**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT PINCHAS**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

On the rare occasions when Parashat Pinchas is read before Shiva Assar Be’Tammuz (as is the case this year – 5776 – in Israel), the section read as the *haftara* is the story of Eliyahu’s experiences in the aftermath of the great miracle at Mount Carmel (Melakhim II 19). At Mount Carmel, Eliyahu openly confronted the pagan prophets of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, challenging them to prove that the deity they worshipped – *Ba’al* – hears and responds to their supplications. After they tried in vain to evoke a response from their alleged deity, Eliyahu prayed to God, who sent a heavenly fire to consume the sacrifice he had offered on an altar especially constructed for this purpose. Eliyahu thereupon killed the prophets, and then rain began to fall, ending a very long and devastating drought which Eliyahu had decreed.

After this event, which appeared at the time to decisively end Eliyahu’s fierce struggle against the pagan worship in the kingdom, the princess, Izevel, sent her servants to kill Eliyahu. He was forced to flee, and he traveled, interestingly enough, to Sinai (19:8). God asked Eliyahu why he had come there, and he replied, “I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have abandoned Your covenant; they destroyed Your altars and killed Your prophets by the sword, and only I remain, alone. Now they seek to take my life” (19:10). God responded by issuing to Eliyahu a number of instructions, one of which was to appoint Elisha as a prophet in his stead. Rashi explains, “I do not want your prophecy, because you prosecute against My children.” A prophet’s role is not only to communicate God’s message to the people, but also to plead to God on their behalf. Eliyahu was “deposed” from his position as prophet of the Northern Kingdom because he “prosecuted” against the people, complaining to God about their disloyalty, rather than pleading their case before Him and trying to effect a change.

Later in this chapter (verse 19), we read that when Eliyahu came to Elisha, he found Elisha plowing with twelve pairs of oxen. Elisha left his work to serve Eliyahu, and he later assumed his place as the main prophet of Israel.

Why is it significant that Elisha was plowing at this time? Why was this detail deemed important enough to be mentioned by the text?

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Mussar Ha-nevi’im*, suggested that the act of plowing a field in preparation for sowing symbolizes Eliyahu’s mistake, for which he was considered unworthy to continue serving as prophet. Just as a field cannot be planted without the proper advanced preparation, similarly, people’s hearts and conduct cannot be changed immediately. Personal change, like agriculture, requires a long, complex process. The “earth” within people’s hearts must first be “plowed” for them to become receptive to lofty ideas. Eliyahu despaired because even the great miracles he performed – preventing rain for three years, and bringing a heavenly fire to consume his sacrifice – did not have the desired effect of impacting the people and convincing them to abandon the worship of *Ba’al*. God’s response was to show Eliyahu his successor plowing a field. *Benei Yisrael* at that time were not ready for the “seeds” of religious truth that Eliyahu was trying to plant within their hearts. A long process was needed whereby the people would gradually outgrow their emotional dependence on *Ba’al* and reach the point where they would be open to change. Indeed, Elisha did not openly confront the pagans of Israel as Eliyahu did. The miracles he performed, by and large, were to help people in need, and this work gradually made an impact upon the kingdom.

Accordingly, God here was teaching Eliyahu – and us – a vital educational message, instructing that change and growth is a long, slow and gradual process. We cannot expect our children, our students or ourselves to absorb the “seeds” of knowledge and refined character until the “earth” is ready. The educational process requires laying the foundations for future knowledge and growth, without which the “seeds” will be unable to produce the “fruits” of knowledge and religious devotion that we desire.

Sunday

Parashat Pinchas begins with God’s proclamation that He was rewarding Pinchas for his act of zealotry, killing Zimri and Kozbi as they publicly sinned during the incident of *Ba’al Pe’or* at Shittim. God here gives His clear approval to Pinchas’ act, which, as Rashi writes, generated a great deal of controversy and was condemned by many among *Benei Yisrael*.

Surprisingly, we find a Midrashic passage that appears to indicate that God disapproved of Pinchas’ zealotry. Numerous sources identify Pinchas with Eliyahu, the prophet during the First Commonwealth who zealously opposed the worship of *Ba’al* in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and even killed the prophets of *Ba’al* at Mount Carmel (Melakhim I 18). The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Melakhim II 2:15) comments that God said to Eliyahu, “You are always zealous! You were zealous in Shittim over sexual immorality, and now, too, you are zealous!” It appears that God criticized Eliyahu both for his zealotry in Shittim, at the time of *Ba’al Pe’or*, and also for his zealotry in opposing the worship of *Ba’al* at the time of Achav and Izevel. The obvious question arises, why did God now express disapproval of Pinchas’ zealous act, after emphatically congratulating Pinchas and even promising him reward for his zealotry?

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Mussar Ha-nevi’im*, suggests an answer by noting the different contexts of these two acts of zealotry. Pinchas’ act at Shittim occurred during *Benei Yisrael*’s travels in the wilderness, when they lived a miraculous existence and were accompanied at all times by the Divine Presence. The Vilna Gaon famously remarked that although ordinarily the *kohen gadol* is permitted in the *kodesh ha-kodashim* – the innermost chamber of the *Mikdash* – only on Yom Kippur, Aharon was allowed to enter the *kodesh ha-kodashim* and perform the Yom Kippur service any day of the year. During the years *Benei Yisrael* spent in the wilderness, each day of the year had the status of Yom Kippur, given the intensity of the Divine Presence during that period, and therefore Aharon was permitted on any day to perform the Yom Kippur service. Under such conditions, Pinchas’ violent response to Zimri and Kozbi’s act was, in principle, appropriate. When *Benei Yisrael* lived on an especially high spiritual level and the Divine Presence was palpable, a grievous sinful act such as the one committed by Zimri and Kozbi warranted an extreme response. In Eliyahu’s time, however, the people were very far from Torah observance and from the Divine Presence. Their condition bore little resemblance to the atmosphere of sanctity felt in the Israelite camp in the wilderness, and thus a softer and more patient approach was warranted. The fact that Eliyahu acted zealously at that time called into question his zealotry in Shittim, as it demonstrated that he did not take into account the broader context and circumstances. If he was zealous in the times of Achav and Izevel, then this showed that his zealotry at *Ba’al Pe’or* was done without proper consideration.

This insight reminds us that different circumstances and contexts warrant different responses. Solutions used effectively in one situation are not necessarily appropriate for solving the same problem in a different situation. Eliyahu’s failure was reacting in the times of Achav and Izevel the same way Pinchas reacted in the times of Moshe Rabbenu. Every generation and set of circumstances offers its unique challenges and requires different strategies, and so measures that were appropriate at the time of *Ba’al Pe’or* were not necessarily appropriate at the time of Achav and Izevel.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Pinchas presents the *mitzva* of the daily *tamid* sacrifice, which was offered each morning and afternoon in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. One of the laws relevant to this sacrifice is that no sacrifices are offered in the *Mikdash* before the morning *tamid* or after the afternoon *tamid*. This *halakha* is inferred from a verse in Sefer Vayikra (6:5), in which the Torah commands that *shelamim* sacrifices should be offered on top of the *tamid* on the altar (“*ve-hiktir aleha chelvei ha-shelamim*”). The Gemara (Pesachim 59b) interprets this verse to mean “*aleha hashleim kol ha-korbanot kulam*” – all the sacrifices must be offered in between the two *tamid* sacrifices.

The Ramban, in his critique of the Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, writes that this law constitutes one of the Torah’s affirmative commands, requiring offering all sacrifices after the morning *tamid* and before the afternoon *tamid*. The Rambam does not include this requirement in his list of the Torah’s commands, and the Ramban claimed that this omission is incorrect.

Rav Asher Weiss, in his *Minchat Asher* (Bamidbar, 60:3), observes that the Rambam and the Ramban likely argue about the fundamental nature of this *halakha*. The Rambam, it seems, viewed this *halakha* as a detail relevant to the offering of the daily *tamid* sacrifices. That is to say, the *mitzva* of the *temidin* is to offer one sacrifice that would precede all others, and a second at the end of the day which would be the final sacrifice offered. According to this perspective, the law of “*aleha hashleim*” does not constitute an independent requirement or prohibition, but is rather part of the definition of the *tamid* obligation. The Ramban, by contrast, understood that the obligation of *temidin* requires simply offering these two sacrifices each day during their respective time-frames, and then a separate Biblical command requires offering all other sacrifices in between the two *temidin*.

A practical difference between these two perspectives, as Rav Weiss notes, might be whether a sacrifice is valid *post facto* if it is offered before the morning *tamid* or after the afternoon *tamid*. This question is the subject of a lengthy discussion in *Tosfos*, in Masekhet Yoma (29a). If, as the Rambam likely maintained, the law of “*aleha hashleim*” should be seen as part of the definition of the *tamid* obligation, then there seems to be no reason to disqualify sacrifices offered before the morning *tamid* or afternoon *tamid*. According to this perspective, such offerings undermine the *tamid* sacrifices, but there is nothing inherently wrong with them. The only effect of offering these sacrifices at the improper time is that the *tamid* was not properly offered; these sacrifices, however, are perfectly valid. According to the Ramban, by contrast, it is certainly conceivable that such offerings would be disqualified after the fact. In his view, the law of “*aleha hashleim*” designates the time-frame for offering sacrifices. It relates not to the definition of the *tamid* obligation, but rather to the period within which any given sacrifice should be offered. It is thus quite conceivable that a sacrifice offered outside that time-frame is considered invalid.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Pinchas of Moshe’s request that God appoint a successor who would lead *Benei Yisrael* after his death. In response, God instructs Moshe to formally assign Yehoshua as his successor in a public ceremony. Immediately thereafter, God presents the commands regarding the *temidin u-musafin* – the sacrifices offered each day and the additional sacrifices offered on special occasions (Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and festivals).

Rashi (28:2), citing the *Sifrei*, offers the following explanation for why the command of *temidin u-musafin* appears immediately after the story of Yehoshua’s appointment: “The Almighty said to him [Moshe]: Before you command Me with respect to My children, command My children with respect to Me.” Meaning, after God “obeyed” Moshe’s “command” that He name a successor, He then reminded Moshe that *Benei Yisrael* must obey His commands to them, as well.

*Chazal* here warn against focusing too much attention on the issue of leadership, at the expense of our own responsibilities. Moshe was certainly not wrong to ask God to name a successor to ensure a stable transition after his passing. Leadership is vitally important, and undoubtedly we should be concerned that our communities and our nation have capable and deserving leaders. Often, however, we devote too much thought and attention to the appointment of leaders that we neglect our own obligations and responsibilities. And thus *Chazal* warn, “Before you command Me with respect to My children, command My children with respect to Me.” We must avoid excessive preoccupation with politics and the selection of leaders, notwithstanding its importance, and give proper attention to the responsibilities to which we need to attend.

Significantly, *Chazal* make this comment in particular reference to the *temidin u-musafin*. The message underlying these *mitzvot* is that each day presents us with obligations to meet and challenges to confront. Some responsibilities present themselves each day (“*temidin*”), whereas others arise on certain occasions or under particular circumstances (“*musafin*”). But on each and every day, without exception, we have obligations that we need to fulfill. Excessive preoccupation with our leadership threatens to divert our attention from our “*temidin u-musafin*,” our obligations, as it causes us to cast the entire burden of responsibility on the leaders’ shoulders. It leads us to think that our success or failure depends solely on how the leaders execute their responsibilities, without worrying about how we execute ours. *Chazal* here remind us that notwithstanding the importance of leadership, our primary focus must be our “*temidin u-musafin*,” the responsibilities that we must tend to each and every day throughout our lives.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Pinchas of God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* to wage war against the nation of Midyan to avenge that nation’s role in the calamity of *Ba’al Pe’or*. The Torah in this context makes mention of the Midyanite princess, Kozbi, who was sent to engage in a public relationship with a prominent figure among *Benei Yisrael* – Zimri, the leader of Shimon – as part of the scheme of *Ba’al Pe’or*. Kozbi is described here as “Kozbi, the daughter of the chieftain of Midyan, their sister” (25:18).

The *Mekhilta* (to Shemot 15:20) finds it significant that Kozbi is referred to here as the Midyanites’ “sister.” Normally, women of a nation are known as “daughters” of that nation. Kozbi, however, is given the unusual honor of being described as the “sister” of the nation of Midyan. Intuitively, we might have explained that Kozbi was given this title because of her royal stature, being the daughter of one of Midyan’s five chieftains. The *Mekhilta*, however, offers a much different reason, stating that she is called the Midyanites’ “sister” because “she devoted her soul for her nation.” She was selflessly devoted to her nation, going to so far as to surrender her body and dignity for the sake of Midyan’s goal of subduing *Benei Yisrael*, and so she was called the “sister” of the Midyanites. The *Mekhilta* makes this observation concerning others, as well, such as Shimon and Levi, who are called “the brothers of Dina” because of their bold, daring response to her abduction (Bereishit 34:25).

Remarkably, even as Kozbi committed a despicably immoral act – prostituting herself for the sake of luring *Benei Yisrael* to sin and bringing God’s anger upon them – *Chazal* identified a positive quality that was manifested at this moment. As evil as her act was, *Chazal* found her devotion to her nation worthy of being noted, and something for which she deserved some sort of respect.

The Tolna Rebbe pointed to this passage in the *Mechilta* as an inspiring example of the extent to which we ought to recognize and appreciate the positive qualities of all people, including the seemingly insignificant good deeds they perform. If our Sages could find something to admire about Kozbi as she perpetrated such a contemptible offense, we are certainly capable of focusing our attention on the positive attributes of the people in our lives and of our fellow Jews. Each and every good deed is something inestimably valuable and precious, and worthy of our esteem. We are bidden to follow *Chazal*’s example and try to focus as much as possible on all that is noble and admirable about other people, rather than assessing people with a critical eye.

Thursday

In the context of the final census taken of *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness, the Torah in Parashat Pinchas briefly recounts the ill-fated revolt against Moshe led by Korach, and provides a new piece of information which had not been previous revealed: “The sons of Korach did not die” (26:11). Rashi, paraphrasing the Gemara (Sanhedrin 110a), writes, “They were originally part of the plan, but at the time of the fight they harbored thoughts of repentance in their hearts. Therefore, a high place in *Gehinnom* was set aside for them, and they resided there.” According to the Rashi, then, Korach’s sons indeed fell beneath the ground along with the other rebels, but they were given a “high place” in the underworld, rather than plunging to the depths with their father and his cohorts. It is commonly explained that Korach’s sons did not actually withdraw from their father’s revolt, but merely “harbored thoughts of repentance in their hearts,” which sufficed to secure them a place of refuge in the underworld where they could survive, but did not suffice to protect them from falling in altogether.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, however, in [*Ta’am Va-da’at*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20034&st=&pgnum=323&hilite=), takes a different approach in explaining Rashi’s comment. He posits that although Korach’s sons recognized that the uprising was wrong, they did not make any effort to influence others. They felt content with saving themselves by withdrawing from the revolt and staying to the side, rather than expending efforts to oppose the revolt. As sons of the revolt’s leader, they likely held a position of prominence which could have been used to positively influence his followers and dissuade them from participating in this campaign. Therefore, as Korach’s sons were concerned only with themselves, they were condemned to live for a period of time in isolation, symbolic of the complacent isolation in which they lived after withdrawing from the revolt.

If so, then the story of Korach’s sons reminds us of the responsibility we all bear to guide and steer those in our sphere of influence in the proper direction. Certainly, our highest priority and primary obligation must be to “harbor thoughts of repentance,” to ensure that we conduct ourselves properly and make the right choices in our lives. Beyond this initial stage, however, we must also concern ourselves with the spiritual state of *Am Yisrael* generally, and do what we can, each according to his or her capabilities and circumstances, to motivate and inspire whoever we can to grow and improve.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted Rashi’s well-known comments explaining the verse in Parashat Korach (26:11) which tells that Korach’s sons did not die in the wake of his failed revolt against Moshe. Rashi writes, “They [Korach’s sons] were originally part of the plan, but at the time of the fight they harbored thoughts of repentance in their hearts. Therefore, a high place in *Gehinnom* was set aside for them, and they resided there.” This remark is based upon the Gemara’s comments on this verse in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a): “A place was set aside for them in *Gehinnom*, and they sat on it and sang [praise to God.” According to the version of the story that appears in the Gemara, Korach’s sons sang *shira* – song of praise to God – during the time they spent in their place of refuge in *Gehinnom*.

What might be the significance of this depiction, of Korach’s sons singing after being spared?

Symbolically, the song of Korach’s sons represents the ability we all have to think positively and feel thankful even in the darkest of times and under the most dreadful circumstances. Even as they fell into the underworld, presumably doubting whether they would ever be rescued, Korach’s sons found the proverbial “silver lining” in the form of the special place set aside for them, and they were able to sing praise to God. The Gemara here teaches us that even when, Heaven forbid, we find ourselves falling into any kind of “*Gehinnom*,” into a painful and distressful situation, we can, as difficult as it may be, find what to feel grateful for and identify a source of hope and optimism.

More details of the fate of Korach’s sons appear in Rashi’s commentary to Tehillim (42:1), where he discusses the Psalms composed by Korach’s sons:

Asir, Elkana and Aviasaf were originally in their father’s plot, but at the time of the fight they withdrew, and when all their surroundings were devoured and the ground opened its mouth, their spot was preserved in the midst of the opening of the ground… There they sang, and there they composed these Psalms. They arose from there, and the sacred spirit rested upon them and they prophesied about the exiles, the Temple’s destruction, and the Davidic kingship.

Korach’s sons prophesied about the future tragedies that would later befall the Jewish People, and then of the ultimate restoration of the Davidic dynasty. It is precisely the message that they embodied, the capacity to find hope and optimism in the most desperate situations, that must accompany us throughout our exiles and which ensures the eventuality of redemption and restoration. The “*shira*” of Korach’s sons is to remain with us as a symbol of hope in the direst situations, and guarantees that our nation, like Korach’s sons, will eventually arise from the “underworld” of pain and suffering to the joy of experiencing the *Shekhina* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash.*

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