

Two moments draw our attention at the end of Parashat *Vayeilekh*. They are the last interactions between Moses and Joshua. The first one happens in public, before the eyes of all Israel. The second happens in private, in the Tent of Meeting, in the presence of God. We should set up the scene. Moses has gone before the entire people and acknowledged that he has reached the end of his life. He declares to the people:

בן מאה ועשרים שנה אנכי היום לא אוכל עוד לצאת ולבוא וה'
 אומר אלי לא תעבר את הירדן הזה. (דב' לא:ב)

A hundred and twenty years old am I today; I am no longer able to go out and to come in, and God has said to me: you are not to cross over this Jordan! (Deut. 31:2)

While on the one hand, we may not expect him to be running marathons at the age of 120, on the other hand, the Torah asserts at his death that despite his age he did not lose his vigor (Deut. 34:7). In other words, it was not because of physical limitations that he could not come and go as he pleased; it was because God banned him from doing so. At the end of his forty years of leading Israel, with the land in sight, God told him that he may not go any further, thus he was effectively limited to a small zone in front of the people and the Tent of Meeting¹ before he makes his final ascent up to the mountain from which he will gaze at the land. This creates a fascinating symmetry for his life: at the beginning, when God called him at the Burning Bush he found himself in a small zone of holiness.² Now, at the end, he finds



himself in a small zone of holiness at the front of the people and in the Tent of Meeting. First he calls Joshua into this zone and gives him a public charge. Shortly thereafter, he calls

¹ With the passing of Dolly Parton last week, many videos were posted online of her appearing at the Grand Ole Opry. Unbeknownst to most of us, there is a 6-foot circle of oak and maple at the center of the stage. This is a piece of the original stage of the Opry. Viewed as sacred, it is **a physical link between past and present holding the memories of now almost a 100 Years of performances**. To stand in the circle is the pinnacle of achievement for a country singer. Sacred circles are present in Jewish folklore. During droughts, Honi the Circle-Drawer would draw a circle, stand inside it, and pledge not to move from it until it rained.

THE PUBLIC STATEMENT (31:7-8)	THE PRIVATE STATEMENT (31:23)
Staged in front of the people.	Located in the Tent of Meeting in front of God.
וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לַיהוָשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ כִּי אַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאֲבוֹתָם לָמַת לָהֶם וְאַתָּה תִּנְחִילֵנָה אוֹתָם. וְה' הוּא הַלֹּלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ הוּא יִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ לֹא יָרָפָךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תַחַת.	וַיֵּצֵא אֶת יְהוָשֻׁעַ בֶּן נֹון וַיֹּאמֶר חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ כִּי אַתָּה תָּבִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לָהֶם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ.
Then Moses called Joshua and said to him, before the eyes of all Israel: Be strong and courageous, for you yourself will enter with this people to the land about which God swore to your fathers, to give them; you yourself will allot-it-as-inheritance to them. And God, he is the one who goes before you—; he will be with you; he will not desert you, he will not abandon you; you are not to be afraid, you are not to be shattered!	Now he enjoined³ Joshua son of Nun and said: Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Children of Israel to the land about which I swore to them; and I myself will be with you.

Some Textual Observations. 1. תָּבוֹא אֶת vs. תָּבִיא אֶת. This is a subtle difference, but it is worth highlighting. In public Moses says **you will enter with this people**; in private he says **you will bring the Children of Israel**. The public declaration registers Joshua as a leader **among** the people; the private declaration registers Joshua as a leader **at the front** of the people. Why the difference? The public charge

² וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל תִּקְרֹב הָלֶם שֶׁל גִּעְלִיךָ מֵעַל רִגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
 הוּא - אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמַּת קֹדֶשׁ הוּא - **He said: Do not come near to here; put off your sandal from your foot, for the place on which you stand—it is holy ground!** (Exod. 3:5)

³ וַיִּצַּו is usually translated as **He commanded**. But the sense here is more, **he enjoined**. He is not commanding him here as much as he is pressing him strongly. Similarly, Jacob **enjoins** his sons to bury him in the Cave of Machpela (Gen. 49:29). It is not a command as much as it is a fervent desire. Here Moses is conveying to Joshua fervently, urgently, and with utmost gravity, his personal desire for Joshua to be strong and courageous.

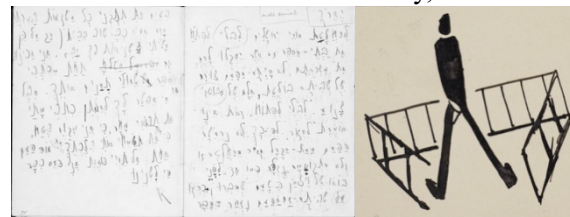
reassures Israel that Joshua was one of them. It endows him with legitimacy and validates the need to perceive Joshua as a symbol of continuity and not of rupture. But in private Moses had to remind Joshua that he was, as their leader, differentiated from the people. **The purpose of the public charge was to boost Joshua's stature in front of the people. The purpose of the private charge was to boost Joshua's understanding of himself in the presence of God.**

2. נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לָהֶם vs. וְנִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם. In the public setting, Moses invokes the promise that God made to **their fathers**. That immediately sparks the audience to imagine Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and recall God's covenant. Lincoln uses a similar rhetorical device at Gettysburg. In his first sentence he deftly gets his audience to go back **four-score-and-seven** years to the Declaration of Independence. By invoking **their fathers** Moses subtly gives Joshua a place in the larger patriarchal story. In the private setting Moses deletes any mention of the patriarchs and makes this moment solely about Joshua and the people. **In public, Moses invokes the past. In private, Moses is invoking the future.**

3. וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ vs. הוּא יִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ. The public, **He will be with you** functions as a promise and a blessing, and signals to the people who are listening in that, as far as their future is concerned, they have nothing to be afraid of because God will be with Joshua. But in the private charge, when Moses says to Joshua, **I will be with you**, there is a gorgeous ambiguity here that adds gravity and pathos to this scene because Moses is speaking and **we are the ones** listening in. We are wondering: is referring to God or to himself? Joshua knows that these are Moses' last words to him. Moses has been a father and mentor to him. Would Joshua not be emotional at this moment? Perhaps this is Moses trying to comfort him by saying, **Don't worry, part of me will always be with you. My stories, my words, my teachings, they are always going to be with you.** Or perhaps in some way he is trying to say that **I, God, will be with you.** Is Moses channeling God? Or is God breaking through in this moment and speaking to Joshua directly? While there is plenty of dramatic irony in this private moment - the people of Israel outside the Tent of Meeting do not know what is taking place inside, but we do! - this scene still lingers in our imaginations, like the smoke of the divine cloud, with plenty of unanswered questions. Nevertheless, it closes a circle for Moses. We recall when God first met Moses at the Burning Bush he said to him, **וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ-I will be with you** (Exod. 3:12). Here, when Moses is about to depart forever, the same words, almost verbatim, hang in the air: **וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ-And I, I will be with you.** As an audience, we cannot help but feel the intensity of these words **in their power to offer comfort, and their comfort to offer power.** They give the new leader purpose, strength, and hope.

Moses' two charges to Joshua highlight the tension between the public and private realms. The longer content-rich public ceremony **reveals** content, but the shorter intimate private communication **conceals** content, that is until the content of what took place in privacy is revealed. Naturally, while we are stirred and

inspired by the public ceremony, we are often more interested in what happens in private, behind the scenes. There is one story on the stage in front of everyone; there is another story, often more fascinating taking place off the stage. Take Lincoln at Gettysburg again for example. At the public ceremony itself, Lincoln was preceded by Edward Everett, one of the greatest orators of his day. Following Lincoln's address, Everett confided privately to Lincoln: **I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes.** That one sentence of private communication augments and even transforms our understanding of the public event, especially its place in the history of modern oratory. Kennedy and Khrushchev sparred famously in public. In private however, they communicated candidly and informally in what became known as the "pen-pal" correspondence. Those exchanges lowered tensions in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs incident. The public story was fascinating. But the private story was arguably even more fascinating. Every ceremony, lifecycle event, every tribute and benediction, has a public and private aspect to it. The public sees what is staged and experiences the narrative that is playing out. But often, perhaps almost always, what goes on behind the scenes is more fascinating. How else to explain the popularity of blooper-reels, tell-all books, diaries, and personal correspondence. Let me share just one more example from two years ago (5784). To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Franz Kafka's death (1 Sivan 5684, June 3, 1924) there several museums held exhibitions featuring his drawings and manuscripts, including his Hebrew exercise workbook (shown below). Famously, Kafka instructed his literary executor, Max Brod to burn all of his material after his death. Thankfully, Brod didn't follow his



From the National Library of Israel exhibit, Kafka: Metamorphosis of an Author, 2025.

wishes. Had he done so, there would be no "Kafka", and we would not be able to explore the complexity of one of the most important literary figures of the modern era. The purpose of Moses' public charge was to reassure **the people** that Joshua would be a great leader, that he was a continuation of the national story, and that God was with him. The purpose of Moses' private charge was to reinforce **to Joshua himself** that he was capable of leading the people of Israel after Moses' death, and that he would never be alone. In the public charge Moses prepared the body politic of Israel for its next chapter. In the private charge, Moses fortified the soul of Joshua for his. **Shabbat Shalom!**

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