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D'rash on Pinchas
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This parsha has a lot in it – the end of the Pinchas story, a census, new rules on inheritance, the sacrifices for the holidays. But also, very appropriately for this past week, we read about the succession from Moses to Joshua, and that's what I'm going to focus on.

Though the Torah presages the succession in some ways – we know Moses will not enter the land and that Joshua and Caleb will survive –the succession story appears suddenly, and the narrative is brief, rather cryptic and conclusive. (That may all have an eerie familiarity, given recent events.)

The Torah doesn't provide a lot of behind-the-scenes details. It provides one quick insight into Moses' thinking – that he cares about having a successor named – and then the decision and the ceremony follow in short order. The Israelites get virtually no information at all.

The narrative raises a lot of questions but I want to focus on three aspects of the story that struck me.

First, why does this story appear at this point in the Torah? It comes out of nowhere, with no warning. It's not even in the Torah in the place that makes sense chronologically – in the next chapter Moses is still the leader, and then he's around for an entire additional book.

I think there are perhaps two reasons – one related to the text that comes before, and one to the text that follows. We've been reading about a series of incidents where Moses' leadership is critically important, including rebellions against him. His role seems increasingly central and irreplaceable – indeed, there are fatal consequences to suggesting he be replaced. So perhaps the succession story is needed here as a corrective. We are reminded in the midst of the narrative that Moses is not going to be the leader forever; that our history and our future are not ultimately about him. We will survive crises and make decisions without him – even though the stories we've been reading may raise doubts about that.

Having Moses' impending departure from the scene presented so starkly may also affect the way we hear what follows. It can lead us to understand more fully that the laws and guidance the Torah is about to lay out are for the future, for us –that we won't be able to rely on a unique leader to make them work. And it adds a layer of poignancy, and perhaps uncertainty, as we hear them.

And finally, the succession story comes shortly after the census – a census that underscores that it is a new generation of Israelites that will be entering the land, not those who left Egypt with Moses. Placing the story here may be a way of reassuring the reader, "Don't worry, the leadership will change, too." Generational change is always an issue.

A second aspect of the succession passages that struck me was the line where G_d tells Moses to transmit to Joshua "some" of his "authority" – or in the Alter translation "grandeur."

Some. When leadership is passed on, even to a successor selected by G_d, the new leader will not be the same as his (or her) predecessor. This may be obvious in the case of Moses – who, the Torah says in its closing lines, was unique. But no matter what, it is the end of an era when the torch is passed. That is highlighted here.

Maybe this inescapable fact has even stymied G_d. G_d doesn't seem to have given much thought to succession before Moses raises the issue. Perhaps Moses has started to seem irreplaceable even to G_d.

Finally, the third thing that struck me is how human-centered the story is. Yes, G_d had decided Moses' time is up, and selects Joshua. But it's Moses who brings up succession. Interestingly, the Israelites don't appear to be told of G_d's role. There's no description of Moses conveying G_d's words to the people. All the Israelites experience is a (seemingly sudden) public ceremony where Moses lays hands on Joshua.

I think this is a recognition that it's humans who seek and need leaders, and who need ceremonies of installation. It's part of what keeps societies functioning. And the ceremony is public to give legitimacy to the new leader – and interestingly here, the legitimacy derives from Moses conveying authority, not G_d (at least not in any explicit way for the Israelites).

Lastly, the episode is brief and compressed in part because the Torah is not as interested as we are in human leadership. It's G_d's leadership that's the point. In the same way that the Haggadah traditionally does not mention Moses, the Torah hurries the human succession off stage, and off the page. The way the episode is told both focuses on what humans need and want, and indicates that that's not what matters most.

So, at the end of a week where succession issues took center stage in the U.S., what do you think the Torah says to us? (Please don't make your comments about your views on the specifics of current U.S. politics.) And what are your views on why this passage appears at this point in the Torah; why Moses can convey only some of his authority; and why the story is so brief and G_d's role circumscribed?