



WEEKLY PARASHA

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A New Leadership? Yes We Can!

The Israelites have been wandering through the Wilderness for forty years and they are now on the cusp of entering into the Land of Canaan. Things will be different now. There will no longer be the cloud of God to lead them during the day and the pillar of fire to lead them at night. There will no longer be manna from Heaven to feed them and the miraculous well to quench their thirst. And their leaders will all be different. Miriam has died, Aharon has died, and now, in parashat Pinchas, Moshe is told to prepare for his death as well.

From the time of the Exodus until now, the main players of the Biblical story have been God, Moshe, and Aharon. The Children of Israel have had very little identity other than that of chronic complainers. But now things are about to change. The larger-than-life leaders are dead or soon to be so and God will soon step back as well and become a more distant player in the future events of the people. It is now the nation's story that will be told; it is now the story not of the leaders, but of the people.

It is thus that we find that the Children of Israel have been moving more and more into the foreground – and Moshe more and more into the background – in these recent parshiyot. In parashat Chukat, immediately after Aharon dies, the king of Arad goes to war against Israel, and then – who is the protagonist? Not Moshe, but Israel. For it is then that Israel takes the initiative, that Israel makes a vow to God, and that Israel goes to war against Arad. And it is then that God responds not to Moshe's prayers, but to the prayers of Israel – “And the Lord listened to the voice of Israel” (21:3) – and the people were victorious.

And so it goes. It is in that parasha that there is a song to the well, and song that opens not with “az yashir Moshe”, “then Moshe sang” (Shemot 15:1), but rather “az yashir Yisrael,” then Israel sang (Bamidbar 21:17). It is then that messengers are sent to the neighboring countries for safe passage. Moshe does come briefly to the fore here – he sends messengers to Edom – but they are rebuffed and the mission fails. But at the next encounter, it is not

Moshe who sends messengers, but Israel (21:21). And here – when they are likewise rebuffed by Sichon, king of the Amorites – the result is unexpected and phenomenal: Israel is brought to war against him (21:23), Israel defeats him and his army in battle (21:24), and Israel conquers all his territory (21:25). The story, clearly, is no longer about Moshe, but about Israel.

The absence of Moshe from almost the entirety of the next parasha, then, should not take us by surprise. The story of Balak and Balaam is a story of one nation plotting against another nation, and Moshe is nowhere to be seen. When Moshe does finally reemerge at the end of the parasha, it is to deal with a situation that Israel – again as an independent actor, as an initiator – has created. Israel has dwelled in Shittim (25:1), Israel has whored after the Moabite women (25:2), and Israel has worshiped the Ba'al of Peor (25:3). Moshe, on God's command, steps up and tries to take control of the situation. And then what happens? A new leader emerges. Pinchas is the one who takes charge and who does what is needed.

One can even hear in this story the echo of another leader who, when he saw a terrible act being committed, and when he saw that no one else was rising up, did what was necessary and slew the Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. That earlier act of smiting the Egyptian was the leadership needed at that time – a leadership to protect an enslaved and oppressed people. Pinchas' smiting of Zimri, on the other hand, was the leadership needed for a free people, for a people who had choice and opportunity and who could easily go astray as a result. It was the leadership for a people about to enter and possess a land, a people about to become a sovereign nation.

And yet it was not Pinchas who was to lead them. A new leadership had to come to the fore, but ironically, those who were chosen were not the most obvious candidates. Pinchas was the Kohen who took

initiative, and yet it was Elazar who would be the next Kohen Gadol, who would be the religious head of the people. And who was to be the political head? Not Caleb, the one who had the courage to stand up to the people, to silence their rebellious murmurings. Not Caleb, the one of who had “a different spirit in him”. No, it was not Caleb. It was Yehoshua. Why? Why not the obvious choice of Pinchas and Caleb? Why rather the quiet and unassuming leadership of Elazar and Yehoshua?

The answer is clear. Israel had just had two larger-than-life leaders – they had had Moshe and they had had Aharon. These were the founders of the nation. But if the nation were to succeed, were to stand on its own, it could not be by virtue of the personalities or the charisma of their leaders. It would have to be by virtue of their own character, their own national identity. The story would have to be theirs.

After a larger-than-life leader, what is needed is stability, continuity, and consolidation. What is not needed is another charismatic leader. After Avraham, we needed not another Avraham, but a Yitzchak. After Moshe and Aharon we needed not a Caleb and a Pinchas, but a Yehoshua and an Elazer.

This transition of leadership is paralleled by the transition in their relationship with God. In the Wilderness, God had been a powerful, indeed overwhelming, presence: the cloud and the pillar of fire, the Tabernacle and the Glory which appeared in the cloud, hearing God’s direct communication, and feeling God’s direct punishment. All of that would soon change. As they were tilling the land and harvesting their crops, as they were working to create a government and its laws, they would have to exert serious effort and observe many mitzvot to ensure that they would keep God in mind, that they would remember the God who took them out of Egypt. In short, their religious leadership, their political leadership, and even their relationship with God would have to be a less imposing, less overwhelming. All these would have to step back so that the nation of Israel, and the people of Israel, could come into its own.

And the daughters of Tzelaphchad paved the way. According to the law that had been received from God, the daughters of Tzelaphchad would not receive any of their father’s portion of the land. But they would have none of that. That was not going to be the end of the conversation. These women had a legitimate complaint and they would be heard. And heard they were – and the law – God’s law –

changed as a result. In this, they proved themselves to be the generation fit to enter the land. They demonstrated not only their passion for the land, but their intuitive understanding that now they must stand up for themselves. Their relationship with their leaders would be different, and their relationship with God would be different. The human reality could be brought to God, could be brought in conversation with the law that was to govern their lives, and a truer law would emerge.

The Sefat Emet makes this point nicely:

הענין הוא כי עתה התחיל להיות הנהגה אחרת של דור באי הארץ. לכן היה מנין חדש... כי היה לפי השתנות הדור שהתחיל עתה להיות עבודת האדם והתעוררות שלמטה... וזה ענין תורה שבע"פ שהכל ניתן מסיני רק שבנ"י צריכין להוציאו מכאן אל הפועל

The meaning is that now, for the generation entering the Land, new way of life was beginning. It is for this reason that there was a new census (at this time, as we read in this parasha)... This was all a function of the transformation of this generation, which was now beginning a way of life based on human effort and “bestirring from below”. This is in the (theological) category of the “Oral Torah”, that everything was given at Sinai, but the Children of Israel must bring (this Torah) from potential into reality.

Until now one book, one story, was being written. It was the Written Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and it was the story of Moshe, of Aharon, of God. Now, as the people prepare to enter the land, another story, another book, must start to be written. It is the Oral Torah. It is the Torah that emerges when the people come into their own. It is the Torah that emerges when the people don’t experience God’s overwhelming presence, but when they work to find God who is so often hidden in the world. It is the Torah that emerges when the people not only receive the Torah but engage in true conversation with the Torah. It is this Torah and this leadership – one of engagement and empowerment – which is needed to bring us into the land. It is this Torah and this leadership which allows us to flourish as a people on the land.

Shabbat Shalom!

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