

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

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.

None the less, one who chooses to go to his

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by Ruthie & Yitz Weiss

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. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Do battle against the Midianites and smite them. They are your enemies because of the plot which they plotted against you concerning the incident involving Pe'or and the incident involving Kozbi the daughter of the Prince of Midian, their sister, who was slain on the day of the plague in the incident involving Pe'or." (Numbers 25:17–18) Why did Pinchas kill Kozbi? Was it because of her immoral sexual seduction of an Israelite, Zimri ben Salou, or because she and her Midianite clan worshipped the idol Pe'or? Rashi (ad loc.) is aware of the ambiguity of the verse, and suggests that the end-goal of the Midianites, and the reason for which they sent their daughters to tempt the Israelite men, was to get the Israelites to worship Pe'or.

And, in fact, there does seem to be a strong linkage between blatant sexual immorality among Jew and gentile, and worship of Pe'or as the mother of all idolatries. But what exactly is the central nature of the transgression here? Sexual immorality between Jew and gentile, or Pe'or idolatry?

I would argue that a careful reading of Pinchas' act clearly emphasizes a fusion of two intermingled transgressions. In last week's Torah portion, the introduction to the story of public cohabitation begins:

"And the Israelites dwelt in Shittim, and began to whore after the daughters of Moab. And it happened that the Israelite nation served their idols... and Israel became joined to Ba'al Pe'or; the anger of God waxed hot against Israel," (ibid., v. 1–3)

What was the sin? Was it whoring, or the

idolatry of Pe'or? Clearly, it was both together! This notion of the fusion of sins appears in our rabbinic commentaries. Bil'am is identified as "ben Beor" (ibid., 22:5) which might be identified with Pe'or, son of the idol Pe'or. And when the narrative continues to describe how "Balak took Bil'am to the top of Mount Pe'or" (ibid., 23:28), Rashi comments, "Balak was a great magician, and he saw that the Israelites would eventually be punished because of Pe'or," which apparently applies to idolatry.

However, when the Talmud describes the evil counsel that Bil'am offered the nations who wished to vanquish Israel, the picture presented is one of sexual seduction by the young gentile women (Sanhedrin 106a). It would seem that the sin was an idolatry linked to sexual abandon, both transgressions joined together.

In order to truly understand this, as well as to understand the idolatrous nature of our own society today, we must attempt to understand the nature of Pe'or idolatry. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 7:6) teaches that Pe'or was worshipped by defecating in front of his graven image, the kind of "appetizing" religious cult which one would think hardly could attract masses of adherents.

Yet apparently Pe'or was very popular, at least for Midianites and Moabites. Yes, defecation is a perfectly normal human function, and the individual who relieves himself genuinely feels relieved! Hence, goes this thought, that is exactly how god is to be served! "Do whatever is natural to do, do whatever makes you feel good".

Is this not merely a cultural precursor to much of contemporary, postmodern, ego-centric, hedonistic thought toward life?! Discipline and consistency have become the "hobgoblin of little minds," and self-expression takes precedence over duty to family, to country, and to ideals. It is a mindset that grants individuals the right not only to their own opinion but also to make up their own facts.

This is the very antithesis of the Biblical directive (at the predawn of human history in the Garden of Eden) for self-control and self-limitation – not eating forbidden fruit and defining good and evil based on God's objective Divine will, not on one's subjective, instinctive desires.

Pe'or denies absolute morality. For Pe'or, the human is no different from animal; he is a creature of instinct, who may defecate publicly just as animals defecate publicly, and he has no innate responsibility – not even before God.

What was the greater crime, worshipping Pe'or or indulging in public fornication? In truth, they are one and the same. Pe'or teaches that if one feels like fornicating, one fornicates when and with whom one wishes to do it. After all, sex has nothing to do with love and sanctity, and everything to do with a natural physical urge, much more in line with defecation than a

sacred union.

Rabbinical voices such as Menachem Meiri (13th Century Spain) were absolutely correct: idolatry has less to do with theology and much to do with the “disgusting, immoral practices” of those who follow the teachings of the likes of Pe’or. Zimri ben Salou was not only expressing his desire; he was rebelling against Moses, against God, and against the very foundation of Torah. ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

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This week’s Torah portion warns us not to be swept away by current culture, media, and societal popularity, and by those who are quick to condemn others for their thoughts and actions.

When Pinchas killed Zimri and his consort, he was roundly criticized and threatened by the those in Jewish society because of this act of zealotry. When this act occurred, society considered it to be wrong, harmful, and worthy of criticism. Later, in the full light and perspective of the time, this act was not only acceptable, but the obvious path necessary, and, in fact, heroic.

Pinchas’ critics mentioned the fact that his own pedigree was uncertain, since, although he was the grandson of Aaron, he was also a product of a woman who was of Midianite origin. Moshe himself was married to a daughter of Yitro the high priest of Midian and did nothing. By what right, then, did Pinchas take it upon himself to commit this double killing?

Implicit in this is the accusation as to who made him the zealot, the enforcer, so to speak, of God’s will. This was a usurpation of power and status that he arrogated to himself. In short, Pinchas was not to be seen as a hero or as a holy person. But, rather, he was considered the impetuous upstart that committed a double killing without proper sanction or legality. The Torah records that heaven itself intervened to set the record straight, and to clearly support and justify the behavior and actions of Pinchas.

There are so many times in history that this story has repeated itself, albeit always under different circumstances. History turns temporary heroes, beloved in their time, into eternal villains when judged by later historical facts and occurrences. History can also rehabilitate people and ideas that were once scorned, held up to ridicule and contempt, and show how the original judgment, event or person was faulty.

There have been many movements and personalities in the history of the Jewish people who achieved temporary fame and popularity, but who are completely forgotten in the long view that history grants us. And many who were criticized, called obstructionists and out of touch with society, have proven to be prescient and heroic in retrospect.

We are always quick to judge, especially when

we have our own preconceived ideas as to what is or what should be. We can look back and see the mistakes of previous generations, of physical and spiritual tragedy within the Jewish world. Yet, somehow, we also continue today to allow our own personal biases to affect our judgment of events, leaders, and ideas. This is one of the most fundamental ideas that we can learn from the reading of this week. It is especially relevant to our current society and its challenges. ©2022 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

Parashat Pinchas begins with a continuation of the narrative of Israel’s immoral behavior found at the conclusion of Parashat Balak. That behavior was induced by Balaam, the heathen prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Jews. Thus, Moab plays a key role in persuading Israel to grievously sin (Numbers 22:5, 6; 31:16).

It wasn’t always this way, though, as the ancestor of Moab was once close to the ancestor of Israel. In time, the relationship deteriorated.

Moab is a descendant of Lot, the nephew of our father Abraham. We first meet Lot in the Torah after the death of his father Haran (Abraham’s brother). In a certain sense, Abraham adopts Lot. When Abraham goes to Canaan, Lot is mentioned in the text as a full-fledged member of his family (Genesis 11:27–31; 12:5).

After arriving in Canaan, Abraham and Lot are driven by famine to Egypt. Upon returning, “Abraham went up from Egypt, he with his wife and Lot with him” (Genesis 13:1). Nehama Leibowitz points out that the expression “Lot with him” indicates that Lot was no longer a central figure in Abraham’s family but became a kind of tagalong. Apparently the wealth that both Abraham and Lot attained in Egypt had transformed Lot into a new person who felt separate from Abraham.

Paralleling this new distance between them, the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarrel, claiming the land cannot provide for both of them. Abraham tells Lot that he does not want to argue. Wherever you wish to go, I will go elsewhere, Abraham says (Genesis 13:8, 9). One would imagine that since Abraham raised Lot, Lot would say that, despite the tight quarters, Lot could never leave this place. But looking out at the plains of Sodom, Lot decides to separate from Abraham (Genesis 13:10–12).

In time, Sodom is destroyed. An angel of God tells Lot to run to the mountain, understood in the Midrash to be a reference to Abraham – in other words, the angel instructs, return to Abraham who lives in the hills (Rashi, Genesis 19:17; Pesikta Rabbati 3). Lot

refuses, insisting that were he to do so, evil would cleave (tidbakani) to him (Genesis 19:19).

This background brings us to our incident in which Lot's descendant, the Moabite king Balak, wishes to spiritually destroy Israel, the descendants of Abraham.

Moab strays to the point that the Torah in Deuteronomy states that Moabites may never become part of Israel. After all, Balak did all he could to sever Israel's covenantal relationship with God (Deuteronomy 23:4,5). But is the breach between Moab and Israel ever narrowed?

In the Book of Ruth, Ruth the Moabite, a descendant of Lot, insists that she will never leave her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth tells Naomi that she will return with her to Israel. Unlike Balak, who wished to destroy Israel's covenantal relationship with God, Ruth renews that relationship.

Not coincidentally, as Rabbi David Silber points out, when the narrative recounts Ruth's remaining with Naomi, it uses the very word that describes Lot's refusal to reunite with Abraham, the word davkah – ve'Rut davkah bah, and Ruth cleaved to her (similar to tidbakani in Genesis 19:19; Ruth 1:14 – note as well the term ba'lat in Ruth 3:7 reminding the reader of the connection to the Lot story). Indeed, Ruth becomes the paragon convert, committing herself to God, the Jewish nation, and halachah (Ruth 1:16).

Here we have come full circle. Ruth the Moabite takes heroic strides to embrace Abraham's family. The Talmud acknowledges her actions by stating that the prohibition of a Moabite joining the community of Israel relates only to males and not to females (Yevamot 77a). In fact, from Ruth, David is ultimately born; and it is from David that the Messiah is destined to come (Ruth 4:13–22).

In other words, you never know. You never know when people will return and what greatness will descend from them, perhaps not in their generation, but in future generations. © 2022 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

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN TANAKH

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

Parashat Pinchas opens with God's response to Moshe in the wake of the action taken by Pinchas at the end of the previous parasha: "And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, has turned My wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was very jealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the

children of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore, say: Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace." (Bamidbar 25:10-12)

Why is Pinchas's genealogy spelled out in such great detail? Rashi (ad loc.) explains: "Because the tribes spoke disparagingly of him, saying: Have you seen this grandson of Puti, the father of whose mother used to fatten calves for idolatrous sacrifices, and he has dared to slay a prince of one of Israel's tribes? Therefore, Scripture comes and connects his genealogy with Aharon." Rashi's words are based on the Gemara in Sanhedrin: "It is written: 'Then stood up Pinchas, and executed judgment [va-yefalel].' Rabbi Eliezer said: Va-yitpalel [he prayed] is not written, but va-yefalel, as though he argued with his maker [on the justice of punishing so many]. Thereupon, the ministering angels wished to repulse him, but He said to them: Let him be, for he is a zealot and the descendant of a zealot; a turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath. The tribes now began abusing him: See you this son of Puti [= Putiel], whose maternal grandfather fattened [pitem] cattle for idols, and who has now slain the prince of a tribe of Israel! Therefore, Scripture detailed his ancestry: Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest." (Sanhedrin 82b)

Still, it is not clear why it is necessary to consistently emphasize that Pinchas's lineage traces back to Aharon the priest. The designation, "a zealot and the descendant of a zealot; a turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath," also requires explanation. Is it not evident even without this description that the action taken by Pinchas was right, and even necessary?

It turns out that this is not the case. The Midyanim with whose daughters the people of Israel committed harlotry are our relatives, descendants of Avraham and Ketura, and the turning of the young men of Israel to their daughters was not expressly forbidden: first, because according to the plain meaning of the verses, the prohibition of intermarriage applies only to the seven nations of the land of Canaan; second, because the incident with the daughters of Midyan was not, strictly speaking, intermarriage.

(It is clear that the people of Israel committed harlotry with the daughters of Midyan and not with the daughters of Moav. This is not the forum in which to expand on the matter, but note that the words: "And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav" (Bamidbar 25:1) mean that they began to commit harlotry with the daughters living in Moav.

(Also, it is important to note that even the reservations of the sons of Yaakov about assimilating with an uncircumcised nation, which arose in the incident involving Dina (Bereishit 34:14-15), do not apply here; the people of Midyan also practiced circumcision, as is evident from the account of Tzipora

circumcising her son at the lodging place (Shemot 4:24-26).)

In short, the boundaries between Israel and the other nations of the Abrahamic family were not so clear, which means Pinchas's action was very problematic: Who appointed him to determine whether relations between Israelites and the daughters of Midyan were permissible or forbidden, and to take such drastic action in order to establish his position as the final word?

The Amoraim addressed this difficulty and offered several explanations of what really led Pinchas to his daring action: "Rav said: He saw what was happening and remembered the halakha.

"Shmuel said: He saw that 'There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord' -- whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one's teacher. [Meaning, one is not required to consult his teacher before acting.]

"Rav Yitzchak said in the name of Rav Elazar: He saw the angel wreaking destruction among the people." (Sanhedrin 82a)

I wish to discuss the last two opinions presented in the Gemara, beginning with Shmuel's view that Pinchas took his action in order to prevent desecration of God's name.

Sometimes, the difference between blasphemy and sanctification of God's name is exceedingly subtle, and it is not so easy to know which action will decide the matter in which direction. Nevertheless, when Pinchas saw the situation in front of him -- the young men of Israel engaging in harlotry with the daughters of Midyan, and in the process, even the prince of a tribe hurling accusations at Moshe -- he believed that this could not possibly be the will of God and he felt an obligation to stand up and take action. (Accusing him of hypocrisy in having married a Midyanite woman himself; see Sanhedrin *ibid*.)

This is the meaning of the statement "zealot and the descendant of a zealot." Zealotry is the understanding that the current situation cannot possibly reflect the will of God, even if there is no explicit halakha to support this understanding. Making this determination, however, does not suffice; one must also stand up and take action to rectify the situation.

Rav Yitzchak, on the other hand, connects Pinchas's action to the plague. In his opinion, Pinchas saw the plague smiting the people and realized that something had to be done to stop it -- just as his grandfather Aharon took action to stop the plague that struck Israel after the sin of Korach and his company:

"And Moshe said to Aharon: Take your fire-pan, and put fire in it from the altar, and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them; for there is wrath gone out from the Lord: the plague is begun. And Aharon took as Moshe spoke, and ran into the midst of the assembly;

and, behold, the plague was begun among the people; and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed." (Bamidbar 17:11-13)

Halakha forbids burning incense outside the sanctuary, and to do so immediately after two hundred and fifty people who burned incense were burned in divine fire turned it into an even more dangerous action. Despite this, Aharon did not shy away from going outside the tent, standing between the dead and the living, and trying to atone for his people.

Pinchas also risked his life with his daring deed and even acted problematically from a halakhic perspective, so much so that the Gemara there (Sanhedrin 82a) writes that Pinchas was subject to the "law of a pursuer (*rodef*)"; Zimri or any other person would have been permitted to kill him. In addition, the Gemara states that had Pinchas sought counsel before taking action, he would have been instructed not to do so. Nevertheless, like his grandfather, he saw the terrible plague decimating the people and understood that he had to take action in order to stop it -- even if by so doing, he would be putting his own life in jeopardy and even if it was not clear how proper his own action was.

This is the meaning of the second description of Pinchas, "turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath." Sometimes the way to turn away God's wrath is not self-evident, and not everybody is capable of understanding that in such a situation, one is obligated to stand up and take action in order to atone for the people. [*This sicha was delivered by HaRav Medan on Shabbat Parashat Pinchas 5780.*]

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Eliyahu Will Answer All Our Questions

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Some say that Pinchas is the same person as Eliyahu Ha-navi (the prophet Elijah). We await his coming, as promised by the prophet Malachi, with great anticipation. Eliyahu will provide answers to all our questions, clarifying laws as well as facts. Thus, the word "*teiku*," sometimes found in the Talmud following an unresolved question, is understood in folk etymology as an acronym for "*Tishbi yetaretz kushiyot u'ba'ayot*" ("Eliyahu will resolve all questions and difficulties").

Here is an example of a law to be clarified. When collecting a debt, do we leave the debtor the items which he needs to support himself? After all, when people donate to the *Beit HaMikdash*, we take their needs into account. Does this apply to debts owed to people as well?

The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 114a) records that this question was once answered by Eliyahu based on a *gezeirah shavah*. (By the way, his view was not

accepted by all. Even those who chose to accept his view were not doing so because he was a prophet. As we know, the Torah is not in heaven, nor is a prophet permitted to make new laws. Rather, Eliyahu was no less a Torah scholar than anyone else, and might have even been better than most.)

Here are some examples of facts with which Eliyahu will help us. He will clarify whether certain *terumah* has become impure, and the status of a piece of meat which was out of a Jew's sight. He will be able to adjudicate monetary disputes in which a rabbinic court could not reach a decision and the money was held in abeyance. These cases are all very specific.

Eliyahu will also clear up some general doubts found in rabbinic literature about how things work: Do people base a meal (*kovea seudah*) on wine in the same way that they do on bread? Would a dead person have allowed certain disrespect of his body on the part of his heirs? May we write *tefillin* on the skin of a kosher fish, or is it considered disgusting? To resolve these doubts, we will rely on the prophetic power of Eliyahu, whose arrival we eagerly await. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Moshe's Final Request

Parashat Pinchas contains a census of the B'nei Yisrael which is done for the purpose of dividing the land which the people will enter shortly. The names of the tribes and the families within the tribes are mapped out for the division which will take place when the actual delineation of the borders of each tribe has been set. This section is followed by the request of the daughters of Tzelaphchad, a man who died leaving no sons to inherit him. Their request to inherit also is dealt with directly by Hashem, and Moshe delineates that Law as it will apply then, and in the future, concerning families in which there are no sons to inherit. Following this passage, we find a directive to Moshe designating the time and the place where he would pass on. Our Rabbis add to our understanding of the nuances of this section.

The Torah teaches, "Hashem said to Moshe, go up on Har HaAvarim and see the Land that I have given to the B'nei Yisrael. You will see it (the land) and you will be gathered to your people, you, too, as Aharon, you brother, was gathered. Because you rebelled against my word in the Wilderness of Tzin in the strife of the assembly, to sanctify Me at the water before their eyes, they are the waters of strife of Kadesh in the Wilderness of Tzin." This passage seems somewhat out of context as we know that Moshe does not die at this time but significantly later in the Torah. The Ramban explains that this passage is only a foretelling of what will happen to Moshe who may have believed that the decree against him (not going into the land) was lifted. Moshe might have been

confused because the Torah states before this that "to these shall the land be divided as an inheritance, according to the number of names." Moshe believed that he might still be the one who would divide this land and therefore he would be allowed to cross the Jordan and enter the land himself. Hashem tells Moshe that this Land will be divided, but not by you.

The Kli Yakar asks two questions concerning this passage: (1) Why was this passage connected to the previous passage (the same question that the Ramban just asked), and (2) why was the Mountain that Hashem instructs Moshe to ascend called here Har HaAvarim when it is called later Har Navo? The Kli Yakar explains that the use of the word *v'ha'avartem*, and they will cross, means that all those who are not worthy of crossing because they are not worthy of inheriting the Land from their fathers, will be eliminated from crossing by the commission of a sin which Hashem will send their way. The name Har HaAvarim is a play on words for that same reason. Moshe is told to go up on the Mountain where *eivarim*, sins (a play on the word *Avarim*), are judged against Moshe and will disallow him from entering the land.

Many of the commentators ask why Aharon was punished as much as Moshe if not more. Aharon did not utter words when Moshe called the people "rebels", nor did Aharon strike the Rock as Moshe did. Our Rabbis answer that Aharon was silent, and silence indicates agreement. Aharon was Moshe's moral compass and he should have rebuked Moshe. His failure to do so resulted in a punishment worse than Moshe's. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Aharon is not given the possibility of even seeing the Land. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that Aharon died much further from the Land than Moshe. Moshe continually offered prayers to Hashem to void the decree and enable him to enter the land and see it. Hashem indicated to Moshe that He would not acquiesce to Moshe's full request but would allow Moshe to at least view the Land. The Or HaChaim adds that Moshe was already told that he would see the land but now was given a different message. He was to receive deeper insight into the land, which would enable him to understand its spiritual essence.

At this point we need to see the rest of the story. "And Moshe spoke to Hashem saying. May Hashem, G-d of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the assembly. Who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out and who shall bring them in, and let the assembly of Hashem not be like sheep that have no shepherd." Moshe accepted his fate, but as any great leader, his concern was not for himself but for the future of his people. They still would enter the land and conquer it, but without a leader they would have no direction.

Moshe's request is not a simple one. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that when a person wishes to ask

another to accept his request, he normally prefaces his request with several words of praise. When making a request of Hashem this is even more crucial. Our own daily prayers consist of three blessings of praise followed by our requests and concluding with three additional blessings of thanks. Here, however, we not only see that Moshe went straight to his request without the preliminary praise, but even used the harsher form of speech, *vayidaber*, and he spoke, instead of *vayomer*, and he said. It is as if Moshe was commanding Hashem to fulfill his request. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that this form is appropriate here, since Moshe was not asking for himself but for the B'nei Yisrael. He was concerned that his people not be left leaderless.

Moshe called Hashem "the G-d of the spirits of all flesh." This description of Hashem indicated that Hashem has knowledge of the intricacies of all men, He understands the problems and the strengths of each. Rashi explains that Moshe was asking Hashem to appoint a leader who would recognize those differences in each person and answer each person according to his needs. Moshe's wish was that the next leader of the B'nei Yisrael would develop the same insight and sensitivity to each of the people that Moshe possessed. The Or HaChaim explains that Moshe later asked for judges to be appointed for each of the tribes because these judges would be even closer to the people.

We see that Hashem appointed Moshe's assistant, Yehoshua (Joshua), to become the next leader. Moshe had already realized Yehoshua's greatness and had appointed him as his aide. Moshe was told to place his hands on Yehoshua's head as a symbolic passing of the responsibility to him. This method is also important because it gives a message to the one receiving the new position that he is still subservient to the one who went before him.

Once Moshe realized that his wish to enter the Land was not accepted, he immediately focused on the future of the people. He was not so arrogant to think that only he could lead the people. But he wished to see that He would find a leader for them that would prove to have many of Moshe's own strengths. The choice of Yehoshua comforted him and alleviated his concern. © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Leader Must Always Lead

In this week's Torah portion, God showed Moses the Land of Israel and told him that he wouldn't be allowed to bring the Jewish people into the Land. Moses immediately said:

"May... God... appoint a man over the assembly, who shall go out before them... and let the assembly... not be like sheep that have no shepherd."

(Numbers 27:16-17)

When Moses was told by God that he wouldn't be able to lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel, his knee-jerk response was not focused on his own fate, but rather to make sure that the Jews would still have someone in his absence who would continue to lead them. This is why Moses was one of the greatest leaders ever.

The ability to focus on other people's needs when the "going gets tough" and not on your own wants and desires is the true definition of leadership. Being a leader is not about the recognition or accolades you might receive, but rather it's the constant focus on the specific needs that are most important to those who are following you. Therefore, if for one reason or another you're no longer able to lead them, you will automatically put their fears and concerns as your primary focus.

The world is littered with countless numbers of cases where, once someone was asked to stop doing something, he ceased to care about the people whom his work was effecting. It makes you wonder if he really ever truly cared about them in the first place. The true colors of a leader are on full display when he leaves his leadership position and to see if he ever gives even a passing thought to all those who believed in him, his vision, and his dream.

The powerful message Moses taught us all is to fight the urge to initially take a demotion or firing personally. There will certainly be time to think about the impact of how this decision affects you. But right now your concern must be about those who trusted you.

Make no mistake; it certainly takes a lot of class to have your focus be on others when your ego, self-esteem, and your self-worth are seemingly all on the line. But it's precisely this knee-jerk response which separates a good leader from a great one. © 2007 A. Lieberman and aish.com

