

פרשת פינחס

OVERVIEW

The restoration of Israel's honor through the avenging deed of Pinchas is confirmed by G-d Who enters into a covenant with the young priest which elevates him to a place among the greats of our nation. Decimated by the various punishments, a new count of the people is ordered. The resulting numbers of each tribe will form the basis for the division of the holy land through Moshe's successor, Joshua. Due to the initiative of the daughters of Tzefachad, the Torah prescribes rules of inheritance following the conquest of the land. - G-d designates Joshua as successor of Moshe and ordains his installation as the future leader of Israel. - The Sidrah concludes with the rules regarding the offering of sacrifices on the Sabbath and festivals.

COMMENTARY

Pinchas

For the first time in Israel's history a Jewish man uses his own initiative to take decisive action in a moral crisis. Pinchas' militant intervention is all the more remarkable as it was a deed committed by a grandson of Aharon (V. 11 in Ch. 25 emphasizes this lineage). Was not Aharon known for his love of peace, for his frequent attempts to solve seemingly unsolvable problems? One would not have expected a member of his family to break the pattern. Yet the apparent breach of the peace was actually its salvation. The "vav" in the word "shalom", "peace", is broken in the written Torah. Pinchas did, cause a warlike atmosphere, he was the murderer of one of his own brothers. But the verse calls his violation of the peace "My covenant". Naturally G-d expects us to do our utmost to maintain and promote peace and unity in the human society. However, the concept of "peace" in Jewish thought means not only a political and social balance but very emphatically also a moral one.

In this episode the grandson of Aharon appears as the true defender of the

peace between G-d and man. It is equally true that his intervention did cause Jewish blood to flow. Yet neither peace with G-d nor peace among men can be achieved on the basis of compromise, weakness and retreat. The painful experiences of our days (Ed. note: here the author refers to the period before the outbreak of the second world war) has taught us the forceful lesson of a policy of "peace at any price". A responsible leader who desires to promote a truly lasting peace must combat energetically all attempts of a lame compromise and must assume an unyielding attitude once it becomes clear that only a firm stand will bring results.

Pinchas realizes at once that quick action is called for to prevent further moral deterioration among the people. He calmly accepts the label of being a troublesome meddler. Neither tears nor complaints, certainly not indifference, can restore public morality. Significantly, the Midrash compares Pinchas with the prophet Elijah who will announce the coming of the messianic redeemer. For Elijah, too, will not be able to build a new world order on the basis of uncertain and ambiguous ideas. In a touching comment the Midrash relates that Elijah holds his hand over every Jewish infant as it comes to this world in the hope of finding a successor who will emulate his mission of pursuing the struggle for the sacred cause.

Division of the Land

A historic moment. A people that never possessed land finds itself faced with a problem, the solution of which was beyond any experience it had until then. It seems obvious that every tribe, every family and every individual member aged twenty years and over would be entitled to some part of the territory the size of which to be determined by the number of persons involved, and by economic necessity. The exact division would be determined by lot to avoid jealousy and undue influence peddling. Children will inherit the property of the parents. This ensured that there would be a sufficient number of farmers

in addition to other branches of the national activity.

According to the oral tradition, the land was allotted to those tribes and families who participated in the exodus from Egypt. The system of division considered two elements:

- a) the names of those who went out of Egypt;
- b) the count in the "plains of Moab" as recorded in our Sidrah.

Let us take the case of two brothers who were part of the exodus from Egypt. One has an only son, the other has nine sons. Both died during their stay in the desert, as did all their contemporaries. Their sons request a share of the land. If the yardstick for the division is the status of being among those who went out of Egypt, the only son would be entitled to the same land allotment as that going to all the nine sons together. If, however, the most recent count in the plains of Moab was the factor that decided the division, then each of the nine sons would receive the same share as the single son. However, in accordance with the combination scheme used by Moshe the heirs of both fathers receive ten shares together so that the name of the deceased might be perpetuated as far as possible. It is as if they were to return the shares of their late fathers who divided them among themselves, with each thus receiving five shares. Thus five shares each go to the single son and to the nine sons collectively who then divide them among themselves.

The Laws of Inheritance

From the above it would follow that the inheritance of a father who has only daughters falls to other members of the family, or even of his tribe, with the result that his name would be extinguished. This was the problem presented by the case of the five daughters of Tzelaphchad. According to the general statement of the law of inheritance now promulgated, in the absence of male heirs, daughters even in the second or third generation will have the same inheritance

claim under the same conditions as sons. The central point is that, in the absence of a son, the father of the deceased is the heir and, at his death, other members of his family. As an example we use the biblical genealogy as a model:

Yaakov dies, his sons are the heirs. His daughter Dinah does not receive an inheritance. After the death of the brothers, their children will be the heirs. Were there no descendant at all from Yaakov's son, Dinah – or her children in her place – would be the heirs. If she were to die childless, Yaakov's father Yitzchak or in his place Esau and his children would be the heirs. Were Esau to die childless, Abraham or his son Yishmael or in his place another son or daughter, would be the heirs. The rule is that no heir remains without a claimant even if that means that one has to go back several generations.

The case of the daughters of Tzelaphchad demonstrates the full equality enjoyed by the grown daughters, regarding their rights by lawful processes in protecting their material interests. Undoubtedly, they are at a disadvantage in relation to their brothers. But we see here that in the case of a missing brother they fully take his place. The Jewish law accords to women a physical and moral capacity that enables them, like the man, to assume added responsibilities. But it also demands that these responsibilities, if at all possible, be borne by the male member in order to permit the woman to devote her strength and efforts fully to the care for the family and home.

Joshua, Successor of Moshe

Moshe has come to the end of an extraordinary career. The "man of miracles" will pass on his responsibilities to his disciple who has demonstrated his unconquerable trust in G-d and the future of his people under the most trying conditions. The loyal disciple received the teachings from the lips of his master; they are the basis for the nation's constitution. Far from any autocratic aspirations, this leader will follow strictly the guidelines given to him by the law and its

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authentic interpreters. Moshe performs the investiture of Joshua in the presence of the people by calling as his chief witness the high priest Elazar who will become his closest friend and collaborator.

Moshe lays both hands on Joshua, with both hands he entrusts to him the future of Israel. This gesture has become part of the great national tradition; it is the manner in which the teachers of Mishna and Talmud designate the disciples who will perpetuate the sacred flame of G-d's spirit. This helped to strengthen the unbroken chain of the generations, and guaranteed the integrity and lasting freshness of all the treasures of Jewish thought across the long centuries, and unto our own days.

The Midrash wonders why Moshe's own sons, whom the oral tradition finds entirely worthy of their father, were not chosen to follow his office. According to one view, Moshe asked G-d after the Korach episode, not to consider his sons as his successors. Another view holds that Moshe indeed expected the choice of his sons but asked G-d to perform the selection in order not to be accused of trying to force his family on the people. It appears that Moshe's sons, unlike those of Aharon, purposely stood aside since their early youth. At no time does the Torah mention any form of participation by them in any of the numerous important events. In contrast, the Torah frequently refers to the activities of Aharon's sons. Moshe must have realized that the mere fact of being his sons is not sufficient reason to entrust them with heavy responsibilities.

The Offerings of Succot

The offerings for the Feast of Tabernacles consisted of three kinds of animals: bullocks, rams and lambs. While the number of rams and lambs remained the same every day of the festival, that of the bullocks decreased from 13 on the first day to 7 on the last. Their numbers totaled 70 corresponding to the 70 nations of

the world, and were intended as atonement for all mankind. At the beginning of the feast the mighty contingent of 13 bullocks – representing the proud and complacent nations of the world – confront the rams and lambs, certain of their invincible strength. Slowly their number decreases; i.e. the resistance of the nations against the never-changing Ideals of G-d's nation will steadily weaken and finally fade away. The inherent optimism with which Israel views the future of mankind is mirrored in its sacrifices. For this, the succot festival was chosen, which also symbolizes the ultimate triumph of the weak over the strong. This idea is reflected in the replacement of the solid house by the shaky hut during the period of the Succot festival.

As significant as the importance of Moshe's work, it is not necessarily a result of his extraordinary personality. His work is taken up, continued and completed by his disciples, by the entire people. It is not Moshe's Torah but G-d's Torah that must be communicated. Perhaps to emphasize this basic truth, the announcement of Moshe's succession follows the listing of the permanent sacrifices that symbolize the constancy of the tradition Moshe received and the stability of its institutions. The national consciousness must maintain a lasting bond with the mighty symbols of Moshe's and Aharon's sacred activities. - This chapter concludes the legislative body of the Torah law.

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