

Vayelekh

וַיֵּלֶךְ

“He went”

Deuteronomy 31:1–30

Torah Together



In this short *Torah* portion, Moses formally appoints Joshua to succeed him as the leader of the Israelites and he graphically predicts Israel's rebellion against their God. This is also the time that Moses put the *Torah* in writing.

1. Joshua to Succeed Moses - 31:1-8

a) In his last address to the Israelites, what reasons does Moses give for naming a new leader? To what events in their recent past does Moses refer to help encourage them? According to Moses, why should the Israelites “be strong and courageous”?

In verse 2, Moses says that he is 120 years old and “no longer able to lead you.” In addition to this, God had told him that he would not cross the Jordan river into Israel. Moses recalls the Israelite's recent victory over the Amorite kings Og and Sihon (see Numbers 21:21-35) as an example of what they would do in Canaan. The Israelites were to be strong and courageous because “YHWH your God goes with you” (verse 6).

b) Next, Moses speaks directly to Joshua. Specifically what does Moses instruct Joshua to do? What reason does Moses give for Joshua not to be afraid or discouraged?

Moses instructed Joshua to lead the people into the land that God promised to their forefathers and “divide it among them as their inheritance” (verse 7). Moses told Joshua that God would go before him and never leave him or forsake him (verse 8).

Scripture Link:

Numbers 20:1–13 relate the incident that led to Moses being told by God that “you shall not cross the Jordan.”

Scripture Link:

Numbers 21:21–35 tell the story of the defeat of Sihon and Og when the Israelites were victorious over their enemies.

These words that Moses spoke to Joshua must have been a great encouragement to him. Even though Joshua had been a faithful servant to Moses for over forty years, the task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land would be daunting.

Scripture Link:

The story of Josiah, a King of Judah, is told in **II Kings 22**. It is believed that the Book of the Law referenced in this story was a copy of the book of **Deuteronomy**.

2. The Reading of the Law - 31:9-13

According to verse 9, who wrote down the Torah? To whom did he give it? What was to be done with the Torah? Why was this to be done? Does this seem like a good idea to you? Do you think Israel followed Moses' instructions?

Moses wrote down the Torah and gave it to the priests who carried the ark. Every seven years (sh'mittah) during the feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), the priests were to read the law in public when everyone came to the "place YHWH would choose" (Jerusalem). In this way, the Torah would be effectively handed down from generation to generation. God intended that the Torah be read or heard often by His people to help them learn and obey it. It would appear that the Israelites didn't follow this command very closely. One specific example occurred during the reign of Josiah, when the Torah was rediscovered after having been lost for what must have been many years. (see II Kings 22)

3. Israel's Rebellion Predicted - 31:14-30

a) Where did the transfer of leadership from Moses to Joshua occur? How does the description of this event in **Numbers 27:18-23** differ from this one?

The ceremony to transfer leadership to Joshua occurred at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The description of the event in Numbers is more detailed, adding that Eleazar, the priest, participated. Also, the Numbers passage implies that Joshua and Moses shared leadership for some period of time.

b) In verses 16 -21, God is speaking directly to Moses. What did He say that the Israelites would "soon" do? Why do you think God chose to use these exact words to describe their behavior? Does this seem appropriate to you?

God told Moses that the Israelites would "soon prostitute themselves to foreign gods." The word prostitution reveals how God feels about the worship of other gods. Furthermore, God considered himself married to Israel and the act of worshipping other gods is blatant adultery.

Note that twice (in verses 6 and 8) Moses tells Joshua and the Israelites that God "will never leave you nor forsake you." Given that God considers himself married to Israel, what does this say about his commitment as a husband?

c) What does God say he will do to the Israelites “on that day”? Did this happen? When?

In verse 17, God says that He will become angry and forsake them (at least for a time) and that they will be destroyed and face many disasters and difficulties. This did indeed happen at several points in history. Most notably, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated and dispersed by the Assyrians in ~722 bc. and the southern kingdom of Judah was captured by the Babylonians in ~586 bc. Up until recently, it also looked as if God had forsaken the Israelites after they were dispersed by the Romans in 70 ad.

d) Why does God instruct Moses to “write this song”? What does God intend this song to do? Has this happened? (The song is recorded in **Deuteronomy 32**.)

God told Moses to write the song and teach it to the Israelites as a witness for Him against them (verse 19). God intended that future generations not forget what God had promised and what the Israelites had done. Miraculously, the song still exists after 3500 years and still fulfills God’s purpose!

e) What command did God give to Joshua in verse 23?

God told Joshua (not Moses) to be strong and courageous, that He would bring the nation of Israel into the land He had promised.

f) After Moses completed writing the *Torah*, he gave it to the Levites along with his instructions. Was Moses confident that the Israelites would obey God’s *Torah*? How do you think the Levites felt about Moses words?

Moses told the Levites to keep the Torah beside the Ark of the Covenant and take it with them. He also told them that he knew that the Israelites would rebel against the covenant and that disaster would befall them. This must have been somewhat demoralizing for the Levites to hear.

Can you sense the emotions that Moses must have been experiencing as he spoke to the Levites in verses 26 through 29? Even though he fervently hoped that the Israelites would be faithful to God’s covenant, he seemed to know in his heart that they would break their vows.

“ . . . for YHWH your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:6

Digging deeper

Scripture Link:

In **Romans 9:19-21**, Paul quotes from **Isaiah 29:16** and **45:9** to help believers understand what it means for God to be sovereign:

“One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

1. Earlier in Deuteronomy we are given a description of what would happen to the Israelites if they broke their covenant with God. In this passage, God foretells that they will indeed break His covenant. Why do you think God went ahead and allowed the Israelites to go into the promised land even though He knew they would not live up to the covenant? What insight does this give you into the character of God? Do you think **Romans 9:19-21** applies here?

This situation points up the difference between the “will of God” and the “foreknowledge of God.” It was not God’s will that the Israelites break their covenant with Him. However, because He is God, He knows beforehand what will happen and He knew that they would indeed break the covenant. Certainly one reason for this is that God’s glory will be made known on earth. Other nations and peoples (us) will learn about the relationship with God and his chosen people Israel and will come to realize that He is indeed the God of the Universe. Furthermore, by maintaining His part of the covenant with Israel, God demonstrates His undying love and forbearing nature, to say nothing of His mercy and forgiveness. Even though God knows the end from the beginning, this does not mean we are free from the responsibility to live up to His commands to the best of our ability. The Romans passage basically tells us that we are in no position to question God and His reasons for why He does as He does. However, by studying His word and history, we can come to trust in Him.

2. From our vantage point of approximately 4000 years of recorded history, it is awe-inspiring to think that God has foreseen all of the experiences that His people would endure. How likely do you think it is that the nation of Israel would exist today if it were not for God? As believers in the Messiah *Yeshua*, what is our relationship to Israel according to **Ephesians 2:19-20**?

Given the many times in history that other nations have tried to exterminate God’s chosen people, Israel, it is nothing less than miraculous that they still exist today and are thriving as an independent nation in the land originally given to them by God. According to the passage in Ephesians, as believers in Yeshua, we are adopted into the family of God and are co-heirs with the Jews in God’s promises and covenants.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Hosea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20; Joel 2:15-27

Brit Hadashah : Hebrews 13:5-8