

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'Why are you here, Elijah?' He replied, I am moved by the zeal for the Lord, G-d of Hosts..." The Lord said to him, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire -- a still, small voice. (I Kings 19:9-12)

In 1165, an agonising question confronted Moroccan Jewry. A fanatical Muslim sect, the Almohads, had seized power and were embarked on a policy of forced conversion to Islam. The Jewish community was faced with a choice: to affirm Islamic faith or die.

Some chose martyrdom. Others chose exile. But some acceded to terror and embraced another faith. Inwardly, though, they remained Jews and practiced Judaism in secret. They were the conversos, or as the Spanish were later to call them, the marranos.

To other Jews, they posed a formidable moral problem. How were they to be viewed? Outwardly, they had betrayed their community and their religious heritage. Besides, their example was demoralising. It weakened the resolve of Jews who were determined to resist, come what may. Yet many of the conversos still wished to remain Jewish, secretly fulfill the commandments and when they could, attend the synagogue and pray.

One of them addressed this question to a rabbi. He had, he said, converted under coercion, but he remained at heart a faithful Jew. Could he obtain merit by observing in private as many of the Torah's precepts as possible? Was there, in other words, hope left for him as a Jew?

The rabbi's reply was emphatic. A Jew who had embraced Islam had forfeited membership in the

Jewish community. He was no longer part of the house of Israel. For such a person to fulfill the commandments was meaningless. Worse, it was a sin. The choice was stark and absolute: to be or not to be a Jew. If you choose to be a Jew, you should be prepared to suffer death rather than compromise. If you choose not to be a Jew, then you must not seek to re-enter the house you had deserted.

We can respect the firmness of the rabbi's stance. He set out, without equivocation, the moral choice. There are times when heroism is, for faith, a categorical imperative. Nothing less will do. His reply, though harsh, is not without courage. But another rabbi disagreed.

The name of the first rabbi is lost to us, but that of the second is not. He was Moses Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the Middle Ages. Maimonides was no stranger to religious persecution. Born in Cordova in 1135, he had been forced to leave, along with his family, some thirteen years later when the city fell to the Almohads. Twelve years were spent in wandering. In 1160, a temporary liberalisation of Almohad rule allowed the family to settle in Morocco. Within five years he was forced to move again, settling first in the land of Israel and ultimately in Egypt.

Maimonides was so incensed by the rabbi's reply to the forced convert that he wrote a response of his own. In it, he frankly disassociates himself from the earlier ruling and castigates its author whom he describes as a 'self-styled sage who has never experienced what so many Jewish communities had to endure in the way of persecution'.

Maimonides' reply, the Iggeret ha-Shemad ('Epistle on Forced Conversion'), is a substantial treatise in its own right. (An English translation and commentary is contained in Abraham S. Halkin, and David Hartman. Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985.)

What is striking, given the vehemence with which it begins, is that its conclusions are hardly less demanding than those of the earlier response. If you are faced with religious persecution, says Maimonides, you must leave and settle elsewhere. 'If he is compelled to violate even one precept it is forbidden to stay there. He must leave everything he has and travel day and night until he finds a spot where he can practice his religion.' This is preferable to martyrdom.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in memory of my grandfather
משה בן דוד ז"ל
Rabbi Dr. Moshe Weiss z"l
by Yitz & Ruthie Weiss

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None the less, one who chooses to go to his death rather than renounce his faith 'has done what is good and proper' for he has given his life for the sanctity of G-d. What is unacceptable is to stay and excuse oneself on the grounds that if one sins, one does so only under pressure. To do this to profane G-d's name, 'not exactly willingly, but almost so'.

These are Maimonides' conclusions. But surrounding them and constituting the main thrust of his argument is a sustained defence of those who had done precisely what Maimonides had ruled they should not do. The letter gives conversos hope.

They have done wrong. But it is a forgivable wrong. They acted under coercion and the fear of death. They remain Jews. The acts they do as Jews still win favour in the eyes of G-d. Indeed doubly so, for when they fulfill a commandment it cannot be to win favour of the eyes of others. They know that when they act as Jews they risk discovery and death. Their secret adherence has a heroism of its own.

What was wrong in the first rabbi's ruling was his insistence that a Jew who yields to terror has forsaken his faith and is to be excluded from the community. Maimonides insists that it is not so. 'It is not right to alienate, scorn and hate people who desecrate the Sabbath. It is our duty to befriend them and encourage them to fulfill the commandments.' In a daring stroke of interpretation, he quotes the verse: 'Do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving' (Proverbs 6:30). The conversos who come to the synagogue are hungry for Jewish prayer. They 'steal' moments of belonging. They should not be despised, but welcomed.

This Epistle is a masterly example of that most difficult of moral challenges: to combine prescription and compassion. Maimonides leaves us in no doubt as to what he believes Jews should do. But at the same time he is uncompromising in his defence of those who fail to do it. He does not endorse what they have done. But he defends who they are. He asks us to understand their situation. He gives them grounds for self respect. He holds the doors of the community open.

The argument reaches a climax as Maimonides quotes a remarkable sequence of midrashic passages whose theme is that prophets must not condemn their

people, but rather defend them before G-d.

When Moses, charged with leading the people out of Egypt, replied, 'But they will not believe me' (Exodus 4:1), ostensibly he was justified. The subsequent biblical narrative suggests that Moses' doubts were well founded. The Israelites were a difficult people to lead. But the midrash says that G-d replied to Moses, 'They are believers and the children of believers, but you [Moses] will ultimately not believe.' (Shabbat 97a)

Maimonides cites a series of similar passages and then says: If this is the punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe, the greatest of the prophets, because they briefly criticised the people -- even though they were guilty of the sins of which they were accused -- can we envisage the punishment awaiting those who criticise the conversos, who under threat of death and without abandoning their faith, confessed to another religion in which they did not believe?

In the course of his analysis, Maimonides turns to the prophet Elijah and the text that forms this week's haftarah. Under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Baal worship had become the official cult. G-d's prophets were being killed. Those who survived were in hiding. Elijah responded by issuing a public challenge at Mount Carmel. Facing four hundred of Baal's representatives, he was determined to settle the question of religious truth once and for all.

He told the assembled people to choose one way or another: for G-d or for Baal. They must no longer 'halt between two opinions'. Truth was about to be decided by a test. If it lay with Baal, fire would consume the offering prepared by its priests. If it lay with G-d, fire would descend to Elijah's offering.

Elijah won the confrontation. The people cried out, 'The Lord, He is G-d.' The priests of Baal were routed. But the story does not end there. Jezebel issued a warrant for his death. Elijah escapes to Mount Horeb. There he receives a strange vision. He witnesses a whirlwind, then an earthquake, then a fire. But he is led to understand that G-d was not in these things. Then G-d speaks to him in a 'still, small voice', and tells him to appoint Elisha as his successor.

The episode is enigmatic. It is made all the more so by a strange feature of the text. Immediately before the vision, G-d asks, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' and Elijah replies, 'I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the G-d of Hosts....' (I Kings 9:9-10). Immediately after the vision, G-d asks the same question, and Elijah gives the same answer (I Kings 19:13-14). The midrash turns the text into a dialogue:

"Elijah: The Israelites have broken G-d's covenant

"G-d: Is it then your covenant?

"Elijah: They have torn down Your altars.

"G-d: But were they your altars?

"Elijah: They have put Your prophets to the sword.

"G-d: But you are alive

"Elijah: I alone am left.

"G-d: Instead of hurling accusations against Israel, should you not have pleaded their cause?" (Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:6)

The meaning of the midrash is clear. The zealot takes the part of G-d. But G-d expects His prophets to be defenders, not accusers.

The repeated question and answer is now to be understood in its tragic depth. Elijah declares himself to be zealous for G-d. He is shown that G-d is not disclosed in dramatic confrontation: not in the whirlwind or the earthquake or the fire. G-d now asks him again, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah repeats that he is zealous for G-d. He has not understood that religious leadership calls for another kind of virtue, the way of the still, small voice. G-d now indicates that someone else must lead. Elijah must hand his mantle on to Elisha.

In turbulent times, there is an almost overwhelming temptation for religious leaders to be confrontational. Not only must truth be proclaimed but falsehood must be denounced. Choices must be set out as stark divisions. Not to condemn is to condone. The rabbi who condemned the conversos had faith in his heart, logic on his side and Elijah as his precedent.

But the midrash and Maimonides set before us another model. A prophet hears not one imperative but two: guidance and compassion, a love of truth and an abiding solidarity with those for whom that truth has become eclipsed. To preserve tradition and at the same time defend those others condemn is the difficult, necessary task of religious leadership in an unreligious age. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**M**oses said to the Lord, 'May the Lord, the G-d who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd'" (Num. 27:15-17).

Moses's request is made immediately after G-d instructs him to climb Mount Abarim and take a glimpse of the Promised Land-after which "he will be gathered to his family-nation."

G-d explains that Moses must now relinquish his leadership because he did not sanctify G-d when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it.

On what basis is Joshua chosen by G-d to be Moses' successor? The Midrash (Tanhuma Pinhas 11) suggests that the most logical choice would have been the more intellectually gifted Phinehas or Eleazar the priest, or alternatively, the personal choice of Moses himself-his own sons (see Rashi on Num. 27:16). The Midrash explains the choice of Joshua by citing a biblical verse: "He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,

and he who looks after his master will be honored." (Prov. 27:18).

Joshua was the devoted servant who never left Moses's tent (Ex. 33:11). He was such a faithful disciple that he was absent from the encampment during the sin of the golden calf because he remained all 40 days at the foot of Mount Sinai, waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain (Exodus 32:17).

But why was "devotion" the primary consideration for a successor to Moses? After all, the most unique Mosaic quality was his outstanding intellect, the fact that he was able to connect and cleave to the active intellect of the Divine (as it were) so that Moses's Torah and G-d's Torah would merge together as one. Moses was a "law-giver King," a ruler whose precepts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice would rule Israel until the end of time. Why choose the outstanding caretaker, the best shamash, not the most praiseworthy jurist, the leading expert in analysis and halachic judgment? I would submit that, although we are rightly called the "people of the book," and Jews throughout the ages have been proud of their intellectual accomplishments in Torah, in philosophy and in science (witness the large proportion of Jews who have won Nobel prizes), our Torah-Book is first and foremost meant to foster the well-being of the people; it is "for your own good": "Its ways are pleasant ways, and all its paths are peace. It is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed" (Prov. 3: 17-18).

Our Talmud's ultimate objective must be to create a perfect society which looks out for the welfare of each individual; hence Maimonides concludes his magnum opus, the Mishne Torah, with a description of the Messianic Age, the period of human fulfillment and redemption which is the purpose of our entire halachic system. And it is not by chance that the source of our Oral Law, according to the Midrash is within the contextual frame of the Divine characteristics, the G-d of love, compassion, freely giving grace, long-suffering, great loving-kindness, and truth. We may be the people of the Book, but the objective of the Book is the welfare of the people-one might even add, "to the people, by the people (human input in the Oral Law) and for the people."

The true fruit of the tree of Torah is the Jewish people, whom Torah has informed, nurtured and recreated for the past 4,000 years. One can become too involved with the tree, so that one forgets that its purpose is its fruits, so involved in the analysis and casuistry of the logic that one overlooks the human enhancement which is its truest aim.

Only one who watches over the tree and worries about preserving its fruits has the right to legislate for them.

That's why Joshua is appointed just as Moses is reminded of his sin at the "waters of strife," when he

strikes the rock (which symbolizes the often hard and stiff-necked nation) rather than speaking to it (Oral Law). That is why the most fundamental task facing Joshua must be to understand the "spirits" of the people comprising the nation and suit his decisions (as much as possible) to their temperaments and needs. He must sensitively nurture his people just like a shepherd nurtures his flock, not only leading from up-front but also personally bringing them in and taking them out whenever necessary. Joshua is a true leader, who proved himself by "nurturing" and tending to the needs of his rebbe in addition to learning from him.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are great challenges in everyone's life. There are natural drives which exist within us that force people to commit sinful behavior. The Talmud succinctly sums up the situation by stating: "Most people steal, a minority of them are sexually immoral and all are covered with the dust of evil speech and slander." Money is a great temptation and the drive to acquire it is so strong that stealing in one way or another is natural to many and even condoned by large sections of society.

Sexual immorality however, in spite of its current seeming glorification in media and the arts, is still frowned upon by most of society. All sections of our society are reeling from scandals of sexual abuse and inappropriate sexual behavior. Rabbis have taught us that the G-d of Israel abhors and hates sexual immorality. It stands not only as a defilement of the human body and a degradation of the human personality, but also as an act of rebellion against G-d's model for society.

The sexual drive within us is strong, vital and necessary. Without it human continuity and creativity would be stifled and aborted. However, Judaism preaches not the abstinence or mortification but rather the channeling, control and discipline that enhances the sexual drive itself and creates a more moral society.

The Jewish world, over its many millennia of existence, has seen many libertine societies rise to the fore and dominate for a time until eventually falling into disfavor. However, it is a constant struggle, both personal and societal, to prohibit sexual laxity and any form of immoral behavior.

This is the background for the behavior of Pinchas and his act of zealotry. Though many even in his time, as Rashi points out, disagreed with his tactics and misunderstood his zealotry, Pinchas was the person who restored moral balance to Jewish society after the debacle of the daughters of Midian.

Sexual immorality eventually destroys the society in which it reigns. It helps explain the demise of many empires and their inexplicable disappearance in

past history. Pinchas sees his act as a lifesaving one for Jewish society and for all later generations. It taught us the vital lesson that sexual immorality is not to be tolerated, for it slowly but surely erodes the foundation of all societies and cultures.

Only the Lord could judge the true motives of Pinchas in killing Kozbi and Zimri and therefore it was necessary for the Torah to reveal to us that Heaven condoned and approved of his zealotry and actions. Pinchas will go on to have a distinguished career as a High Priest and a leader of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel in later generations. But he will be eternally remembered as the enemy of sexual immorality and of his refusal to bow to current popularity or political correctness. There is a lesson in this for all of us today as well. ©2015 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One way that people attempt to attain transcendence is by guiding their children on the path they began. Even Moshe (Moses), who was first and foremost committed to the nation of Israel and was the most humble of men, was hopeful that his own children would complete the mission he started and lead the people into Israel.

Hence, the Midrash notes, (See Rashi 27:16) it was after G-d permitted the daughters of Zelofhad to inherit from their father, (27:1-11) that Moshe makes the request of G-d that a successor be appointed in the hope that his sons would be tapped for leadership.

It was not to be. The Talmud points out that Torah leadership is not automatically inherited. (Nedarim 71a) This principle is seen as G-d tells Moshe that none of his children will lead the people, rather Yehoshua (Joshua) will be the next leader of the nation. (Numbers 27:18) Moshe transfers the reigns to Yehoshua. Several lessons can be learned from the way Moshe passes on his position.

First: Although it was not to be transmitted to his sons as he had wished, Moshe transfers the power to Yehoshua with great support and kindness. Whereas G-d told Moshe to "lay your hand (in the singular) on him [Yehoshua]," (27:18) Moshe places both hands on him. (27:23) Rashi makes this point by maintaining that Moshe laid his hands on Yehoshua "generously, in much greater measure than he was commanded."

Second: Whereas G-d tells Moshe to "put some of his honor upon him [Yehoshua]," (Numbers 27:20) there is no mention that Moshe does so. Perhaps Moshe's humble side felt that he was unworthy to act in such a way--only G-d can give such honor.

Alternatively, Moshe wanted Yehoshua to do it his way. While Moshe had given Yehoshua a sound foundation, Moshe understood that every leader is blessed with a unique style. Yehoshua should not become Moshe's clone—he should develop his own way, his own honor.

Third: Moshe genuinely desires that Yehoshua receive a better lot than he did. Hence, Moshe tells G-d that the new leader be able "to lead them out, and...bring them in." (Numbers 27:17) This, according to the Midrash, means that Moshe hoped that unlike himself, the next leader would not only be permitted to begin his task by moving the Jews out, but also be allowed to conclude his mission by taking the people into the land of Israel. (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:16) Even Moshe could not do it all. Yehoshua would complete that which Moshe started, that which even Moshe could not complete.

It's not easy to step back and make space for someone else. This is especially the case vis-à-vis our children. When someone else is given precedence over one's own child it presents an especially challenging situation, especially when one is in a position of power and is as Moshe was, the prophet of prophets.

But Moshe did all of this, and did so nobly. The most humble person ever to live was without envy and graciously transferred power to the other. In doing so he once again showed his great strength and unbridled selflessness. ©2015 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Absolute Soul

There is a lesson, meted out in this week's portion that has eternal ramifications upon the theological nature of the Jewish nation. It is a lesson that defines our attitudes toward spirituality and its relevance to modern living.

After Bila'am's failed efforts to curse the Jewish people, he devised another ploy. He advised the nations of Midian and Moav to lure the Jews to sin through salacious activities. Midian complied wholeheartedly, offering its daughters as conspirators in the profanity. The scheme worked. The Jews cavorted with Midianite women, and the wrath of Hashem was aroused. A plague ensued and thousands of Jews died.

In this week's portion, Hashem commands his people to administer justice. "Make the Midianites your enemies and attack them!" For they antagonized you through their conspiracy that they conspired against you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister, who was slain on the day of the plague, in the matter of Peor" (Numbers 25:17-18). Eventually Jews go to war with Midian.

The issue that may confront the modern thinker is simple. War? Over what? They were not fighting over land. There was no dispute over oil or natural resources. Why such vehemence to the point of physical attack over the incident at Peor? Why call for such physical retribution for an act that caused spiritual sedition through secular seduction?

Rabbi Eliezer Sorotzkin of Lev L'Achim related the following story: In November 1938, before the onset of World War II, some Jewish children had the opportunity to escape from Nazi Germany and resettle in England through what became known as kindertransport. Unfortunately, there were not enough religious families able to accept these children and other families who were willing to take them were not willing to raise the children with Jewish traditions. The Chief Rabbi of London, Rabbi Yechezkel Abramski, embarked on a frantic campaign to secure funding to ensure that every child would be placed in a proper Jewish environment.

Rabbi Abramski called one wealthy Jewish industrialist and begged him for a donation sizable enough to ensure that the children would be raised in proper Jewish environment. "It is pikuach nefesh!" cried Rabbi Abramski.

At that point, the tycoon became incensed. "Rabbi," he said, "Please do not use that term flippantly. I know what pikuach nefesh is. Pikuach nefesh means a matter of life and death! When I was young, my parents were very observant. When my baby sister was young, she was very sick. We had to call the doctor, but it was on Shabbos. My father was very conscientious of the sanctity of Shabbos. He would never desecrate Shabbos. But our rabbi told us that since this is a matter of life and death, we were allowed to desecrate the Shabbos! He called it pikuach nefesh. Rabbi Abramski," the man implored, "with all due respect. The children are already here in England. They are safe from the Nazis. The only issue is where to place them. How they are raised is not pikuach nefesh!" With that, the man politely bade farewell and hung up the phone.

That Friday evening, the wealthy man was sitting at dinner, when the telephone rang incessantly. Finally, the man got up from his meal and answered the phone.

As he listened to the voice on the other end of the line, his face went pallid.

"This is Abramski. Please. I would not call on the Sabbath if I did not think this was pikuach nefesh. Again, I implore you. We need the funds to ensure that these children will be raised as Jews."

Needless to say, the man responded immediately to the appeal.

We understand matters of life and death, justice and injustice, war and peace, in corporeal terms. It is difficult to view spirituality in those terms as well.

The Torah teaches us that our enemies are not merely those who threaten our physical existence, but those who threaten our spiritual existence as well. Throughout the generations, we faced those who would annihilate us physically and others who would be just as happy to see us disappear as Jews.

What our enemies were unable to do to the Jewish people with bullets and gas, they have succeeded in doing with assimilation and spiritual attrition.

People fail to equate the severity of spiritual disorders with those of a physical nature. They may scoff at a prohibited marriage in the eyes of the Torah, or seek a leniency to absolve themselves from following matrimonial law, yet they will leave no stone unturned in searching for a genetic incompatibility or suspect health issue. The Torah teaches us that the two the physical world and the spiritual world are inseparable. An attack on spirituality, breaches the borders of our very essence, and our response must be in kind. It is essential to know that when we do some serious soul-searching there is really something out there waiting to be found. © 2015 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd Moshe spoke to G-d, saying" (Bamidbar 27:15). In a reversal of the usual formula ("and G-d spoke to Moshe, saying"), here Moshe did the "speaking," even demanding that G-d respond to his request (see Rashi). And it wasn't just a request that Moshe was making, but a set of instructions (see Sh'mos Rabbah 21:2), telling G-d to appoint a leader to replace him rather than asking Him if he please could (Bamidbar 27:16). Not only that, but Moshe listed a series of requirements for this leader, as if G-d didn't know what qualifications the leader who replaces him should have! [Although this is not problematic as a request, since we are supposed to speak out every detail of what we want in our prayers to G-d (if for no other reason than to help us better understand what our needs really are), as a set of instructions, it makes it seem as if G-d needed to be told these qualifications so that He wouldn't appoint a less qualified leader.] What led Moshe to be so forceful with G-d about who should take over, making it seem as if G-d wouldn't take care of it properly on His own?

Rashi (27:15), quoting the Sifre, praises the righteous because at the time of their death they put their own needs aside and deal with the needs of the public instead. Moshe is included in this praise, because after he was told that he was going to die (27:12-14), the very next thing he did was to ask/tell G-d to appoint an appropriate leader for the nation. However, on the very next verse (27:16), Rashi tells us that the impetus for Moshe's request/demand was the daughters of Tz'lafchad inheriting their father's portion,

as it reminded Moshe that the time had come to advocate for his own sons to inherit his position. If the reason Moshe made his request was because he wanted his sons to take over, how could Rashi say Moshe put his own needs aside for the needs of the nation?

This question is asked by numerous commentators, with some (e.g. B'er Yitzchok, see also Nachalas Yaakov) suggesting that the main thrust of Moshe's request was on behalf of the nation, to make sure they had a leader. He also wanted at least one of his sons to be that leader, but since the request was primarily to take care of the nation, it could be said that Moshe put his needs aside on behalf of the nation. This works better with the wording of the first printing of Rashi's commentary (see Sefer Yoseif Hallel), where the words "put their own needs aside" do not appear (and the praise is only for becoming involved in the needs of the public), but most editions of Rashi, and the Sifre he is quoting, mention putting their own needs aside as well. [As we shall see, these words being in the Sifre may have less significance than usual.] Nevertheless, since the inheritance going to Tz'lafchad's daughters started the process, it would seem that Moshe advocating for his sons was a primary factor here, leaving the question of how Moshe's request/demand could be considered on behalf of the nation rather than on his own behalf.

Some (e.g. Sifsay Chachamim) suggest that when Rashi says Moshe put the nation's needs first, it means that he made sure they had a leader first, before beseeching G-d to let him enter the land (see D'varim 3:23-25). However, he wouldn't have known they needed a leader until after G-d made it clear that there was no chance he could cross the Jordan, so the demand/request to appoint a leader had to have come after he had already made his personal request (and been denied). As a matter of fact, after he was denied, G-d told him to "ascend to the top of the height (of the mountain)" to see the land, since he will not be able to go there himself (3:27), which is likely a reference to the same "ascension" described here (Bamidbar 27:12-14). [According to this, when it says (there) that Moshe should "command Y'hoshua" (D'varim 3:28), who will be taking over the leadership, it is the same conversation described here (Bamidbar 27:18). It would be very awkward if G-d had already told Moshe that Y'hoshua would take over for him to then ask to be able to continue his role, thereby pushing Y'hoshua aside.] Besides, even if Moshe's demand/request for a leader took place before his supplication to be able to enter the Land, if the leader he wanted was one of his sons, it would still not really be on the nation's behalf.

The Sifre continues by saying explicitly that Moshe's demand/request was for Y'hoshua to be the leader. Theoretically, this could fit with Rashi's wording on these verses as well, and except for Rashi not

saying explicitly that Moshe wanted Y'hoshua to take over, may fit even better. Rambam (Hilchos M'lachim 1:7), after telling us that when a king dies his son becomes the new king, adds: "And not only the monarchy, but all leadership positions and appointees are to be inherited by [the leader's] son and his son's son, forever, as long as he can fill his fathers' position in wisdom and fear (of G-d). If he can fill [his position] in regards to fear (of G-d), even if he does not match his wisdom he takes over his father's position and is taught (wisdom). And whoever does not have fear of heaven, even if his wisdom is greater (than his father's) should not be appointed to any position in Israel." If we can safely assume that Moshe's sons feared G-d, it would seem that Moshe didn't have to ask for his sons to take over, as it would have happened anyway. The demand/request makes much more sense if Moshe had assumed that his sons would take over but wasn't comfortable with it because he thought Y'hoshua would make a much better leader. Let's see how this fits into Rashi's words.

After Tz'lafchad's daughters are given their father's inheritance, Moshe, who had always focused on the nation's needs rather than his own or his family's, realizes that his sons will inherit his position too, even though Y'hoshua is much more qualified. He therefore petitions G-d to appoint someone else (Y'hoshua), someone who has all the characteristics of a leader and is therefore better suited to lead the nation. (This is why Moshe had to list all the characteristics, to highlight why Y'hoshua is a better choice.) He had to be forceful with his request, since he is asking for a change in protocol, and wants to make sure that his request comes across as being what he really wants to happen, despite the personal sacrifice involved. These actions personify him putting his own needs aside on behalf of the nation, while at the same time being the result of his realization (spurred by Tz'lafchad's daughters) that his sons are supposed to inherit his position. G-d's response? Don't worry, I never considered anyone but Y'hoshua, since he deserves it and is the most qualified. The expression Rashi uses, "it never entered My mind," doesn't mean "Sorry, but I can't fulfill your request," but, as the words themselves indicate, "your concern about who should lead the nation was unnecessary, since I (G-d) had intended for Y'hoshua to be the next leader all along."

Tz'lafchad's daughters inheriting their father being the catalyst for Moshe bringing his sons into the equation is based on Midrash Rabbah (21:14) and Tanchuma (11). There, the words "it never entered My mind" do not appear, so Rashi including them in his paraphrase of this Midrash indicates that he was trying to get this thought across, that Moshe had requested/demanded that G-d appoint a leader with the right qualifications because he thought otherwise it would go to his sons,

with G-d responding that He never considered doing such a thing. Whether or not Rashi thought this was the intent of the Midrash itself (and Midrash Rabbah saying that Moshe was being forceful because he was asking on behalf of the nation does indicate that the request was on their behalf, not for himself), it certainly seems to be what Rashi is trying to get across to us. [This Midrash does not tell us that Moshe was putting his own needs aside for the needs of the nation, so there is less of an issue if its intent was that Moshe was asking for his sons to take over. And if Rashi was following this line of thinking, his paraphrasing the Sifre without including the words "leaving their needs aside" fits.] It is only because Rashi quotes the Sifre and paraphrases the Tanchuma that reconciling the two becomes necessary.

If we only had to reconcile Rashi's commentary on these verses, Moshe asking G-d to appoint Y'hoshua instead of his sons (with his realization that his sons would otherwise inherit his position coming because of Tz'lafchad's daughters) addresses all the issues. However, there is another part of the Tanchuma that Rashi paraphrases, with G-d telling Moshe that by making Y'hoshua "stand before Elazar the Kohain" (27:21) He was fulfilling his request to "keep things in the family." If this was Moshe's request, he obviously was not asking for Y'hoshua to be appointed. So not only are we back to square one, but we have another issue to contend with; if Moshe's request was for his sons to take over the leadership, how would his nephew Elazar being part of the administrative process fulfill that request?

I would therefore suggest that Rashi was using the ideas expressed in both Midrashim to paint a more complete picture. Moshe's primary focus was always the nation, which had taken its toll on his family life (see Rashi on Bamidbar 12:1). The daughters of Tz'lafchad getting their father's inheritance reminded him that he also had the responsibility of taking care of his sons' needs after his death. These dual responsibilities were now at odds, as his role as the nation's leader meant ensuring that the person succeeding him would be the most qualified candidate, Y'hoshua. At the same time, as a father, he was supposed to advocate on behalf of his sons. In order to navigate these dueling responsibilities, knowing that the "default setting" was his sons inheriting his position, Moshe forcefully asked G-d to appoint the most appropriate candidate, without explicitly mentioning Y'hoshua's name. He put the nation first, and made his forceful request after the situation with daughters of Tz'lafchad reminded him that his sons would inherit his position if he didn't do something, but because they were his sons, he didn't mention Y'hoshua's name, thereby leaving open the possibility that G-d would give it to them anyway (perhaps by giving them the tools needed to do the job as well as Y'hoshua would). G-d told Moshe that he

never considered anyone but Y'hoshua for the position, but since Moshe had worded his request the way he did because of his responsibility to his family, someone from his family would have a leadership role too. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

"**A**nd behold! A man of the Children of Israel came and brought the Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the entire assembly of the Children of Israel; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Pinchas, son of Elazar son of Aaron the Kohen stood up from amid the assembly and he took a spear in his hand. He followed the Israelite man into the tent and pierced them both, the Israelite man and the woman into her stomach -- and the plague was halted from upon the Children of Israel. Those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand." (Bamidbar 2:6-10)

What just happened here? If the Torah did not spell it out clearly we would have no idea. One has to be a Navi -- a Prophet not just to know the future. It requires prophetic insight to understanding what's happening now. A Jewish man became inappropriately entangled with a Midianite woman and 24,000 people died in a plague until Pinchas arrived on the scene and abruptly ended the scourge. It's obvious...once the dots are connected!

Why does the Torah tell us this account? Is it only a matter of historical record or is there some current relevance? We say every evening before the SHEMA, "Ki Hem Chayeinu" -- Because they (words of Torah) are our life" It's not about what happened then to them (hem) but it's about us -- our life! The Zohar cautions, "Woe to those who think that the Torah is stories!" So why does the Torah tell us about the plague and the heroism of Pinchas?

The Ramchal (Moshe Chaim Luzzato) writes in his famous Sefer Daas Tenuvos -- The Knowing Heart that there are two general ways HASHEM deals with the world. One is called "Gilui Panim" -- Open Face" and the other is "Hester Panim" with a Hidden Face". There is an advantage and disadvantage to each.

When HASHEM is more hidden we do not perceive His presence, we are less culpable, and the immediate impact of what we do right or wrong is not readily discernible. The good news though is that we have time to correct and change directions without the heavenly hammer thundering down.

The bad news is that a person may just get the signal that nothing he does quite matters. If he does a good deed even, he may not think is has real and ultimate value. If he does something wrong, the lack of a swift response may just give the false signal that there is no consequence for a misdeed. That may just invite another misstep. Then the conscience becomes

numbed through repetition and rationalization. Eventually the person's connection with HASHEM is severely severed.

On the other hand, when there is an Open Face relationship, the judgment is swift and strong. A person is more blameworthy because HASHEM and the lines that define reality are so obvious. That's the good news and the bad!

Please pardon the irreverent reference but Reb Tzadok HaKohen says that when a person does Teshuva then all his experiences become useful in serving HASHEM. I can't forget it and I think of it daily. More than 40 years ago I was at an Elton John concert on Thanksgiving with my brother. Suddenly he invited John Lennon of the Beatles on stage. The place went wild as he plucked his guitar and they sang, "She was just 17, do you know what I mean..." The place was pulsing like one heart in rhythmic unison as I had never seen before. Now I can relate that experience to when we rise on our toes in Kedusha saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy, HASHEM the Lord of Hosts fills the whole world with His glory". I imagine the angelic world above is responding to the plucking of these simple chords I am playing here below with even greater intensity.

The Nefesh HaChaim affirms that with each thought, speech, and deed we are either building or destroying worlds. Every move, mental or manual, climbs a heavenly ladder upward and rains down into the world a residual blessing or curse, a taste of Heaven or Hell! Whatever is happening in the world today, harmonious or discordant, is shaped by the musical notes we strike daily. Now, that's hard to verify and hard to swallow! How do we know it's true? The Torah generously opens a window into the world of spiritual significance so we can measure the cosmic consequences of what we do... Do you know what I mean!? © 2015 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

