

“Pinchas or Joshua as Moses’ successor?”

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The sidrah of Pinchas draws our attention to the subject of leadership, given that it invites us to contrast the respective responses of Moses and Pinchas to a crisis that might well have destroyed the nation from within far more effectively than by the hand of any of the external tribes with whom they came into conflict during the forty years of their desert wandering. In the case of the latter – who posed a physical danger – the Hebrews demonstrated on several occasions that, with God’s help, they were quite capable of seeing them off.¹ In the episode described in our sidrah, however, the threat was existential to the extent that it could erode the nation's moral fiber, the very core of its covenant with God and its inherited heritage. We refer to the immoral and idolatrous ritual practices of Baal-Peor, imported into the Israelite camp by Moabite and Midianite prostitutes, whose seductiveness the Hebrews were unable to resist.²

Peor was the antithesis of every aspect of human dignity as promoted by the Torah. While the latter strongly promoted the principle of ‘Your camp shall be holy,’ (Dt. 23:14) – to the extent that, following the emission of any bodily flux a rite of purification had to be observed, and that all human excrement, or even the blood from a slaughtered animal, had to be covered up in the ground – Peor was a sort of dung god, whose veneration involved the ritual and worship of defecation. The Hebrew root *p-’a-r* means ‘to open wide,’ which is understood to relate to that act which was its central activity in addition to its orgiastic sexual acts.

It is essential to comprehend the level of degradation to which its worshippers sank, and to which they sought to entice the Hebrews, to appreciate the righteous indignation of God and the zealous retribution unhesitatingly taken by Pinchas. This underscores the affirmation,

“Pinchas, son of Eleazar... has allayed My rage against the Israelites. Because he was passionate on My behalf among you, I did not destroy the Israelites in My own passion” (Nu. 22:10-11).

So, the obvious question is why it was that, while Pinchas was stirred into fierce retributive action against the fornicating couple – Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon, and Kozbi, a Midianite harlot – Moses, although accompanied by a crowd of Israelites, could no more than burst into tears at the entrance of the Sanctuary.

This is strange, given that on several occasions stands out for his firm and uncompromising leadership. One thinks instinctively of the occasion of his first visit to seek out his Israelite brethren when he comes across an Egyptian taskmaster³ attacking an Israelite. Moses was so overcome with rage that he struck the man with a forceful blow that killed him on the spot (Ex. 20:11-12). Most commentators understand the words, ‘and buried him in the sand’ (v.12) as suggestive of a mortal blow. This is supported by the threatening comment of the Hebrew on the following day, ‘Do you propose to murder me *as you murdered the Egyptian?*’ (v.14), though it was always possible that the man was bluffing and intended merely to frighten Moses into thinking that he intended to report ‘the murder’ to the authorities. That he convinced Moses of his intention is clear from the fact that Moses immediately fled to Midian.

Another prime example of Moses' courage lay in his bold dealings with Pharaoh – which included the issuing of threats to his land, to his people, and even to the lives of the firstborn of the royal family. It might be argued, however, that he was wholly reliant at that time on the protection God had promised to extend to him at the outset of his mission, as demonstrated by the miracles He performed for him at the Burning Bush.⁴

This leads us to focus, then, on the natural temperament of Moses when he was merely 'the man' - the term used by the Israelites (Ex. 32:23) – and '*the most humble man on earth*' (Nu. 12:3), as described by God, rather than God's miracle worker and mouth-piece. For, in truth, there were far more occasions during his 40-year ministry when he displayed fear, timidity, and a lack of belief in his own leadership ability. To name a few: When he initially rejected God's summons to him to lead Israel, offering the lame excuse that, "I am not an orator," followed by the request, "Please send someone else!" (Ex. 4:10, 13), a response which elicited God's anger (v.14).

A little later, when his intervention with Pharaoh proved counter-productive, and the Israelites' brick-making burden was intensified, Moses says, less than respectfully, *Why have you done evil to this people? Why have you sent me?* (Ex. 5:22). And when the people had no water at Rephidim, and complained against Moses, he turned away in fear and cried out to God, "*Help, they'll soon be stoning me!*" (Ex. 17:4). This is hardly the sort of leadership one would have expected from someone who regularly communicated with God and who should have been convinced of His protection!

So, now, when he contemplated his people having succumbed to the debasement of Baal-Pe'or, the man who gave his people the highest moral code of the Torah, and who sought

to bring them close to God and make their camp a model of holiness, must have been in total despair. No wonder he was speechless and petrified into inaction.

Suddenly there was a stir as the ranks of the bystanders parted and a familiar figure stepped forward. It was Pinchas, son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron. He looked to Moses for approbation but received no flicker of a reaction. His body shaking with righteous indignation, Pinchas seizes a spear, rushes into the tent, and runs it through the bodies of the two fornicators.

Two opposing reactions. Two paradigms of leadership in a time of crisis: The humble and self-effacing Moses was so accustomed to dialogue with God and to waiting to receive His instructions on every issue that it would never have occurred to him that he had the license to decide the law for himself even in an emergency or to impose an appropriate punishment on this couple for a sin without precedence.

Moses was not a Rabbi Akivah or Ishmael. He was never comfortable when called upon to create law *de novo*. Moses operated with the Written, not the Oral, Law. And the classical example of this is found, significantly, just a little further on in our sidrah in the episode of the daughters of Zelafchad, wherein, once again, Moses is called upon to decide on an unprecedented situation involving the right of a daughter to inherit the father's estate where there were no male heirs (Nu. 27:1-4). This was not legislated for in the Written Law, so Moses had to refer the matter to God (v.5). But did he? After all, God had already granted Moses and his judges full license to apply the law to any new situation (see Ex. 18:13-16, 20). And if the tradition is valid that side-by-side with the Written Law God handed down an Oral supplementation, then surely Moses would have confronted the

Tzelafchad situation on Sinai, and should have known how to decide on the daughters' application to inherit. But that was not in Moses' nature. While God was accessible to him, he would never have had the temerity to decide the law in any novel situation. And temerity came easily to Moses!

When Moses considered his shortcomings, real or perceived, and the fact that, although he had 'given' the Torah to the nation, it, in turn, had failed to 'receive' it into their hearts and souls, he concluded that the time had inevitably come to pass on the spiritual baton to a younger, more vigorous and inspirational, successor, 'whom the entire Israelite community would obey' (Nu.26:20). That leader was Joshua.

But, surely, the obvious successor was not someone like him who had lived entirely in the shadow of his teacher all his days and had had no opportunity to demonstrate any independent leadership quality. Indeed, when the crisis of the Golden Calf arose, Joshua misconstrued the situation and panicked. This was during Moses' absence to receive the first set of tablets. Joshua had accompanied him to the mountain and pitched his tent at its foot, remaining there for the entire 40-day period.⁵ When Moses returned, he found Joshua overwrought. "*There's a noise of war echoing forth from the camp,*" he screamed. Moses replied, "*It is neither the sound of triumph nor the wailing of defeat. What I hear is the sound of revelry*" (Ex. 32:17-18).

On another occasion, when Moses had designated seventy elders to appear at the Tent of Meeting to receive some of Moses' prophetic spirit, two of them, Eldad and Medad, defied his request and yet succeeded in prophesying while still in the camp (Nu. 11:16-26). When this was reported to Moses, Joshua, who was standing by, filled with righteous

indignation, demanded of his teacher, “My lord, Moses, incarcerate them!” (v.28). Moses’ profound and generous-spirited reply calmed Joshua and taught him a profound lesson in leadership: “*Are you jealous for me? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His spirit upon them all*” (v.29). Leadership involves delegation. It is not a one-person prerogative.

So, how about Pinchas, who leaped into the breach when Moses had failed to react against the fornicators, and who had ‘*allayed God’s rage against the Israelites.*’ Surely he was leadership material, with the ability to respond to a crisis in an instant! So why was he not recommended by Moses?

Our view is that, while God credited Pinchas with having averted the moral disaster, stopped the plague, and turned away His wrath from Israel through his act of zealotry and violence, this was only justifiable as a one-off response to a crisis to which there was no alternative solution and which saved the nation by having purged it of any such future inclination toward gross immorality and degradation. This is related to the philosophical concept of Consequentialism.⁶

Neither God nor Moses wanted a leader who would represent Him to Israel as an instrument of retribution or His Torah as a code of practice for zealots. God describes very clearly the qualities that He employs wherever possible in His relation to man, and which, *imitatio dei*, He expects man to strive to embody:

merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon

*the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation (Ex. 34:6-7).*⁷

The Talmudic sages knew all about zealotry from the activities of the extremist groups among them whose hostile anti-Roman activities helped expedite the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE by refusing to tolerate or negotiate with the Roman occupation and fomenting unrest and rebellion. Josephus describes the various acts of savagery committed against their own people by those zealots, including the torching of the city's food supply in a bid to force the defenders of Jerusalem to fight for their lives. One of the zealots' splinter groups was the *sicarii*, or 'dagger men,' who would assassinate Romans or suspected Jewish collaborators by stabbing them as they walked by with the small daggers that they kept beneath their cloaks.

In response to the havoc such groups wrought in Judea, the sages established the principle, 'One may not impose upon the community any restriction with which the majority could not cope.'⁸

It is inconceivable that such a principle would have been established *ex cathedra*, without such a pre-existent trend in earlier Jewish tradition. That trend was indeed enunciated as the basic philosophy of the great Hillel who always strove to uphold lenient decisions, as opposed to his colleague Shammai who inclined toward the stringent. Not surprisingly, the halachic consensus followed Hillel's approach.⁹

It might not surprise that the attitude of the sages toward Pinchas was less than luke-warm, to the extent that the Talmud quotes a tradition that, following his assassination of Zimri,

all the tribes mocked him for having taken the law into his own hands given that he didn't possess the requisite standing to do so.¹⁰

So, we have seen that, of the two candidates in line to succeed Moses, Joshua failed the test of maturity and experience and Pinchas the test of sensitivity to people and their situation. From Moses' words to God, outlining the ideal qualities of the next leader as he perceived them, we may determine which of the two he preferred:

Moses spoke to God, saying, "May God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the assembly, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out and bring them in; so the assembly of the Lord shall not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Nu. 26:15-17)

The Midrash reveals what Moses had in his mind by association with each phrase he consciously employed:

God of the spirits of all flesh: Master of the universe, the thoughts of each individual are known to You and how different they all are. Appoint a leader who will take account of all those variant views.

who shall go out before them: Leading them out to achieve their objectives successfully, on account of his special merit.

and come in before them: Bringing them back safely, on account of his special merit.¹¹

Moses' simile of the relationship of a leader to his people as akin to that of a shepherd to his flock, is also telling. Moses sees that relationship as one characterised by love, care, and responsibility, for each individual.

It is not difficult to determine which of the two Moses had in mind. Joshua had a tender heart. He waited 40 days for his teacher to return back safely from Sinai, and was profoundly affected by the slightest diminution of Moses' honour and authority. For his own honour, on the other hand, he had little thought and was content to live in Moses' shadow all his life.

Pinchas, on the other hand, not only cut across the authority of Moses without a thought, but there is also no record of his having sought out a mentor, as did Joshua, or having frequented the circle of Moses, the judges, or the elders, to prepare himself for high office should God think him worthy of it.

But there is still one loose thread: Joshua's apparent immaturity and lack of experience. Well, God sets out to discount that immediately on instructing Moses to appoint him: *God says to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man (ish) infused with My spirit, and lay your hand upon him"* (Nu. 26:18). God's and Moses' conjoint blessing was to be transformative to the life, character, and leadership acumen, of Joshua. With such endorsements, there would have been no doubt regarding his future success in leading Israel into the promised land, promoting the Torah as Israel's national constitution, dividing the land among the tribes, and mediating the word of God to the nation.

NOTES

1. The Israelite conflicts were with the Amalekites at Refidim (Ex.17:8-14), the threat of the Egyptians by the Red Sea (Ex.14:1 - 15:19), the Canaanite king of Arad (Nu.21:1-3), King Sichon of the Amorites and Og, King of Bashan (Nu. 21:21-30, Dt. 2:26-37), and the Amorites (Nu.21:31-35; Dt. 3:1-14).
2. See Tal. *San*.106a.
3. The text states that the attacker was ‘an Egyptian’ with no indication that he was a taskmaster; however Midrashic tradition, as quoted by Rashi (see on Ex.2:11), asserts his latter status.
4. See Ex. 3:1-2; 4:2-7, 17.
5. See Ex. 24:13 and Rashi *ad loc*.
6. Consequentialism is defined as, ‘the view that normative properties depend only on consequences and that what is best or right is whatever makes the world best in the future because we cannot change the past... Thus, whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.’ See www.Consequentialism (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) Accessed 25/07/2024.
7. Jewish tradition interprets this generational guilt as referring to a situation wherein each succeeding generation follows the evil path trodden by their forebears.
8. Tal. *Av. Zar*. 36a.
9. See Tal. *Eruv*. 13b; Tal. *Jer. Ber*. 1:4.
10. See Tal. *San*. 82b, quoted by *Rashi* on Nu. 2511.
11. Mid. *Tanch*. ch.10.