

JOSHUA

MAX APPLE

Throughout my career as a writer, I've made it a point not to write about the Bible, or even to think about it too consciously. I've done so to protect myself from an old guilt.

Before I was born my grandfather chose a career for me, "Talmud *Chochem*," and why not. He and his brothers gave up a life of study to work in bakeries in America, his only son was killed in an automobile accident, and then a family miracle. There I was, a boy, a male heir, who if brilliant enough might make the chaos and disappointment and tragedy of his own life more bearable.

Easy to see through now, but not then. Before I could read I knew that the big job of my life was to study Torah in order to bring *nachas* upon my grandfather and all those dead ancestors in Lithuania and Poland who contributed their genes and lots of hardship so that I might stand before rabbis in an outpost near Lake Michigan and make everybody proud.

I didn't astound any of them, but I did stand before rabbis. Somehow, my grandfather found them even if they were working undercover as jewelry salesmen or managerial assistants. Wherever he noticed a Talmudic inclination, there he delivered me. I was five or six or seven and already knew that people my age in my grandfather's day spent their lives in happy Talmudic dispute with their elders.

I couldn't read Hebrew and my mind was on toys. I was even too young for baseball. None of this mattered. If I could begin I could succeed. My grandfather had confidence. He also had a high, shrill voice. He would lead me before one of these sages and say, "Do something with him. Teach him. He's growing up like a goy."

I don't know what any of these men might have done. As I think of them now, they were probably bigger disappointments than I was. The itinerant teachers and rabbis who passed through western Michigan in the late 1940s would no doubt have preferred to be elsewhere. How my grandfather found so many amazes me. The easiest were the old men, the *meshulachs*, who appeared before Rosh Hashanah to collect money for widows and yeshivas. They were traveling salesmen, their eyes on richer prey than my grandfather. I had no problem with them: a quick blessing and that was that.

The younger ones made up a kind of circuit, a pony express of teachers, *schochets*, *moels*, rabbis, who alighted for a while in the provinces. They would lead a service in Kalamazoo, perform a wedding in Niles, teach a class in Muskegon, all the while doing penance for their mediocrity in the seminary and praying for a better life in a big city. Most of them got their wish, but not before my grandfather brought me in and made his plea. Before they left Grand Rapids there was a big

job—me.

Now I see the comedy of it; then it was pure suffering. I would sit beside a Hebrew book and a glass of tea, while a wispy man in his thirties would say, “So we’ll begin.”

We never did. Nothing penetrated the barrier of my desire to be far from these men and their words. The three or four whom I remember specifically were decent men. They were not very worried about me or my failure. I remember one teacher who quizzed me about apartments in the area, another who drew diagrams of a car in traffic. They were as bored as I was. If they had a choice, and the proper training, they would have preferred to be out killing chickens.

In an hour my grandfather would reappear to claim me, no wiser than when he had left me. No matter how often we enacted that scene, he could not create for me the mood of Vilna in about 1890. It was Michigan in 1948, and my grandfather finally gave up. I was never going to be a Talmud *Chochem*. I might as well go to Hebrew school. My grandfather still loved me and wished me well, but his dream of my special destiny ended. He said he hoped I would still remember him when I had my Bar Mitzvah, and advised me to become a druggist. When I was seven my Bar Mitzvah looked as far away as ancient Egypt. As he delivered me to Hebrew school, my grandfather lingered in the sentiment of his coming death. “Remember me,” he said. I did and I do. He lived to be 107 and was full of energy until the last weeks of his life.

When he let go of his hope for my career as a Talmud *Chochem*, I went to a regular Hebrew school. There I was not my grandfather’s project, but a boy like the others. Even worse: a wild boy in the back row pulling on girls’ pigtails, wrestling in the aisles, making paper airplanes out of the narrow ruled pages of my Hebrew notebook.

My Hebrew-school teacher was a refugee, Mr. Sellinger. When he spoke, the consonants clicked against his plastic molars. His English was almost as difficult to understand as his Hebrew. Against little boys he had no defense, only a ploy. When the chaos got too great, when he could not hear himself over the noise, when there was too much yelling, or now and then bleeding he went to a white emergency button above the blackboard and let his finger hover over it. He just stood there savoring his ace in the hole. We were not afraid, but when he moved toward the button we did become quiet. It was the one ritual we celebrated with our teacher. At the button we acknowledged his power. He played with those few seconds. Sometimes his thick yellow fingernail actually touched the button. “I’m calling the rabbi,” he would say, “I can’t stand it any more, I’m calling the rabbi.” His swollen knuckle hovered. He stared at us. We looked at our shoes, at the mess we had made of the floor. His finger trembled. He never pushed the button. Of course the rabbi did come in from time to time, unsummoned. In his presence we behaved, but not out of fear. The rabbi was a young man who spoke English, smiled, seemed like a regular public-school teacher. For him it was easy to behave. He was not afraid of us, nor we of him. We behaved because there were rules.

But we must have smelled Mr. Sellinger’s terror. Maybe he could not control us because

long ago he had given up hope of ever controlling anything. Maybe he could not call for help because he knew there was none. Maybe his finger stayed not at the button but at the void.

During our brief recess we went to the playground, where we imitated Mr. Sellinger's accent and taunted one another with "I'm calling the rabbi." We doubled over in laughter.

Now I recall that line with such shame. How sorry I am that I did not understand what it meant to be a Polish refugee in 1950.

Yet, in the midst of the howling and the chaos, as Mr. Sellinger wrote from the wrong side across the pitted blackboard, I did learn a little. From the private teachers, those pony-express men of ancient ritual, I was as silent as a mummy. What I was supposed to learn I wouldn't. But old Mr. Sellinger in his dark-brown suit, always ready to call the rabbi, moved me now and then to read that strange language. From a little gray book I learned about Abraham in Ur-Chasdim. I learned much about wanderers and refugees in Mesopotamia four thousand years ago, but I did not recognize the one in the front of the room, whistling out the Hebrew cadences.

I tell you this by way of introduction to Joshua, so you will know that I have been preparing for and avoiding this kind of work for most of my life. I tell you so you'll know, also, that the Joshua I see is probably not a Joshua my grandfather or Mr. Sellinger would recognize. The character I see is also a kind of failure, a man who looked across the Jordan hundreds of times, even thousands, probably for decades, and prayed that he might disappear in the masses before he might be called upon to lead his people across the water into the land of their destiny, perhaps.

I think of a Joshua who might have been far greater had he plied his trade nearer the Aegean Sea, circling the thick walls of Troy with Agamemnon rather than leading his desert wanderers to make a great noise on the outskirts of Jericho.

No doubt in the history of another people Joshua might be the chief hero. After all, it is Joshua who leads his army into the land of his enemies and triumphs there, Joshua who leads his people to the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Abraham, Joshua who is the powerful, unyielding, triumphant general.

Alas, poor Joshua: to him falls the role of warrior among shepherds, soldier among dreamers, servant of the Lord who serves after Moses.

If the Torah was exclusively a record of God's promise to Abraham and the fulfillment of that promise, then the book of Joshua would be the triumphant conclusion of the Torah. Instead, Joshua is the first book *after* the Torah, the beginning of the prophetic books, the book that chronicles the history of the Hebrews after the promise of Abraham is made real. For not even God rescues the Hebrews from history. And in Joshua, they begin their struggle as a united nation, a nation in the realm of history rather than mythology.

In the career of Joshua we can almost see myth begin its transition into history. After Joshua's battles come the division of the land, then the judges and prophets and kings, and the

dense, complicated annals of the descendants of those who once walked with God.

Joshua cannot know subsequent history but he can know the past. He does know what it means to follow Moses. He knows that to succeed Moses is more difficult than to overcome Canaanites. Moses talked to God. Moses ascended Mount Sinai and returned with the Ten Commandments. Moses shaped a nation out of slaves, a moral nation, and then, “though his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated,” Moses died. At that dramatic moment the Torah ends. After Moses, in spite of all his accomplishments, everything is still to be done.

Yes, God has promised a land, but that is already an old promise. It will happen in the fullness of time, but there is no rule that tells Joshua he must lead the conquest. Whatever Joshua does will be his own choice, and in choosing he will be hesitant, uncertain. He cannot be otherwise. Joshua’s connection to divine wisdom is secondhand. He gets it through Moses. The Joshua who acts so decisively to order the destruction of his enemies is hiding a Hamlet behind the figure of Achilles. Yes, he is a powerful general, but how he wishes for the certainty of Moses, his “father”; how he wishes that the times were not out of joint, that he was still free to roam in the desert, in the great afterglow of the escape from Egypt and the numbing pleasure of the Manna which glistens like the dew and satisfies all hunger; how Joshua still longs to be the young man following orders; how much easier it is to spy out the land than to send in spies; how much easier to be the son than the father.

But Moses is dead, dead without the preparations and failures of old age, dead in the midst of his strength. Moses is dead and the people wait and everyone looks toward Joshua and Joshua gazes across the Jordan and waits. And in the privacy of his tent he must wonder why God and Moses chose him, why among all the miracles there couldn’t be one more, a small one that would allow someone else to lead the people.

Moses and God have nurtured these tribes, have weaned them from slavery toward freedom. The forty years in the desert are the extended infancy of Israel. For a forty-year span they do not have to work. All is provided. With Moses as their guide they are learning the new rules of civilized behavior. It may be exile and wandering, but how safe the desert must seem after the slavery of Egypt and the wars that lie across the Jordan. And Joshua knows and understands what it means to cross the borders of dependency. God is patient, but the destiny of Israel lies in the hands of Israel—at this moment, in the hands of Joshua.

Joshua is as certain as anyone can be of the rightness of his actions, and yet he hesitates. The reader can only guess what is in Joshua’s mind as he hears the reports of his spies and decides that the years of wandering are now complete. The narrative tells us only: “and Joshua rose up early in the morning and they removed from Shittim, and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel; and they lodged there before they passed over. And it came to pass after three days that the officers went through the midst of the camp.”

Three days is a Biblical term that suggests more than waiting. It is an ancient oral formula for internal drama, the anguish that precedes action. When Abraham goes to Mount Motiah, he “lifts up his eyes on the third day.” While Joshua waits three days, something happens. The Biblical narrative leaves this out, though to a modern reader the omission may be more intriguing than the details of war and tribal territory.

I think Joshua waits because he is not sure he is the true heir of Moses. He doubts not God, but himself. The people are fickle; Moses must have told him this, and Joshua must have seen it with his own eyes. If they are fickle even in choosing God, how can they ever be sure of their leader? The force of Moses’ personality and the intensity of Moses’ religious vision kept these desert wanderers united. Joshua does not even have the sign of election in his body. Aaron is the brother of Moses, but Joshua is not a son. He bears an even greater burden: Moses selected him. He is the heir not of the body, but of the task. How deeply Joshua must feel his duty in his bones. How he must loathe it, too, the mess of history after a period of consolidation and rest.

Joshua understands that when he begins the Manna will disappear. A people that can make war is a people that can feed itself. When Joshua acts, Israel’s brief protected respite is over. All the dangers and excitements of adult life begin, a life of politics, not myth, a life filled with choices.

The tribes of Israel enter into Canaan as weak and frail and vulnerable as any other Bedouins. The Books of Moses are over, the books of history are beginning. Mythic heroes from now on will be merely soldiers or prophets or judges or kings. The promise of the God of Israel still remains, but His presence is less available.

Because Joshua lives exactly at the tragic moment when myth disintegrates, he may be the first modern man. If he acts, the Manna ceases, the terrible war begins, the tribal squabbling becomes more central than the Ark of the Covenant. If he does not act, he betrays his history and the trust of Moses and God.

Joshua has been hesitating, perhaps far longer than three days. It is possible that he sent those spies into Canaan only to stall for more time. Without the unforeseen intervention of Rehab, the spies might have returned with a warning to wait, or perhaps not returned at all, an even more significant warning.

As Joshua looks across the Jordan he sees the people who inhabit that land, their flocks, their cities, their children. Though the narrator of Joshua has little sympathy for the lives of Canaanites, Joshua did not write this narrative. Joshua the man remembers that the Lord told Moses and Miriam in their joy after crossing the Red Sea that the Egyptians, too, were his people. War is not celebration, and no victory is great enough to erase the losses. Joshua the soldier knows this as he looks at the salty plains around Jericho.

Modern Biblical commentators are quick to point out the necessity for the Israelites to

destroy utterly the pagan kingdoms which they conquered, but the Joshua I imagine is too subtle to believe such an argument. Even as he orders the annihilation of his enemies, Joshua must wonder why it is that this holy people fears contamination from idol worshippers. He must wonder, too, why the legalisms of apportioning the land have to be so specifically recorded. Why can't the people live where they choose? Why can't everything be as easy as gathering the Manna? Because Joshua knows that he is now making order, establishing protocol, he is careful and specific about everything. Moses laid the grand framework, the idea of freedom limited by the Ten Commandments. Joshua will settle for the legalisms, the details that come after the sweeping visions. In the specificity of his orders, we can read Joshua's hesitancy. If he fails, it will not be for lack of remembering every symbolic detail.

Before he orders an assault he makes certain that every male is circumcised and that the Passover is observed. He is scrupulous, too, at the end of his life, in reminding the people to pay attention to details. It is the message of his life, the message of a consolidator, the message of a warrior who follows a visionary.

Yet, after all the symbolic and military groundwork is in place, Joshua still hesitates until he receives a visit from a "Captain of the host of the Lord." It is the briefest of angelic visits. Abraham waited upon the angels, Jacob wrestled with his angel until the sun rose, but Joshua makes no significant contact with the "Captain of the host of the Lord." He asks only, "Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?" Mythic beings have already receded. Joshua is ready for war, for history, for reality. An angel is both too awesome and too external for him. Joshua needs assurance not from a messenger but from God. In his "three days" on the lip of history Joshua wants to believe that he is the heir of Moses. He wants to know that the son, for all his shortcomings, can still carry out the task of his great predecessor. Joshua, hesitating before his great work, is an emblem of all sons hesitating after the death of all fathers. The greatness of his own true self is in Joshua. Moses, of course, saw this and selected Joshua because of it. But, on the threshold of lunging into war and history, Joshua feels his insignificance. He has heard the voice of the Lord before and he has still hesitated. Before Joshua can cross the Jordan he needs the confidence of a Moses, and as he listens to himself he hears the Lord.

"This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that as I was with Moses so I will be with thee."

Feeling magnified, Joshua is magnified. He cannot be Moses, but still the Lord will be with him. When he crosses the Jordan, Joshua will do so as Joshua, the best, most magnified version of Joshua, but Joshua still, not Moses, and this Joshua will be sufficient to lead his people and to conquer his enemies. He can do so because he was able to triumph over the myth of Moses.

All sons tremble before their inheritance, but Joshua has the hardest task. He cuts his teeth on history. When Joshua leads the tribes across the Jordan, childhood is over for Israel, but so is

their status as refugees. The tribes will take the land and become a people, a great nation. Over the millennia, exile will become the destiny of their descendants, and the longing for return will fill the prayers of a hundred generations.

Even while my grandfather was dragging me from teacher to teacher, that exile was coming to a conclusion. Lesser Joshuas were examining their hearts and crossing other waters. Refugees were everywhere and, even in the cities of western Michigan, people asked visitors, “Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?”

We still wonder how much to trust ourselves and how much to trust our enemies, how to conquer a land and live beside its peoples. There is no Moses, not even a Joshua, only history, most of it tragic, and the memory of our fathers inevitably heroic.

In a way, Mr. Sellinger was a blessing for me. In my grandfather’s hopes I was a failure at age seven, and that failure would continue. My tough little *zeyde* fought old age and boredom and despair and cancer almost to a standstill. I could not replace him; nobody could.

But Mr. Sellinger, that symbolic grandfather, the one who did teach me Hebrew, he was easy to defeat. All of us triumphed over him. He was a brown suit, false teeth, an accent—baggage heaved up by a dead Europe. Mr. Sellinger was there to be replaced; it was the only role left for him. He was a wheezy voice, an idle threat.

Seven-year-old boys wrestling on the floor were not ready to replace anyone. But we’re grown now, Mr. Sellinger, we’re fathers ourselves, filled with our own layers of personal history, our own disappointments. We may even be ready to shut up and learn something. Go ahead, Mr. Sellinger, call the rabbi.

The Revised Standard Version of the Bible used in this essay.

Max Apple, "Joshua" from CONGREGATION, edited by David Rosenberg, Harcourt Bruce, 1987, pp. 61-69. Reprinted by permission of the author.