

On Wednesday evening we entered the three-week period that begins on 17. Tammuz and ends on 9. Av. Although these two dates memorialize ten specific events, the weeks they encompass call forth countless other tragedies that the Jewish people have endured over the millennia. Mishna Ta'anit: "Five calamitous matters occurred to our forefathers on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, and five other disasters happened on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. On 17. Tammuz the tablets were broken by Moses when he saw that the Jews had made the golden calf; the daily offering was nullified by the Roman authorities and was never sacrificed again; the city walls of Jerusalem were breached; the general Apostemos publicly burned a Torah scroll; and Manasseh placed an idol in the Sanctuary. On 9. Av it was decreed upon our ancestors that they would all die in the wilderness and not enter Eretz Yisrael; and the Temple was destroyed the first time in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, and the second time by the Romans; and Beitar was captured; and the city of Jerusalem was plowed as a sign that it would never be rebuilt." This period is known as *bein hametzarim*, between the straits/boundaries, from Lamentations 1:3: "Judah went into exile because of affliction and great servitude; she settled among the nations, [and] found no rest; all her pursuers overtook her between the boundaries." *Mitzrayim*, from the root צר (narrow, confined, restricted) is the Hebrew word for Egypt, where the lives of our enslaved ancestors were confined to the will of their Egyptian overlords. Ill-equipped to deal with the challenges they face as free people, the Israelites repeatedly succumb to a pernicious nostalgia for their old, restricted lives. Like all of us, they are only human. The stress of constantly coping with new problems can be overpowering. When the goal seems unreachable it is easy to give up and even turn toward something that seems easier. Parashah Pinchas takes place during such a time. Having spent all their lives under the direct protection of HaShem and the leadership of Moses, this first generation born in freedom is not only dealing with their parents' trauma, they are still learning what freedom entails. At the end of last week's parashah the Israelites are led astray by the women of Moab, and HaShem orders Moses to hang the leaders and instruct the people to kill the men who had turned to idolatry. At the height of this debacle Simeonite tribal leader Zimri brazenly brings Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite chieftain into the camp in plain sight of Moses and the Israelites while they are weeping at the entrance of the *mishkan*. Aaron's grandson Pinchas follows them into the chamber where they are engaging in forbidden sexual activity, and kills them with one thrust of his spear. It is noteworthy that Pinchas and Elijah, who burst in during a religious crisis to turn the tide, are the only people referred to in the TaNaKh as zealots, and HaShem ensures that neither of them will ever again have to engage in zealotry. Zealotry is not the responsibility of human beings; it belongs solely to HaShem. HaShem blesses Pinchas with eternal covenants of peace and of priesthood, and teaches Elijah that there is more power in the *kol d'mammah d'kah*, the thin voice of stillness than in the forces of nature (I Kings 19:12). The broken letter *vav* (ך normally written as a single line) in the word *shalom* in HaShem's covenant with Pinchas, one of the Torah's many curious anomalies, not only alludes to the fragility of peace, it is an eloquent expression of our human fallibility. Spelled without the *vav*, the word means *complete, perfect*, which is something we humans most certainly are not. The decisions we make that seem good at the time may prove otherwise, which even Moses has had to learn more than once. When he rules to apportion land to the brotherless daughters of Zelophechad, he does not consider that their holdings could potentially fall into the hands of other tribes should they marry outside their tribe. The backlash occurs at the end of next week's reading, and he must amend his decision – which, by the way, was decreed by HaShem, but obviously not understood in its entirety by Moses. Who was this Zelophechad, whom his daughters say, "died for his own sin?" (27:3) In the same verse they say that he did not take part in Korach's rebellion, but died for another reason. In a discussion on forbidden activities on Shabbat in Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 96b, Rabbi Akiva states that the unnamed man who was stoned for gathering wood on Shabbat (Numbers 15:32) was Zelophechad. But Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira admonishes, "Akiva in either case you will be judged in the future for this teaching. If the truth is in accordance with your statement, the Torah concealed his identity and you reveal it. And if not, you are unjustly slandering that righteous man." Indeed, none of us is perfect, but as we learn from the story of Akiva and Rabbi Yehuda, we are commanded to "rebuke your fellow so you will not bear sin on his account." (Leviticus 19:17) A major component of the art of rebuking is to do it in a way that does not publicly shame the person being rebuked, and both Pinchas and Moses fail miserably. In addition to disobeying HaShem's explicit order to sanctify HaShem through the water (27:14), Moses calls the Israelites rebels, striking the rock in his anger. Of course, his behavior is understandable, but it proves that not even Moses, the person who communicates directly with HaShem, is free of human weakness. Like all of us, he too, will die, and that is as it should be. HaShem alone is eternal and HaShem alone is worthy of worship.

Shabbat shalom!