

Pinchas – 5782

I know that I am not alone when I struggle in the search for relevance in our Torah, the five books of Moses. I am a product of my environment and this moment in time when I was raised. I took for granted my Jewishness, I took for granted the necessity to attend Cheder four days a week after school and Sunday, plus attend services on Shabbat and all the Chagim. I took for granted that the Torah was the road map for my people and often, read it without questioning its relevance. But I know there are many, including the sages of old, that found themselves wondering what lessons we could derive from this text that is more than 2500 years old.

If one looks at this week's Parsha, for example, when I approached its study in preparation for writing this Davar Torah, I assumed that I was going to be writing about the passages we read during ALL of the Chagim and every Rosh Chodesh because that is what the last two chapters relates. We have one of our Torah scrolls, in the ark behind me, rolled to Pinchas because we need to use it every Rosh Chodesh and every chag. And what do we read, all the animals to be slaughtered and offered up and how to go about doing that. Is it any wonder there are those that question its relevance? We lost the second temple two thousand years ago and despite the zealots on the extreme right in Israel who think they can tear down the mosque and rebuild the temple, no one actually believes we will ever turn back to the ancient sacrificial cult of our forefathers. So, without a doubt, one can question the relevancy of reading precisely what we read this morning, in the last third of the parsha.

But, if you go back a chapter or so, what do we read? Moshe is being told by HaShem about his forced retirement and the end of his mission to the Children of Israel. The parsha begins precisely where we left off last week, with the slaughtering of the sinners of Zion and their heathen women of Moab led by Pinchas. The sages argue that although Pinchas was a zealot, not unlike those ultra-right-wing loonies I referred to just a moment ago, he had the right intention. HaShem did not punish him the way he did the sons of Aaron back more than a few pages. His extremism came from a place that HaShem found favour with – the protection of the purity of the traditions. So, now HaShem is using this as an opportunity to remind Moshe that his zealousness on behalf of his people, our people, to remain faithful to the covenant and come to understand what

it meant to be a holy people, was leadership that would not be as important in the days and years ahead with a promised land to conquer and inhabit. Moses has to pass on his torch to Joshua, in the plain sight of the people, with the blessings of the High Priest in the name of HaShem.

Think about it. Here's Moshe, who took on the mantle of leadership under duress because HaShem masked it of him at the burning bush. He has spent the last 50 years leading this stiff-necked and stubborn people overseeing the changing of the generations and he's the last of his kind. But he's being told that what Israel needs now is not what he has on offer. So on with the Joshua show and stage left exit by Moshe. And how does Moshe handle this demotion, this pulling of the rug out from under him by HaShem. He is gracious under pressure and accepts, without hesitation, what he is told to do. And here in lies the relevance to today.

As I write this, on Wednesday evening, Jack Tapper had just begun his program on CNN, the Lead, by pointing out that Donald Trump is still seeking out those who would help him retake the White House. And as if that were not enough, HaAretz had an article about how Benjamin Netanyahu's biggest problem now is that his image is being undermined by his activities in and out of the court, not just of law but of public opinion as well. Having power is one thing. Letting go is another. It had to have been VERY, VERY hard for Winston Churchill to leave London and parliament and retreat to Chequers, his country estate and leave the governing behind when he was voted out of office after the Second World War came to an end.

Moses sets an example for us of how to leave power behind and retain one's image and prestige. After all, we call Moshe, Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our Teacher. Unless I am missing something, Moses hasn't done a lot of teaching directly to the children of Israel. He has taken the word of HaShem and transmitted it to the people. In this week's parsha we are reminded that Moshe took the Word of HaShem as given to him on Mount Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua. Moshe is our teacher because of the power of his example. Time and time again, he set a standard for leadership and courage that teaches us lessons we can use even today. It is not just in Israel and the United States where there are leaders who could do well by attending more to the lesson of Moshe's behaviour in

Pinchas. Putin and Erdogan are following the wrong role models in their attempts to hold on to power.

So, the Torah as written 2500 plus years ago is still very much relevant to us today. The rabbis were not so wrong when they suggested that a day without Torah study is not complete. Maybe, just maybe, we would be doing ourselves and our grandchildren a favour if we spent more time study Torah and the lessons it teaches us then watching CNN and the CBC and pointing to the follies of some of the leaders of the world without being able to point to better role models to follow. Maybe we need to sing louder when we return the Torah to the Aron HaKodesh.... Eitz Chaim He...Le Machazikim Bah....it is a tree of life, for us to grab hold of. Shabbat Shalom.