

TIMELESS TORAH

PINCHAS - THE COVENANT & PROMISE OF PEACE

A Peaceful Retribution

Parshat Pinchas opens with the bestowing of the wonderful blessing of priesthood and peace on Pinchas in reward for his actions, which stopped the plague from wiping out the Jewish people. What is confusing about this is that the actions of Pinchas in eliminating the prince of the tribe of Shimon seem to have been far from peaceful. Indeed, the very verse that presents the blessing of peace refers to Pinchas's action as an act of vengeance, perhaps the exact opposite of an act of peace. Why then, was peace an appropriate reward for Pinchas?

In fact, the concept of vengeance appears to be a recurrent theme in Judaism. Many of our prayers — most notably Av HaRachamim, which was written in the aftermath of the Crusades, and Shefoch Chamatcha, which we recite at the Pesach Seder — actually beseech Hashem to wreak vengeance on the nations of the world who have harmed us. Why is it that we pray for Hashem to take retribution rather than for Him to bring about world peace?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (d.1979), in an examination of this issue, offers us a fascinating new perspective on the essence of the concepts of peace and vengeance. He writes that vengeance, or *nekamah*, is more about a calculation and rebalance of righteousness in this world than about punishment. For this reason, *nekamah*, when exercised appropriately, is considered a lofty ideal, and is even described as one of the virtues of Hashem.

When one witnesses a travesty, it is sometimes tempting for a person to take the path

of least resistance and let it pass, often citing a desire for peace as a reason for their inaction. But true global harmony searches for the common cause of Hashem's will. When faced with injustice and wickedness, the seeker of peace might be required to take action, sometimes drastically, to counterbalance this wrong. As Rav Hirsch (d.1888) comments, in the incident described in this parshah, some of the onlookers watched with apathy while others were indeed disturbed and even moved to tears. It was only Pinchas, however, who, rather than turning away, was courageous enough to take action and restore peace with Hashem.

In this vein, Rav Berel Wein (Jerusalem, contemporary) explains the lesson of the *vav keti'a*, the broken vav. This is the letter vav in the word shalom in this parshah which, in the Sefer Torah, is written with a break through it. Peace, in its simple sense, is fragile, just like the broken vav. But on the other hand, the broken vav teaches that sometimes, true peace must come from the most unexpected places, such as brave acts of zealotry.

Ancestry & Aspiration

Significant about the way Pinchas is introduced in this parshah is that his ancestry is traced not only one generation, as is normally done, but all the way back to Aharon HaKohen. Our Sages explain that this is emphasised in response to the criticism he faced for his actions. There were those who ridiculed Pinchas, highlighting the fact that he was descended, on his mother's side, from Yitro, who had been an idolatrous priest before he joined the Jewish people.



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To counteract this disparagement, the Torah associates Pinchas with Aharon.

According to the K'tav Sofer (Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, Pressburg, d. 1871), the association with Aharon has a deeper connotation. Pinchas's act of apparent violence and cruelty seems to be in opposition to Aharon's trait of pursuing peace. Those who ridiculed him, therefore, claimed that specifically now, Pinchas had demonstrated that he did not deserve to be considered a descendent of Aharon as he had clearly inherited negative characteristics from elsewhere.

The reality, however, is the exact opposite. The Torah tells us that Pinchas was indeed a descendent of Aharon and his nature was to value and seek peace. Here, we appreciate the real magnitude of Pinchas's actions, as he went against his nature to readdress the imbalance of evil that had crept into the Jewish nation, bringing about peace in its wider sense. For this, he was truly deserving of the mantle of the *brit shalom*, the covenant of peace.

Lessons for Leadership

Upon learning that he would not be destined to lead the Jewish people into Eretz Yisrael, Moshe asked Hashem to appoint a successor. Naturally, the Midrash writes, Moshe expected that his own sons would merit this distinction, and he was surprised to hear that instead, the position was to be given to his student, Yehoshua. The Midrash explains that Yehoshua's qualification for this was the fact that he had been faithful to his teacher, Moshe, throughout his life and

was dedicated to learning everything that Moshe could teach him. Fascinatingly, however, the examples that the Midrash cites focus on seemingly trivial acts: "Since he attended you day and night, organising the chairs in the beit midrash and spreading out the mats, the custodian of the tree should now eat its fruit."

Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch (Cleveland, d. 1955) expands on the message of this incredible Midrash. Yehoshua's attention for the small details normally left for a caretaker was a demonstration of his greatness. The big difference, explains Rav Bloch, between a small-minded person and a broad-minded person is that a small-minded person appreciates only major things while a great person appreciates even small things. When someone is able to value and see the unique place of matters that everyone else treads underfoot, this is a sign of excellence. Using the expression of the Midrash, because Yehoshua could see that even a small seed can one day grow into a tree, he merited to eat the fruit.

In other words, the Midrash is conveying that the key to leadership is the ability to play the long game and not to focus on instant results. Much like Pinchas, whose sensitivity to peace gave him an understanding of the fine balance of this world, Yehoshua, too, grew to greatness by developing a sensitivity to the small issues that build the picture of the way major issues develop.

Next Week: MATOT-MASEI
The Power of Words