

TIMELESS TORAH

PINCHAS: SUCCESSION, VISION, AND CONTINUITY

Complexity of Leadership

The overarching themes of continuity and succession occupy the first half of Parshat Pinchas. This begins with the reward given to Pinchas for his courageous stand against Zimri, the prince of Midian, and Kozbi, the Midianite princess. For this act of zealotness, Pinchas was awarded the *brit kehunat olam*, the everlasting covenant of priesthood. Pinchas was a grandson of Aharon HaKohen but had nevertheless not been invested as a kohen due to an interesting anomaly. The *kehunah* (priesthood) had been given to Aharon and his two surviving sons as a hereditary position, but the birth of Pinchas pre-dated that appointment, and he was not included until this point.

Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995) suggests that the gift of the *kehunah* was left slightly incomplete at first because there was something deficient in the leadership of the priesthood. The primary character trait of Aharon HaKohen, as is well-known, was that he was 'a lover of peace and pursued peace' (*Pirkei Avot 1*). This quality was highly valued, and it was in this merit that Aharon received the gift of *kehunah*. It is possible, however, that it also contained a drawback. For a leader to love and care for the people under his care is essential, but it is critical, too, for a leader to be able to take a stand when necessary against influences which threaten the spiritual integrity of the group. This aspect of leadership may have been lacking among the Kohanim, and this was reflected in the fact that not all of his descendants were included at first.

In this episode, Pinchas demonstrated the qualities that were needed to correct this imbalance. Pinchas knew that there were those among the nation who would be quick to point out the imperfections in his lineage

– his mother, the verse emphasises, was also a 'Midianite woman', the daughter of Yitro – but nevertheless, he disregarded his personal circumstances and stood firm against the immorality that was seeping into the camp. A willingness to behave in a way that might make one unpopular is a complex aspect of leadership that is sometimes necessary to diffuse conflicts. Together with love for the people must come the ability to act, when appropriate, for the greater good even at the risk of causing upset. Having removed this possible shortcoming in the traits of his family, the sanctity of the priesthood was ready to envelope him as well.

At the end of the parshah, when Moshe is asking Hashem for an appropriate successor, he appeals to Hashem as '*Elokei haruchot* – the God of all spirits'. Rashi explains that this unusual epithet was an allusion to Moshe's request that the new leader of the Jewish people should be able to encompass and bear each and every individual according to their ways. This overly accepting attitude, however, might easily lead to the same kind of deficiency as Rav Schwab highlighted. Indeed, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Hart Lyon (d.1800) addressed this very point in his inaugural sermon upon taking over the rabbinate in Halberstadt, Germany in 1758. He said that Hashem's response to this request was to present Yehoshua as an '*ish asher ruach bo* – a man of spirit'. This means that he would be able to stand firm against being swayed by particularly powerful individuals and insist on maintaining spiritual standards. This is a critical value for any leader; to have the sensitivity to satisfy the myriads of requests presented by every individual, yet at the same time ensure that the best interests of the people as a whole are always prioritised.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

Family Identity

The counting of the Jewish people in this parshah was ostensibly performed as an introduction to the instructions given regarding how to apportion the land. From Moshe's perspective, however, this count was comparable to a faithful shepherd returning the flock to its owner. As Rashi explains, just as a shepherd carefully counts the sheep at the beginning of the day, and accounts for them again at the end of the day, so too, Moshe counted the Jewish people as they left Egypt and counted them again shortly before his death.

This census stands out for two unique features. Firstly, while it is rare in Tanach to use the concept of 'family' to establish group identity, this census is heavily based on family groups rather than on association with tribes alone. Secondly, every time a family is mentioned in this passage, the name is modified to include the name of Hashem – a yud and a hey. These two points, Rashi explains, were a response to the nations of the world, who scorned the Jewish people, contending that the Jewish pedigree must have been compromised during the enslavement in Egypt. In grouping the entire nation by families and inserting His name into the names of the people, Hashem testifies to the integrity of our nation; every member of the Jewish people was a direct descendent of our founding family.

We can suggest, perhaps, an additional nuance to this. As the nation was counted in anticipation of the handing over to future leaders, they were being told to consider the essence of their Jewish identity in the future. Whatever the situation Jewish communities have found themselves in, the answer has always been the same: we preserve our national identity through the extent to which Hashem is present in our family lives.

Inherited Love

This idea of finding identity within the family is echoed in the story of the daughters of Tzelafchad. When describing their love for Eretz Yisrael and their desperation to be awarded a portion in it, the Torah emphasises that they were descendants of Yosef, who was also exceptionally concerned that his remains should be brought for burial in Eretz Yisrael. Rav Moshe Feinstein (d.1986), in *Darash Moshe*, questions this, arguing that perhaps it would have been a bigger accolade had the daughters of Tzelafchad developed this love for the land themselves. But, Rav Feinstein continues, the Torah is in fact teaching that the opposite is true. When someone develops an affinity for a certain mitzvah, they are likely to suffice with the mere act of the mitzvah alone. When, however, a mitzvah is part of one's ancestral tradition, they are almost compelled in its performance; the particular connection between them and the mitzvah is therefore measured only in terms of how much they cherish doing it. The praise that the Torah gives to Tzelafchad's daughters was not for the fact that they wanted to have a portion in Eretz Yisrael. Rather, they were praised because their plea to be granted a part of the Land demonstrated how much they identified themselves with the inherited traits of their ancestor Yosef.

When it comes to succession planning, it is the attitude we develop to what we inherit that really matters. As Jews, we receive many opportunities to perform *mitzvot*, but what truly sets us apart is the extent to which we cherish them.

NEXT WEEK - MATOT-MASEI:
Words, Wanderings, and the Way Forward