Graduation: Thoughts for Parashat Shelakh Lekha

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By
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“And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun Yehoshua” (Bemidbar 13:16).

Before Moses sends out the delegation of leaders to spy out the Promised Land, he changes Joshua’s name from Hoshea to Yehoshua. By adding the letter “yod,” the message is that the Almighty should bring salvation. Moses wanted to attach God’s name to his protégé.

(Actually, the Torah refers earlier to Joshua with the name Yehoshua [Shemoth 33:11], but the formal name change seems to have occurred in the episode of the spies.)

The Midrash and many commentators explain the reason for Moses’s decision to change Joshua’s name. Moses foresaw that the spies would return with a negative report, and he wanted to bolster Joshua so that he would not be swept into the evil designs of the others. This suggestion isn’t altogether satisfying. If Moses foresaw the wicked report that the spies would bring back, why didn’t he abort the mission right away? And why would he only have blessed Joshua with a name change; he should have changed the names of all the spies so they would feel the presence of God when they fulfilled their mission?

Perhaps the name change represents a new phase in the life of Joshua.

Until this episode, Joshua was a faithful disciple of Moses. He studied with Moses; he followed Moses’s instructions. He never was called upon to face challenges on his own or to demonstrate personal initiative.

As the time came for him to join the other leaders of Israel on the mission of the spies, Joshua now became a graduate. For the first time, he was leaving the security of living in Moses’s shadows. For the first time, he was leaving his community and setting off for a new land. For the first time, he would have to deal with peer pressure without the guiding hand of Moses to help him.

Moses knew the challenges that were about to face Joshua. He added a “yod” to Joshua’s name, as if to say: You are now going out on your own. You will face many pressures and challenges. I want you to know that God’s name is attached to you. When you find yourself in a dilemma, remember that you are not alone: the Almighty is with you. When you make decisions, remember that you are answerable to the Almighty. Stay true to yourself and stay true to God.

Joshua graduated. He went on to become one of the greatest leaders in the Biblical period.

This is the season when many of our children and grandchildren are graduating from high school or college. They have spent years in their schools, learning from their teachers, being guided by their parents. And now, like Joshua of old, they will be entering a new phase in their lives.

They will be required to be more independent. They will face increasing pressures from peers. They will confront new ideas and new ideologies. They will spy out the Promised Lands of their own possible futures, and will try to determine what path to follow in their lives.

Parents and grandparents need to symbolically add the name of God to their children and grandchildren. They must remind them that as they move into a new phase in life, they need to be strong; they need to know that God is with them; they need to know that their decisions should find favor in the eyes of God, and in the eyes of righteous human beings.

Just as Joshua “graduated” from his tutelage under Moses and went on to achieve personal greatness, so we pray that all our graduates will be blessed with God’s name. May they go on to live happy, healthy, wonderful lives, achieving all the personal greatness of which they are capable.

Angel for Shabbat