

Leadership in Times of Darkness

By Menachem Feldman

There is a powerful, yet seemingly unfair, contrast between the reward which Pinchas received for his deed and the reward which Moses did not receive for similar deeds.

When the Jewish people were encamped in Shittim, they became promiscuous with the local Midianite women and started worshipping their idols. Zimri, the prince of Simeon, even went so far as to publicly flaunt his Midianite paramour, Cozbi. Pinchas was the hero of the moment. In an act of great self-sacrifice, putting his own life in danger, risking revenge by the tribe of Simeon, Pinchas killed both Zimri and Cozbi, thus stopping the plague that ravaged the Jewish people.

Pinchas was the hero of the moment!

The Torah relates the dramatic story:

Then an Israelite man came and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aaron the *kohen* saw this, arose from the congregation and took a spear in his hand.

He went after the Israelite man into the chamber, and drove [it through] both of them—the Israelite man, and the woman through her stomach—and the plague ceased from the children of Israel.¹

In the opening statement of this week's portion, Pinchas receives an awesome reward from G-d. A reward not only for himself, but also for his descendants for all time:

Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them, so that I did not destroy the children of Israel because of My zeal.

Therefore, say, "I hereby give him My covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him [as] an eternal covenant of priesthood, because he was zealous for his G-d and atoned for the children of Israel."²

Pinchas receives the gift of priesthood, not only for himself but also for his descendants for all time. Why does he merit this great reward? Because he "turned My anger away from the children of Israel."

In this very portion, we read about the desire of Moses to see his own children succeed him. Moses beseeches G-d:

Let the L-rd, the G-d of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go forth before them and come before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the L-rd will not be like sheep without a shepherd.³

According to Rashi, Moses asked G-d to appoint his own child as his successor, yet G-d refused.⁴

This seems terribly unfair. If Pinchas was rewarded with the gift of his children inheriting his priesthood because he “turned My anger away from the children of Israel” just one time, why did Moses not merit the same reward? After all, Moses turned G-d’s wrath away from the children of Israel numerous times (such as at the sin of the Golden Calf and at the sin of the spies, to name just two instances)!

There was an important difference between the leadership of Moses and the leadership of Pinchas, which will explain why Pinchas’ position of leadership was passed on to his children.

Why did Moses not merit the same reward?

Moses was the leader during a time of spiritual illumination. At every turn he was led by G-d. G-d was at his side, holding his hand, directing his every step. From the moment of the first revelation at the burning bush to the day of his passing, Moses’ primary job was to communicate the Divine will to the people.

Pinchas, by contrast, stepped up to the plate and showed leadership in a time of great spiritual confusion. There was no Divine communication; Moses himself was at a loss as to what to do. Pinchas took the initiative when there was no directive from Moses, when many of the leaders of the people were engaged in sin, and there was no clear spiritual and moral path forward.

What did Pinchas do? Pinchas took action. Pinchas did not wait for the revelation from above; he found the path forward from within the spiritual darkness.

This is why Moses’ leadership could not be passed on. Not always can one rely on Divine revelation and intervention. Divine revelation will not necessarily prepare the leader, or his descendants, for the moment when the revelation is over. Pinchas, by contrast, was able to find the right path on his own. His leadership was not limited to a specific time, and the skill of finding the right path forward could be passed on to his children and grandchildren as well.

Like Pinchas before him, Jeremiah, whom we read about in the Haftorah, also led the people in a time of spiritual darkness. He was the prophet in the years leading up to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people.

Jeremiah did not feel up to the task. As we read in the Haftorah, Jeremiah says to G-d: “Alas, O L-rd G-d! Behold, I know not to speak, for I am a youth.”⁵

G-d responds by reassuring Jeremiah that he has the power to lead in what were the darkest moments of Jewish history: “Say not, ‘I am a youth,’ for wherever I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.”⁶

Like Jeremiah, we question our ability to bring light and spiritual warmth to the world. Yet, we know that the words of the Haftarah—G-d reassuring Jeremiah of his ability to inspire in times of terrible crisis—apply to us as well. The lesson we must take from Jeremiah, as we begin the three-week period which marks the commemoration of the destruction, is that we too must carry the word of G-d, the values and teachings of the Torah, to a world that is often spiritually dark.

We question our ability to bring light to the world

G-d's words to Jeremiah apply to each of us: "When I had not yet formed you in the womb, I knew you, and when you had not yet emerged from the womb, I had appointed you; a prophet to the nations I made you."⁷

Each and every soul is a prophet, carrying the Divine message to this world. Each and every soul has the power to inspire all those she touches. Each and every soul was sent to this world to do just that.⁸

FOOTNOTES

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| 1. Numbers 25:6–8 . | 5. Jeremiah 1:6 . |
| 2. Numbers 25:11–13 . | 6. Jeremiah 1:7 . |
| 3. Numbers 27:16–17 . | 7. Jeremiah 1:5 . |
| 4. Rashi ad loc. | 8. Based on the teachings of the Rebbe, Likkutei Sichot, vol. 18, Pinchas III. |

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