We Are All Someone Else's "Before"
Parashat Devarim 5786
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[FIRST IMAGE ON SCREEN: Messi and Yamal today]

These are two of the most recognizable players in the world.

On the left is Lionel Messi of Argentina, now thirty-nine years old, widely considered the greatest soccer player of his generation.

On the right is Lamine Yamal of Spain, who turned nineteen this week and is already regarded as one of the most gifted young players in the world.

This Sunday, they will face each other in the World Cup Final.

For Messi, it may be the last great international match of an extraordinary career. For Yamal, it may be the first great moment in a career whose possibilities still seem limitless.

The established legend and the emerging star.

The player who has defined an era and the young man who may help define the next one.

But this week, another image of the two of them began circulating.

Actually, the photograph is nineteen years old.

[CHANGE TO SECOND IMAGE: MESSI HOLDING AND BATHING THE BABY]

The picture was taken in 2007.

A young Lionel Messi, then twenty years old and still growing into the player he would become, had agreed to participate in a charity calendar photo shoot organized by UNICEF and a newspaper in Barcelona.

Families entered a raffle for the opportunity to have their child photographed with one of Barcelona's players. The winning family was paired with Messi.

That baby is Lamine Yamal.

Messi held him. He helped bathe him in a blue plastic tub. The photographer took the pictures. Then everyone went home.

Messi had no idea who that child would become.

Yamal, being only a few months old, probably has no memory of it at all.

It was a small encounter. A charity photo shoot. A few minutes in the life of a young athlete and a young family.

Nineteen years later, they are about to stand on opposite sides of the field in the World Cup Final. [1]

Even before we know who they are, there is something tender and funny about these photographs. But once we know who the young man and the baby became, the pictures begin to look like destiny, though no one in the room that day had any idea.

Lionel Messi had unknowingly stepped into the opening pages of another person’s remarkable story. Every one of us has done that, probably more than once this week. Most of the time, we never learn how important those encounters became.

Each of us has been, and will continue to be, someone else's "before," just as so many people have been that for us.

This week we begin the Book of Devarim, Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah.

The Israelites are standing on the edge of the Promised Land. Moses knows that he will not cross the Jordan with them. He begins to look back over the forty years they have travelled together, retelling their history and preparing them for a future he will not share.

Early in the portion, Moses mentions the person who will lead them into that future:

> “Yehoshua bin Nun, ha-omed lefanecha.”
>
> “Joshua son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there. Strengthen him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it.”

The phrase Moses uses to describe Joshua is striking:

Joshua son of Nun, the one who stands before you.

Long before anyone declared that Joshua would become the next leader of Israel, the Torah had already introduced him as Moses’ attendant. When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with God, Joshua remained there. The Torah says that he “would not stir out of the Tent.”[2]

Joshua stayed close to Moses.

He listened.

He watched Moses lead a people who were frequently frightened, difficult, demanding and disappointed. He saw Moses at his strongest and most courageous. He also saw him exhausted, angry and uncertain.

Joshua learned leadership before he was ever given the title. He did not observe Moses because he knew that one day he would step into his shoes. He was perhaps as oblivious to that possibility as baby Lamine was to the soccer skills of the smiling man with the unfortunate haircut giving him a bath.

Just as significantly, neither Moses nor Messi had any inkling that Joshua or Lamine would one day occupy the stage on which they themselves had become great.

Yet that is how the future so often takes shape: one generation living its life while the next is quietly watching, learning and preparing for a role no one can yet imagine.

The rabbis add a lovely detail about those early years of Moses and Joshua, not about Messi, just to be clear. I have scoured rabbinic literature, and it appears to be one of the few places this week where Messi has not received extensive commentary.

According to the Midrash, Joshua arrived early and remained late at Moses' house of study. He arranged the benches and spread out the mats.

Before leading the people of Israel, Joshua set up the room.

It was hardly glamorous work. No one would have looked at the young man moving benches and said, "There is the next leader of the Jewish people."

But God tells Moses that Joshua's faithful service mattered. He had tended the community and remained close to his teacher. He had quietly prepared himself for a role that perhaps even he could not yet imagine.[3]

Moses had become part of Joshua's story long before either of them fully understood what that story would be.

It is tempting to imagine that the most important lessons we teach are the ones we prepare carefully and deliver deliberately. Sometimes they are.

But a great deal of what we teach is absorbed when we do not realize anyone is paying attention.

People watch the way we treat someone who cannot do anything for us. They notice whether we make room for another person, whether we admit a

mistake, and whether our values survive inconvenience.

When my father taught me to drive in the empty Safeway parking lot, he turned to me and said, “Do as I say, not as I do.” It was honest advice, but probably not the best educational philosophy.

Children, students, colleagues and friends learn far more from the lives we actually live than from the instructions we give them.

Moses could teach Joshua the laws of Torah. He could explain how the camp was organized and how disputes were decided. But Joshua also had to learn how to remain faithful to a people who could break your heart, how to argue with God on their behalf,

and how to keep walking even when the destination remained beyond the horizon.

That education took place over years of standing nearby.

There is another part of Moses' example that matters.

Eventually Moses had to let Joshua step forward.

It is one thing to allow someone to learn from you. It is another to make room for that person to lead.

Already in this week's portion, Moses is told concerning Joshua:

Oto chazek.

"Strengthen him."

Encourage him. Give him confidence. Help the people see in Joshua what you have come to see. Prepare him to become more than your assistant.

Moses would not live to enter the land, but his influence would cross the Jordan in the person of Joshua.

That may be one of the deepest meanings of leadership and one of the great sources of joy in

human life. We get to participate in stories that will continue beyond us.

And most of the time, we will never know the full part we played. We are supporting actors in countless stories that are not our own, even as others are quietly helping to shape ours.

A word of encouragement may stay with someone for years. A moment of generosity may teach another person what kindness looks like. Someone may have learned courage simply by watching us work through something difficult.

We may remember the encounter only vaguely, if at all.

For them, it may have mattered enormously.

Lionel Messi could not possibly have known who he was holding in 2007. It was simply a baby, a charity event and a photograph.

Moses could not have known, during every ordinary day in the wilderness, exactly who was standing beside him. Joshua was his attendant, his student, the young man who stayed in the Tent and arranged the benches.

Yet the future was already taking shape.

[SHOW THIRD IMAGE: FULL COLLAGE OF THE PHOTO SHOOT]

We look at these photographs now and see the story because we know what happened next.

Life is usually lived in the opposite direction. We meet the baby before we know the adult, and the student before we know the leader. We live the moment long before we understand its place in the story.

That is part of the wonder of being alive. Only when we look back do we begin to recognize the moments that truly mattered and the people who made those moments possible.

We are all standing somewhere in another person's story. We may be there for a chapter, a page, or only a few lines. Yet something we say or do may travel farther into the future than we ever see.

The photographs of Messi and Yamal invite us to enjoy the astonishing circle of life: the baby once held by a young star is now preparing to challenge him on the world's largest stage.

Torah study trains us to look at life this way. We read the story once to learn what happened, and then again to discover what it means. We linger over a word, a relationship, an apparently ordinary detail, trusting that beneath the surface there is another story waiting to be seen.

Joshua became Joshua because he stood near Moses, and because Moses eventually strengthened him to step forward.

This Shabbat, I want to encourage each of us, myself included, to recognize the people standing near us.

The Torah, with all its stories of family, struggle, failure, courage and redemption, teaches us to live lives worth watching, especially when we do not realize anyone is watching.

And may we have the generosity of Moses, who understood that one of the greatest things a person can do is help another human being become ready for the story that awaits them, remembering that today we may be standing in someone else's "before."

Shabbat shalom.

(1) https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2026/07/16/19-year-old-photos-messi-baby-yamal-are-delighting-soccer-fans/ "19-year-old photos of Messi and a baby Yamal are delighting soccer fans - The Washington Post"
(2) Exodus 33:11 with Translations | Sefaria Library"
(3) Bamidbar Rabbah 21:14 Bamidbar Rabbah | Sefaria Library"