

Dvar Torah – Pinchas

July 8, 2023

Shabbat Shalom.

This Shabbat we are privileged to read Parashat Pinchas. One must be struck by the juxtaposition of two contrasting sets of narratives in this parasha. On the one hand, Pinchas provides us with verse after verse of boilerplate recounting censuses and sacrifices. The descriptions of the offerings recounted in this parasha must be among the most familiar verses in the Torah. Indeed, many of the pesukim of Pinchas are repeated so often on so many holidays that more than a few of us could, if necessary, step in and cover for a missing liner and not miss a beat (or trope as the case may be). Then, interspersed among the mind-numbing details counting commoners and chronicling cows to be sent to slaughter, the Torah tells us complex, and seemingly contradictory stories of succession worthy of a streaming series of the same name.

The parasha opens with all the graphic action one would expect in an R rated cable show. If you want the gory details you will have to review the original text on your own, starting from the end of last week's parasha. The PG rated version is as follows: a plague had been devastating the Israelites who had been led into idolatry. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, takes the law into his own hands and brutally murders an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were both engaged in some inappropriate activities. Pinchas' reward for his zealotry was a "covenant of peace" and "lasting Priesthood."

If you are confused, you are not alone. Pinchas is a direct descendant of Aaron. Aaron and his offspring were already promised the priesthood. So why does Pinchas get a position that should have already been his only after he kills two people engaged in hanky panky? The Rabbis make a technical argument explain the disconnect. They parse the timing of God's promise to Aaron in a manner that suggests that Pinchas was born outside the window that qualified him to benefit from God's initial promise. Seems like a stretch. One might wonder if there is something about the heredity nature of the priesthood that makes the rabbis and even God uncomfortable.

Indeed, for those who may have doubts about the appropriateness of conferring position and power based on who one's father is, an episode later in the parasha addresses the issue more directly. Toward the end of the parasha, Moses is confronted by his own mortality. He knows that he will not make it to the promised land and pleads that God choose a leader for the people. God chooses Joshua to lead the Israelites to

the land of Israel, implicitly rejecting the idea that one of Moses' sons should inherit the leadership mantle. God then goes into considerable detail about the six-part process Moses is to follow in transitioning leadership to his successor. The parasha concludes with two chapters about the sacrifices to be made at different times, daily, weekly, monthly, and on festivals.

The Torah hinted at its discomfort with passing authority from father to son in the case of the priesthood. But here God comes out expresses a clear direction - choose leaders based on their individual merit and not their luck in the gene lottery. So why doesn't the Torah and God take a clear, consistent and unambiguous position? It seems like God itself cannot decide if it prefers an aristocracy determined by blood or an executive leadership awarded based on merit.

The themes of inheritance and legacy are not new themes for the Torah. Rabbi Hayyim Angel has taught that much of the book of Genesis can be read as a critique of the laws of primogeniture. Primogeniture was the practice of favoring the first-born male by assigning him all of a family's wealth and it was dominant in ancient times. The Torah turns the concept upside down. Able is favored over first-born Cain, Abraham chooses Isaac over older Ishmael, Jacob steals the birthright from Esau, Rachel is loved more than Leah, and tension between Joseph and his older brothers inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber musical performed on high school stages around the world. My friend Mark Gerson, host of the podcast "The Rabbi's Husband" is fond of saying: "God hates primogeniture."

I would amend my friend's insight by saying God hates perpetuating the established order of things. At the same time, God knows that human beings should not and cannot move too quickly or too radically away from all they are used to. Yes, God values action and attitude over ceremony and station. But God also values stability and unity. That is why Korach was punished for his rebellion. Go too far – even if some of your arguments have merit – and the world will swallow you whole.

Our parasha doubles down on the idea that God makes practical compromises by including details about animal sacrifices alongside its series on succession. Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, a well respected Modern Orthodox rabbi born in Amsterdam and now in Israel, describes animal sacrifices as "the Great Jewish embarrassment." Cardozo draws on Maimonides to argue that in a pagan world that elevated animals to Gods, ancient

Judaism's embrace of animal sacrifices represented a compromise to gradually wean the people away from pagan practice toward monotheism. Cardozo writes:

God permitted the Jews to continue the sacrificial cult but only for "His service," and with many restrictions, the ultimate goal being that with time the Jews would be weaned from this trend of worship; from the *is* to the *ought-to-be*.

The hereditary priesthood and animal sacrifices do not therefore really represent Judaism, at least not in its ideal form. Instead, they are reflective of the imperfect world that we live in today with hints and aspirations of the world as it could be.

Humanity is still learning the power of this incrementalist approach to change and progress. Human history is littered with examples of ambitious revolutions that departed too quickly from established norms only to result in blood, death, and destruction. By following an evolutionary approach, eventually history will bend toward a more perfect realization of your ideals.

We can relate to this preference for evolution versus revolution easily in America. America's declaration of independence held that "all men were created equal" at a time when slavery was legal in many parts of our land and women were denied the vote. The contradictions in the American system were clear but so was the aspiration that we would move, in time, toward a more perfect union. Americans clearly have work to do but in our best moments we have faith that we are progressing not toward utopia but at least something better than our current condition.

As we digest our 4th of July holiday hot dogs and celebrate the independence of this nation that has been such a good and supportive home for its Jews, we should appreciate the way in which God's example informs our nation's ethos and evolution. If a noted rabbi can contend that core concepts in the canon are not in fact Judaism, then we Americans can resist the urge to romanticize or idealize our nation. At the same time, as our parasha and the American experience teach us, we should not ever lose hope about the prospects for improvement and growth beyond our petty prejudices. Our world may not be perfect but our Torah teaches that perfection is not what God commands; God call on us to improve and evolve.

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