the LORD after he had died. Moses further commanded them to call all the elders together to listen to the prophetic song of rebuke the LORD had commanded him to write as a testimony against them.