

This past Sunday was 17. Tammuz, the beginning of the “Three Weeks.” Exactly 40 days after Shavuot, we have moved into the time *ben hametzarim* “between the straits,” the period of mourning that culminates in Tisha b’Av, the anniversary of a huge number of tragedies. The root *tzar*, from which the word for straits derives, means narrow but it also means anguish or distress. (*Mitzrayim* is the Hebrew word for Egypt, our narrow place of slavery.) When we are in distress, our vision is limited. We are so focused on our pain that we can see neither the light at the end of our tunnel, nor the bigger picture. Our sages teach that 5 calamitous events occurred on 17. Tammuz: Moses broke the first set of tablets; the *Korban Tamid* (mandatory daily sacrificial offerings) was discontinued; the walls of Jerusalem were breached during the Roman siege, leading to the destruction of the Temple on 9. Av; prior to the Bar Kochba revolt the Roman military leader Apostomus burned a Torah scroll; an idol was set up in the Temple.

These 5 events can be viewed as a downward spiral beginning with lack of trust and ending in a total break with HaShem. For some of our ancestors this was true, but we are here today because many others remained steadfast. Trusting an invisible, intangible god is difficult, even for people who have already witnessed countless miracles. Fear of the unknown not only foments nostalgia, but also encourages seeking instant gratification through any means available. Throughout the ages, many of our people, for a variety of reasons from expediency to sheer self-preservation, have succumbed to the lure of other cultures and other religions. Parashah Pinchas takes place during one of those times when the people have lost their vision. This first generation of Israelites born in freedom has not yet learned how to take on the responsibilities freedom entails. Having spent all their lives under the direct protection of HaShem and the leadership of Moses, they are hardly equipped to make good decisions on their own. As we learned in last week’s parashah, the Israelites, settled for a while in order to regroup before entering the Promised Land, are led astray by the women of Moab, forming relationships not only with them, but also with their deities. HaShem instructs Moses to put an end to it by hanging the leaders and ordering the people to kill the men who had become attached to Baal Peor. At the height of this debacle Zimri, leader of the Simeonite tribe, brazenly brings Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader (We learn their names in this week’s parashah.) into the camp in plain sight of Moses and the Israelites while they are weeping at the entrance of the *mishkan*. It is unclear in which chamber they engage in their forbidden sexual activity, but Pinchas, Aaron’s grandson, follows them into the chamber and kills them both with one thrust of his spear. Why does Moses not act first? Is it because of his own Midianite wife? Whatever the reason, Pinchas steps to the fore without hesitation. He and Elijah are the only two human beings described in the TaNaKh as zealots, a term associated many times with HaShem. Both Pinchas and Elijah take charge spontaneously during a religious crisis, heroically risking their lives while others remain inactive. But afterward HaShem ensures that they will never again have to engage in zealotry. Pinchas receives an eternal covenant of peace as well as an eternal covenant of priesthood, and HaShem teaches Elijah that there is more power in the *kol d’mammah d’kakh*, the thin voice of stillness than there is in the forces of nature (I Kings 19:12). Violence is not compatible with service to HaShem, and neither is taking the law into one’s own hands. The broken letter *vav* in the word *shalom* in HaShem’s covenant with Pinchas, one of the Torah’s many curious anomalies, alludes to the tenuousness of peace. Spelled without the *vav*, the word means *complete, perfect* – something we humans most certainly are not. And we need level-headed leaders to help keep us pointed in the right direction.

For the next 3 weeks, we look back with sadness on the human frailty that throughout the ages has led to so much tragedy, and we recognize recurring patterns in ourselves and in the world at large. Peace is fragile, especially for us Jews. Variations on the poisonous theme of Amalek continually add new events to the long list of calamities we mourn. We can learn much from that broken *vav*: Peace through violence will inevitably be broken through more violence. Not even Moses was immune: Like Pinchas, he too acted impetuously when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating the Israelite slave. The Kotzker Rebbe teaches that because leadership requires patience, thought, and respect for the law, a zealot cannot be a leader. Our world seems to be full of zealots these days, but despite our anguish, we dare not lose sight of the larger picture. As Hubert Humphrey, Vice President under Lyndon Johnson, presidential candidate against Richard Nixon, and Senator from my home state of Minnesota so well said, “Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not ‘happen,’ it requires work.” Yes, peace is an ongoing process requiring vigilance, patience, and thoughtful action. Aleinu – it’s upon us!

Shabbat shalom!