

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Pinchas – Numbers 25:10 – 30:1 July 11, 2020

At the end of the last Parashah Pinchas impetuously kills the Israelite man and the Midianite woman with whom he is engaged in forbidden sexual activity, thus stopping the plague visited upon the people for allowing themselves to be seduced by the Midianites. For this zealous act, HaShem rewards Pinchas with an “eternal covenant of peace.” A curious anomaly in our Torah scroll alludes to the dichotomous nature of Pinchas’s deed and his reward: Instead of being written in one piece, the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* is broken, a mistake that would ordinarily make a scroll unkosher, but that is required here. Interpretations for this strange irregularity are numerous and varied. I like to see it as a vivid illustration of our human imperfection. Peace achieved solely through violence is seldom lasting. The broken *vav* alludes to the imperfect peace that has always been, and likely will always be our lot. Spelled without the *vav*, the word means *complete, perfect* – something we humans most certainly are not. All we can do is try to be the best we possibly can, each of us in our own fashion, with our own unique sets of strengths and weaknesses.

After this event, Moses is told to harass Midian (more on that next week), but suddenly the topic shifts. Moses must take a new census, this time to determine how many are left after the plague, and also to apportion land after the people have arrived at their destination. Nearly forty years have passed since the people left Egypt. Almost all of the former slaves have already died, and Moses too, will die, a mortal human despite his uniqueness and the pivotal role he has played. A new group of people will settle the land, people born in freedom, but still learning – as we all continue to do – how to balance privilege and duty in order to build a just society based on Torah precepts. To make them aware of their identity, their lineage is traced back to the first tribal leaders, the sons of Jacob.

It is telling that the priesthood is given to the descendants of Aaron, not Moses. The Kohanim are integral to the spiritual life of the people, but they do not lead them. There is to be strict separation of priesthood and leadership. Moses was chosen to lead the people from slavery in Egypt to freedom and self-determination. But he too, is human, with flaws some of us can easily recognize in ourselves. In addition to his temper, he also neglects his own family. Way back in Parashah Yitro, right after the escape from Egypt, and on the verge of the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses’ father-in-law Yitro appears with his wife and two sons, reminding him of his husbandly and fatherly duties. Preoccupied with leadership, as he must be, Moses finds little time to mentor his sons, and his wife Zipporah disappears into the background. Thus, the priesthood passes to Aaron’s descendants as an inheritance, and Joshua, an Ephraimite is chosen by HaShem as the new leader. But painful as this must be for Moses, this is not really a punishment, but simply an acknowledgement of our human limitations. Monarchy and aristocracy are hereditary, and stories abound in history – as well as in our TaNaKh – about the misdeeds of royal progeny. It is obvious that ruling and leading are two fundamentally different things. Our Torah teaches that ideally, leadership should be based on merit and ability, not heredity. We are not even supposed to have a monarchy, but after a succession of misguided judges, we find ourselves with a succession of equally poor monarchs. Leadership is not only about power; it requires a steady moral compass and sound judgement. In other words, leadership is an achievement, not a right. Jacob’s speeches to his sons before he dies make this abundantly clear, as do the lives of some of David’s and Solomon’s offspring.

Although he led the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the borders of their new home, Moses is honored not merely as a leader, but as the greatest of all prophets, a gift without which he never could have been the leader he was. And in the spirit of true leadership, knowing that is soon to die, his first thought is for his people, who must be provided with a new leader, so they don’t wander like sheep without a shepherd. He does not request that his sons inherit his mantle, but instead leaves the choice to HaShem. What a poignant admission of his own humanity! He is prophet enough to understand that leadership through succession is unhealthy, and he is leader enough to leave the decision to HaShem. He is truly Moshe Rabbinu – Moses our teacher – privileged as no other to communicate and yes, to also argue with HaShem, but human to the core, with weaknesses and faults just like all of us. May we learn from his life and his deeds to be the best human beings we can, using our talents wisely while accepting our limitations, and doing so in the spirit of *tikkun olam*, of doing our part to help make the world a better place.

Shabbat shalom!