

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Pinchas
July 11, 2020 *** 19 Tammuz, 5720

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Pinchas in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2236/jewish/Pinchas-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Aaron's grandson Pinchas is rewarded for his act of zealotry in killing the Simeonite prince Zimri and the Midianite princess who was his paramour: G-d grants him a covenant of peace and the priesthood.

A census of the people counts 601,730 men between the ages of twenty and sixty. Moses is instructed on how the Land is to be divided by lottery among the tribes and families of Israel. The five daughters of Tzelafchad petition Moses that they be granted the portion of the land belonging to their father, who died without sons; G-d accepts their claim and incorporates it into the Torah's laws of inheritance.

Moses empowers Joshua to succeed him and lead the people into the Land of Israel. The Parshah concludes with a detailed list of the daily offerings, and the additional offerings brought on Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh (first of the month), and the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret.

Haftarah during the Three Week Period : Jeremiah 1:1–2:3

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3716002/jewish/Pinchas-Three-Weeks-Period-Haftarah-Companion.htm

Introduction

This week's haftarah begins a series of three haftarot known in halachic literature as telata depur'anuta, "the three (haftarot) of retribution." We read these haftarot during the three-week period between the seventeenth of Tammuz and the ninth of Av—the time when we mourn the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people. These readings are taken from three passages where the prophets warn the Jews of the looming destruction and the terrible suffering that will follow, and implore the people to mend their ways and avoid this tragedy. The first of these haftarot is taken from the opening chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived through the destruction, and was its primary prophet.

Meet Jeremiah

The opening verses of the reading give us some background about its major figure. Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) the son of Chilkiyah was a kohen who lived in the territory of Benjamin. On his father's side he descended from Evyatar, the high priest who

served in the days of King David. King Solomon, the son of David, had banished Evyatar to the territory of Benjamin due to his disloyalty in supporting Solomon's brother Adoniyahu (Adonijah) in his attempt at the throne.¹ The family had lived there for over three centuries since then.

In addition to this, Jeremiah also descended from Rahab. Rahab was the woman who hosted and saved the spies sent by Joshua to scout the city of Jericho just before its miraculous fall into Israelite hands. Our sages tell us that Rahab later converted and became the wife of none other than Joshua himself. Before the spies visited her, the verse describes Rahab as a zonah—literally translated as “a prostitute.”² In their quest to belittle Jeremiah, the people would use this ancestor of his as a pretext for ridicule. Rashi in his commentary to this verse quotes the words of our sages, who said about this: “Jeremiah was a descendant of one who had a rotten past but later mended her ways. It was fitting for him to come and rebuke the Jews, who came from good descent but who had now gone in rotten ways.”

The hesitation

The first live encounter we have with Jeremiah is his great reluctance to assume the position he was destined to take on. The narrative begins with the Almighty letting Jeremiah in on the fact that he had been designated and sanctified for this role even before his mother conceived him.

Rashi takes this to refer to the teaching of the sages that G-d showed Adam, the first man, all the leaders who were to lead each generation of the Jewish people. Why is this stressed especially with regard to Jeremiah? Radak, in his commentary, suggests that not only was Jeremiah destined for greatness by his creator, but that his parents also had an active role in his “sanctity before conception”: “This comes to teach us that his father and mother took care to be in a state of holiness and purity at the time of conception, so that the prophet would be sanctified.”³

Jeremiah, however, knowing well the difficulty that lay ahead of him, was extremely hesitant: “Alas . . . Behold, I know not to speak, for I am a youth.” In addition to literally being young, Jeremiah was indicating that he was still “young” in his experience with the people. He used the example of Moses, who had also rebuked the people, but had done so only at the end of his life. After doing so much for them and performing so many miracles, he was indeed in a position to rebuke his people. But here Jeremiah was called to do this right at the outset.⁴

G-d reassures Jeremiah that he had nothing to fear. The places where he would need to go and the words he would speak there were not going to be of his own after all. His mission would be tough, and sometimes dangerous, but he was not acting alone: he was an agent of G-d. His mission would not be easy, but G-d would give him fortress-like resilience, and no harm would befall him.

Almond branch and boiling pot

The next part of the reading records two scenes that seem to be the beginning of Jeremiah's visions. The first was of an almond branch. The Hebrew word for an almond is shaken. The same word in Hebrew (אשך) also serves as the root for “diligence” or

“haste,” and this name is given to the almond and its tree due to its “haste” in the process of producing fruit. G-d was conveying Jeremiah that what He was soon to tell him was going to take place imminently.

Rashi, quoting a midrashic source, explains that the almond actually served as a precise point of reference. It takes three weeks from the time the almond tree buds till the almond ripens. In a similar way, it would take three weeks from the time Jerusalem succumbed to the siege (on the 17th of Tammuz) to when the Temple would be set on fire (the 9th of Av)—hence the observance of the “Three Weeks.” The second vision was of a boiling pot whose froth was mainly on its northern side. The message was that the evil would come upon Israel from a country to its north—namely Babylon.

Abarbanel makes note of the wording in this verse, “The evil will open up from the north.” He understand this to imply that the evil will both “open” from the north and also culminate from there. Babylon is to the northeast of Israel, and Rome is northwest of it. It was Babylon who began the Jewish exile with the destruction of the first Temple, and Rome who, five hundred years later, brought the exile full circle with the destruction of the second Temple.

Final words of love

Although the haftarot of the Three Weeks can read as rather harsh and gloomy, they each finish with magnificent words of hope, strength and love to the Jewish people. In a verse that we use in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, the Almighty invokes the memory of the “early youth” of the Jewish people. At the time of the exodus from Egypt they were like a young bride, filled to the brim and overflowing with love and passion for G-d. They displayed this with their unbounded faith as they ventured out into the barren desert with nothing other than their faith as a provision. Traveling into such a place with no knowledge of how they would survive defied any rational calculation. But this was no deterrent. They plunged in with hearts filled with love and joy, casting their lot entirely with their creator.

This is the true and pure nature of the Jew. For this they are a truly holy nation. The verse compares the status of the Jew to the status of terumah, the part of the crop that was given to the kohen. This portion was to be eaten exclusively by the kohen and his family, and had to be consumed in a state of purity. It is forbidden for a non-kohen to partake of terumah, and the Torah provides strong consequences for this transgression. The Jewish people are thus compared to terumah in the sense that any foreign people who would “consume” them will ultimately pay dearly for this misdeed.

Food For Thought

Moral vs. Political Decisions (Pinchas 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/pinchas-5780/>

The coronavirus pandemic raised a series of deep moral and political issues.[1] How far should governments go in seeking to prevent its spread? To what extent should it

restrict people's movements at the cost of violating their civil liberties? How far should it go in imposing a clampdown of businesses at the cost of driving many of them bankrupt, rendering swathes of the population unemployed, building up a mountain of debt for the future and plunging the economy into the worst recession since the 1930s? These are just a few of the many heart-breaking dilemmas that the pandemic forced on governments and on us.

Strikingly, almost every country adopted the same measures: social distancing and lockdown until the incidence of new cases had reached its peak (Sweden was the most conspicuous exception). Nations didn't count the cost. Virtually unanimously, they placed the saving of life above all other considerations. The economy may suffer, but life is infinitely precious and saving it takes precedence over all else.

This was a momentous victory for the value first articulated in the Torah in the Noahide covenant: "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God He created man" (Gen. 9:6). This was the first declaration of the principle that human life is sacred. As the Sages put it, "Every life is like a universe. Save a life and it is as if you have saved a universe." [2]

In the ancient world, economic considerations took precedence over life. Great building projects like the Tower of Babel and the Egyptian pyramids involved huge loss of life. Even in the 20th century, lives were sacrificed to economic ideology: between six and nine million under Stalin, and between 35 and 45 million under Chinese communism. The fact that virtually all nations, in the face of the pandemic, chose life was a significant victory for the Torah's ethic of the sanctity of life.

That said, the former Supreme Court judge Jonathan Sumption wrote a challenging article in which he argued that the world, or at least Britain, had got it wrong. [3] It was overreacting. The cure may be worse than the disease. The lockdown amounted to subjecting the population to house arrest, causing great distress and giving the police unprecedented and dangerous powers. It represented "an interference with our lives and our personal autonomy that is intolerable in a free society." The economic impact would be devastating. "If all this is the price of saving human life, we have to ask whether it is worth paying."

There are, he said, no absolute values in public policy. As proof he cited the fact that we allow cars, despite knowing that they are potentially lethal weapons, and that every year thousands of people will be killed or maimed by them. In public policy there are always multiple, conflicting considerations. There are no non-negotiable absolutes, not even the sanctity of life.

It was a powerful and challenging piece. Are we wrong to think that life is indeed sacred? Might we be placing too high a value on life, imposing a huge economic burden on future generations?

I am going to suggest, oddly enough, that there is a direct connection between this argument and the story of Pinchas. It is far from obvious, but it is fundamental. It lies in the difference – philosophical and halachic – between moral and political decisions.

[4]

Recall the Pinchas story. The Israelites, having been saved by God from Bilam's curses, fell headlong into the trap he then set for them. They began consorting with Midianite women and were soon worshipping their gods. God's anger burned. He ordered the death of the people's leaders. A plague raged; 24,000 died. A leading Israelite, Zimri, brought a Midianite woman, Cozbi, and cohabited with her in full view of Moses and the people. It was the most brazen of acts. Pinchas took a spear and drove it through them both. They died, and the plague stopped.

Was Pinchas a hero or a murderer? On the one hand, he saved countless lives: no more people died because of the plague. On the other hand, he could not have been certain of that in advance. To any onlooker, he might have seemed simply a man of violence, caught up in the lawlessness of the moment. The parsha of Balak ends with this terrible ambiguity unresolved. Only in our parsha do we hear the answer. God says:

“Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the Priest, has turned back My anger from the Israelites by being zealous among them on My behalf, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My zeal. Therefore say: I am making with him My covenant of peace.” (Num. 25:11-12)

God declared Pinchas a hero. He had saved the Israelites from destruction, showed the zeal that counterbalanced the people's faithlessness, and as a reward, God made a personal covenant with him. Pinchas did a good deed.

Halachah, however, dramatically circumscribes his act in multiple ways. First, it rules that if Zimri had turned and killed Pinchas in self-defence, he would be declared innocent in a court of law.[5] Second, it rules that if Pinchas had killed Zimri and Cozbi just before or after they were engaged in cohabitation, he would have been guilty of murder.[6] Third, had Pinchas consulted a Bet Din and asked whether he was permitted to do what he was proposing to do, the answer would have been, No.[7] This is one of the rare cases where we say Halachah ve-ein morin kein: “It is the law, but we do not make it known.” And there are many other conditions and reservations. The Torah resolves the ambiguity but halachah reinstates it. Legally speaking, Pinchas was on very thin ice.

We can only understand this by way of a fundamental distinction between moral decisions and political decisions. Moral decisions are answers to the question, “What should I do?” Usually they are based on rules that may not be transgressed whatever the consequences. In Judaism, moral decisions are the province of halachah.

Political decisions are answers to the question, “What should we do?” where the “we” means the nation as a whole. They tend to involve several conflicting considerations, and there is rarely a clear-cut solution. Usually the decision will be based on an evaluation of the likely consequences. In Judaism this sphere is known as mishpat melech (the legal domain of the king), or hilchot medinah (public policy regulations). [8] Whereas halachah is timeless, public policy tends to be time-bound and situational (“a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build”).

Were we in Pinchas' position, asking, “Should I kill Zimri and Cozbi?” the moral answer

is an unequivocal No. They may deserve to die; the whole nation may be eyewitnesses to their sin; but you cannot execute a death sentence without a duly constituted court of law, a trial, evidence and a judicial verdict. Killing without due process is murder. That is why the Talmud rules Halachah ve-ein morin kein: if Pinchas had asked a Bet Din whether he were permitted to act as he intended, he would be told, No. Halachah is based on non-negotiable moral principle, and halachically you cannot commit murder even to save lives.

But Pinchas was not acting on moral principle. He was making a political decision. There were thousands dying. The political leader, Moses, was in a highly compromised position. How could he condemn others for consorting with Midianite women when he himself had a Midianite wife? Pinchas saw that there was no one leading. The danger was immense. God's anger, already intense, was about to explode. So he acted – not on moral principle but on political calculation, relying not on halachah but on what would later be known as mishpat melech. Better take two lives immediately, that would have been eventually sentenced to death by the court, to save thousands now. And he was right, as God later made clear.

Now we can see exactly what was ambiguous about Pinchas' act. He was a private individual. The question he would normally have asked was, "What shall I do?", to which the answer is a moral one. But he acted as if he were a political leader asking, "What shall we do?" and deciding, based on consequences, that this would save many lives. Essentially, he acted as if he were Moses. He saved the day and the people. But imagine what would happen anywhere if an ordinary member of the public usurped the role of Head of State. Had God not endorsed Pinchas' action, he would have had a very difficult time.

The difference between moral and political decisions becomes very clear when it comes to decisions of life and death. The moral rule is: saving life takes precedence over all other mitzvot except three: incest, idolatry and murder. If a group is surrounded by gangsters who say, "Hand over one of you, or we will kill you all," they must all be prepared to die rather than hand over one.[9] Life is sacred and must not be sacrificed, whatever the consequences. That is morality; that is halachah. However, a king of Israel was permitted, with the consent of the Sanhedrin, to wage a (non-defensive) war, even though many would die as a result.[10] He was permitted to execute a non-judicial death sentence against individuals on public policy grounds (le-takken ha-olam kefi mah she-ha-sha'ah tzerichah).[11] In politics, as opposed to morality, the sanctity of life is a high value but not the only one. What matters are consequences. A ruler or government must act in the long-term interests of the people. That is why, though some will die as a result, governments are now gradually easing the lockdown provisions once the rate of infection falls, to relieve distress, ease the economic burden, and restore suspended civil liberties.

We have moral duties as individuals, and we make political decisions as nations. The two are different. That is what the story of Pinchas is about. It also explains the tension in governments during the pandemic. We have a moral commitment to the sanctity of

life, but we also have a political commitment, not just to life but also to “liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[12] What was beautiful about the global response to Covid-19 was that virtually every nation in the world put moral considerations ahead of political ones until the danger began to recede.

I believe that there are moral and political decisions and they are different. But there is a great danger that the two may drift apart. Politics then becomes amoral, and eventually corrupt. That is why the institution of prophecy was born. Prophets hold politicians accountable to morality. When kings act for the long-term welfare of the nation, they are not criticised. When they act for their own benefit, they are.

[13] Likewise when they undermine the people’s moral and spiritual integrity.

[14] Salvation by zealot – the Pinchas case – is no solution. Politics must be as moral as possible if a nation is to flourish in the long run.

Shabbat Shalom [1] This essay was written on 11 Iyar 5780, 5 May 2020. Things will have moved on since, but the issues raised here are of general significance and not always fully understood.

[2] Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:4. [3] Jonathan Sumption, ‘Coronavirus lockdown,’ Sunday Times, 5 April 2020.

[4] Too little has been written about this. For one collection of essays, see Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2012. [5] Sanhedrin 82a. [6] Sanhedrin 81b.

[7] Sanhedrin 82a. [8] See especially R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, *Torat Nevi’im*, ch. 7, *Din Melech Yisrael*.

[9] *Tosefta Terumot* 7:20. [10] *Shavuot* 35b. [11] *Rambam Hilchot Melachim* 3:10. [12] The Jewish equivalent is: Life, liberty and the pursuit of holiness. [13] The classic cases are Nathan and David, 2 Samuel 12; Elijah and Ahab, 1 Kings 21. [14] The standard biblical term for this is “They did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” an expression that occurs more than 60 times in Tanach.

[The Courage to Not Know by Matthew Berkowitz](http://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online?search=&genre=2046¶shah=&holiday=&theme=&series=&author=)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online?search=&genre=2046¶shah=&holiday=&theme=&series=&author=>

If there is a moment of heroism in Parashat Pinehas, it is when the daughters of Zelophahad stand before Moses. Living in the patriarchal world of biblical Israel, they arrive at a defining juncture. Their father, Zelophahad, dies, leaving no sons to inherit or perpetuate his name. While the daughters could have simply accepted the reality of patriarchal inheritance, they bravely choose another path. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah approach Moshe explaining, “Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no sons! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen!” (Num. 27:4). The reader of Torah cannot help but embrace this gesture with a sense of awe. What trepidation—and gumption—must have been involved in the decision to bring their case before the leader of the fledgling nation of Israel! It is even more significant that they do so in the aftermath of Korah’s rebellion. Given Moshe’s recent experience with malcontents, this could have easily turned against them. And yet this episode proves to be a powerful leadership moment for the daughters, Moses, and God.

First, one must note the way in which the daughters approach Moshe and the chieftains. Far from coming with justified rage and aggression (as Korah and his cohort do – *vayakumu lifnei Moshe*, “They rose up before Moses”)—the Torah’s language is nuanced: *vatikravnah* and *vata’amodna*—they “come close” and “stand confidently” before leaders of Israel. Once before these elders, they rationally explain

their case—first by defusing any residual tension related to the uprising of Korah (they state clearly that their father was not involved) and second, by stating their cause in a compelling and just way. Rashi, the great medieval commentator, sings the praises of these daughters in remarking that “their eyes saw what Moses’s eyes did not see.” The choice of posture and words is not inconsequential in seeking the desired outcome. They know well that courage and *kavod* (respect) are critical elements that will lead them a step closer toward perpetuating the memory of their father.

Second, from Moses’s response, we know well that he is at a loss for how to answer them. Interestingly, this is one of four cases in the Torah (the others being Lev. 24:10–22 [the blasphemer]; Num. 9:6–14 [*Pesah sheni*]; Num. 15:32–36 [Shabbat violator]) when the Torah’s instructions prove insufficient—even for the greatest prophet of Israel—to render a decision. Though Moshe does not explicitly acknowledge that he doesn’t know the answer, his actions clearly confirm this. Moshe brings the case before God and hopes the matter will be resolved through counsel with the Divine. Far from worrying about how others would perceive this gap in his knowledge, Moshe embraces the occasion. It is an *et ratzon*, auspicious moment, for him that demonstrates admirable leadership. Indeed, the midrash *Numbers Rabbah* 21:12 lauds Moses for serving as a model to “the heads of the Sanhedrin of Israel that were destined to arise after him, that they should not be embarrassed to ask for assistance in cases too difficult for them. For even Moses, who was Master of Israel had to say, ‘I have not understood.’ Therefore Moses brought their case before the Lord.”

Finally, God provides us with a powerful example of leadership, using this as a teaching moment for Moses, the daughters, and the entire community. God states clearly that the plea of the daughters is just and requires an addendum to the law of inheritance promulgated in Torah. Yet, far from being limited only to Tzelophahad and his daughters, this expanded law will now apply to all of Israel. Granted, sons will still be considered the natural heirs, but if the deceased does not have sons, from this moment on, the daughters will become the heirs—empowered to perpetuate the name of the deceased for generations to come.

Taken collectively, we, the descendants of Moses and the daughters of Tzelophahad, are infinitely enriched by the encounter that unfolds in this week’s *parashah*. The easier path for the daughters would have been to shy away from confrontation; they could have seen themselves as collateral damage—victims of Torah’s patriarchal claim and their parents’ inability to have sons. Rather, a sense of injustice welled up in their souls that enabled them to confront both human and Divine leadership. And similarly, Moses, as the leader of the Children of Israel, could have simply restated the laws of inheritance—reinforcing the absolute law of Torah rather than acknowledging a gap in his own knowledge. Moses could have reasoned *better that Torah and my leadership should remain intact than admit to shortcomings and fallibility*. To his credit, he recognizes his shortcomings and the power and potential of the case before him and places the matter in God’s hands.

And while God could have limited judgment to these plaintiffs, God recognizes that

equality before the law and true justice are “on trial.” As British biblical scholar Philip Budd writes, “Theologically, the section presses the rights of women to a clear and recognized legal position within the sphere of property law. They are seen as a proper channel through which the threads of possession and inheritance may properly be traced” (*Word Biblical Commentary: Numbers*, 303). God’s decision inspires hope for a better future—not only for the daughters but for all women (and men!) who will come after them and find themselves in the same position. (*Matthew Berkowitz is the Director of Israel Programs at JTS*)

Pinchas by Rabbi Jill Hammer

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

In Parashat Pinchas, five daughters, the daughters of one man, Tzelofhad, appear before Moshe, bringing a case. Their father has died. Each Israelite family is to be allotted land in Canaan when the people enter the land. However, because Tzelofhad has no son, he has not been allotted land. The women present the case that their father deserves a portion in the land: “Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen!” (Num. 27:4) Moshe brings this case before YHWH, and YHWH declares that “the plea of Tzelofhad’s daughters is just” and rules that if a man has no sons, his daughters may inherit, provided they marry men from within their own tribe (Num. 27:7-11). This caveat about the daughters’ marriage is put in place so that, when the women have children, the land does not pass to other tribes (since people inherit tribal status from their fathers and if the women marry men of other tribes, the women’s children would belong to other tribes).

The story of the daughters of Tzelofhad suggests incremental justice rather than a radical shift in Israelite law. The daughters don’t win inheritance rights for all women. Rather, they win a concession: daughters of fathers who have no sons may inherit, provided they marry in such a way that their inheritance does not shift tribal land allotments. However, the moment that the daughters step forward at the Tent feels like an important moment in which a plea for justice is stated and heard. That moment requires courage—to walk out in front of the tribal leaders and Moshe, to stand out among women, to ask for something that has not yet been given. If we took a snapshot of that moment in our minds, we might imagine faces we recognize, faces of those determined to make change.

What causes the daughters to have such courage? Sifrei Bamidbar 133:1 suggests that the daughters believed God would be on their side.

When the daughters of Tzelofhad heard that the land was being divided among the tribes, and not to females, they gathered together to take counsel: “The compassion of the Omnipresent One is not like the compassion of human beings! Human beings, their compassion is for men. The One who spoke and created everything is not like that, but has compassion on males and females—compassion on everyone! As it is

said ([Psalms 145:9](#)): “God is good to all and God’s compassion is over all God’s works.”

If we were to translate this midrash into modern language, we might say as follows: “Human beings have biases, based on who has power and what society values. But God is not like that. God has equal compassion on everyone. God places equal value on all of us.” The daughters of Tzelofhad are buoyed and inspired by their sense that God finds them valuable even if society denigrates them. The midrash perhaps draws this interpretation from the word “Vatikravna”—“the daughters drew close” ([Num. 27:1](#)). They draw close to God, because they know God will hear their case.

The daughters also seem to draw their courage from one another. All five of them come together. They don’t send one or two daughters as delegates: they all come as one. The Talmud understands the daughters as having a sense of equality among themselves. The Talmud ([Bava Batra 120a](#)) notes that:

Later (in [Numbers 36:11](#)), the verse lists them [the daughters of Tzelofhad] according to their age, and here (in [Numbers 27:1](#)), according to their wisdom. This supports Rabbi Ami who said: In the yeshiva, precedence goes according to wisdom, and when reclining [at a feast], according to age.... A tanna of the house of Rabbi Yishmael said: The daughters of Tzelofhad were all equal, as it says: Vatihyena (and they were)—they all had one being.

The Talmud observes that there are two lists of the daughters, one when they step forward, and one when they marry their cousins, in fulfillment of the request that they marry within their tribes. In this passage, the first opinion suggests that the daughters are listed in different orders because the context is different. The text observes that in general, people are seated according to wisdom in a yeshiva, and according to age at a festive meal (that is, wise people have seating priority in yeshiva and older people have seating priority at a banquet). In the first text, the women are speaking before Moshe so it is like yeshiva; in the second text, the women are getting married, so it is like a banquet. In this opinion, the Talmud imagines that the daughters’ listed order replicates the different hierarchies of their time.

But the second opinion, by a tanna of the school of Rabbi Ishmael, is more radical. He suggests that the different orders of the names show that the daughters were all equal. This interpretation focuses on the word Vatihyena — “they were” — from the phrase, “they became... married to their cousins—tihyena... livnei dodeihen lenashim ([Num. 36:11](#)). The word tihyena, this midrash suggests, means that the women were all of one being, one havayah (the same root as tihyena). The women speak as one, without jockeying for place and without argument. How often in the Bible do we see siblings inherit anything without internal conflict? The tanna is proposing that the daughters not only argue for equality—they demonstrate the principle of equality through their own behavior.

This beautiful second interpretation seems to me to speak to us today, reminding us that when we seek to make our society more equal, we first have to start by listening to everyone and giving honor to everyone. Equality means seeing one another as of

one being, one havayah. The daughters of Tzelofhad establish no precedence in their order: no one comes first all the time. This seems to me to be an important principle: we are called to create a societal structure where people all have the opportunity to be first sometimes. Even though our differences in age and wisdom might make a difference in some contexts, there must be other contexts when we assume a radical equality.

According to these midrashim, Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah know that God values everyone equally, and they too value one another equally. This list of five names from our parashah feels like a rallying cry for our time, not only because it is the beginning of an inquiry into the rights of women, but also because it continues the vision of Genesis 1 that we are all made in the image of the Divine. It is almost as if the five daughters are offering us five new books of the Torah, books in which new forms of equality, liberty and compassion are written. May we continue to open those books as we move forward into the future.

Shabbat shalom. (*Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD, is the Director of Spiritual Education at AJR. She is the author of several books, including The Hebrew Priestess: Ancient and New Visions of Jewish Women's Spiritual Leadership, Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women, and The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for All Seasons—as well as the forthcoming Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzirah.*)

Pinchas: Three Models of Leadership by Rabbi Jay Kelman

<https://www.torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/pinchas-three-models-of-leadership>

Parshat Pinchas presents us with at least three distinct models of leadership. Our parsha gets its name from the zealotry of Pinchas who, without warning, killed a leader of the tribe of Shimon and the Midianite women with whom he was sinning. Ironically, his act of violence earned him a covenant of peace; Pinchas merited both safety from those who might have sought revenge, and inner peace and calm allowing him not to feel guilty over the lives he took. His zealotry put an end to a plague and, not unlike a just war, his killing of others prevented even more from dying. Yet despite his heroism, zealotry has little place in Jewish life. The rabbinic limitations to zealotry render its practical use obsolete, not unlike the almost impossible conditions needed before a court could issue a death sentence. First and foremost is the need to ensure that one is truly motivated completely for the sake of heaven, a condition that even the students of Hillel and Shammai could not fully attain (see Sanhedrin 88b and Pirkei Avot 5:17).

Highlighting this point, the parsha presents another model of leadership—that of one who will “go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out and bring them in, and let the assembly of G-d not be like a sheep that has no shepherd” (Bamidbar 27:17). As a farmer lovingly tends to his entire flock, the next leader of the Jewish people had to embody this trait of inclusiveness and responsiveness to the needs of the people. Extremism may have a place, but that place must be far away from positions of leadership. Thus it was Yehoshua, and not Pinchas, who was chosen as the successor to Moshe.

Yet the Torah presents another form of leadership, what today we might call political activism. The daughters of Tzelofchad had no brothers, and as such it appeared they would get no share in the Land of Israel. Instead of sitting back quietly, they approached Moshe, asking, “Why should the name of our father be omitted from the family because he had no son? Let us have a possession among our father's brothers” (Bamidbar 27:4). Moshe was at a loss as to what to do, and “brought their claim before G-d”.

While our Sages note that, even had the daughters of Tzelofchad not queried Moshe, the law allowing daughters to inherit would have eventually been given, the biblical text presents this change as a result of their activism. And that is no accident. In the words of our Sages, “The daughters of Tzelofchad merited to have this law written through them”.

While the first half of the parsha deals with the preparations to enter the land of Israel—focusing on the census and the appointment of Yehoshua—it is the latter part of the parsha that is most familiar to all shul-goers. It is parshat Pinchas that records the (Mussaf) sacrifices that were to be brought on Shabbat and festivals. It serves as the maftir on our holidays and as the torah reading on Rosh Chodesh. Its placement here seems out of place.

Perhaps we can find a link between the three types of sacrifices brought on the festivals and the models of leadership in our parsha. Interestingly, most of the sacrifices offered on the festivals themselves were korbanot olah, commonly translated as burnt offerings, the entire sacrifice being burnt on the altar with humans consuming no part. The olah represents total dedication to G-d, the trait that embodied Pinchas. On a theoretical level, such dedication to G-d and the inability to tolerate sin is the ideal.

Yet our Torah is a Torah of practice, not theory. The festivals were a time of joy and celebration, defined by the rabbis as the bringing of korbanot shelamim, peace offerings. These korbanot were eaten by all, with a small portion placed on the altar, and were especially intended to be shared with the stranger, widows, orphans and the like. The shelamim, as its name indicates, represents both peace and completeness. Our leaders must be leaders for the complete nation, ensuring the unity of the people, seeking peace both internal and external.

And yet on each festival, the Jewish people are to offer a chatat, a sin offering. Not only must our leaders embrace sinners, leadership (almost by definition!) requires one to sin. The pressures, the balancing of competing needs, the enormity of the task—requiring superhuman judgment and foresight—mean that sinning is inevitable. No wonder our Sages assert that “blessed is the generation where the leaders have the insight to ask for forgiveness for their sins” (see Rashi, Vayikra 4:22). Greatness often emerges from sin. While we do not know why Tzelofchad was punished, we do know that “he died because of his sin” (Bamidbar 27:4).

We are a nation made up of saints and sinners, activists and pacifists, believers and skeptics, thinkers and doers. If we are to succeed in settling the land, we need to

ensure that all have a place and inheritance in that land.

This is a piece of writing by Rabbi Sacks from September 5th, 2018. I know that I have shared this with you at the time but I would like to share it again.

[Morality matters more than ever in a world divided by fear and faithlessness](https://rabbisacks.org/morality-matters-ever-world-divided-fear-faithlessness/)
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What happens to national identity when everything holding a nation together disintegrates or disappears? What happens to society when the focus of a culture is on the self and its icon, the “selfie”? What happens when Google filters and Facebook friends divide us into non-communicating sects of the like-minded? And what happens to morality when the mantra is no longer “We’re all in this together”, but rather “I’m free to be myself”?

These were some of the questions that prompted me to undertake a five-part series on morality in the 21st century to be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 next week. It was thrilling to engage in dialogue with some of the finest minds in Britain and North America as well as with some stunningly articulate sixth formers from London and Manchester. What emerged from this journey into the state of Western culture is that morality matters more than we commonly acknowledge. It’s all we have left to bind us into shared responsibility for the common good. Morality is our oldest and most powerful resource for turning disconnected “I”s into a collective “we”. It’s the alchemy that turns selfish genes into selfless people, egoists into altruists, and self-interested striving into empathy, sympathy and compassion for others.

It is no accident that the word “demoralisation” means what it does: a loss of confidence, enthusiasm and hope. Without a shared morality, we are left as anxious individuals, lonely, vulnerable and depressed, struggling to survive in a world that is changing faster than we can bear and becoming more unstable by the day.

One symptom of this was starkly revealed this week in the news that almost a quarter of 14-year-old girls in Britain had self-harmed in the course of a year. This is a deeply disturbing trend, but it will have come as no surprise to readers of iGen, the thoroughly researched study of American children born in or after 1995: the first generation to have grown up with smartphones. Jean Twenge, its author, is one of the participants in the radio series. She told me about her discovery that rates of self-ascribed life satisfaction among American teenagers plummeted after 2012, while depression and suicide rocketed upward. Again, it was girls who were the more vulnerable.

Her view is that social media and smartphone addiction have played a significant part in this pathology. Young people were spending between seven and nine hours a day on their phones. The result has been a loss of social skills, shortened attention spans and sleep deprivation, but, above all, anxiety. Seeing their friends’ posts, they are subject to Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) – and constantly comparing themselves with the burnished images of their contemporaries. iGen’ers, she says, are “scared, maybe even terrified”. They are “both the physically safest generation and the most mentally

fragile”.

The second result, charted by another participant in the series, the American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, is the assault on free speech taking place in university campuses. His new book, published next week, is called *The Coddling of the American Mind*, subtitled, “How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure.”

It tells of how the new ideas of “safe spaces”, “trigger warnings” and “no platforming”, despite their good intentions, can screen out from university life views and voices that fail to fit the prevailing canons of political correctness. This is being done in the name of the right not to be offended – a right that would have terrified George Orwell, whose dictum, engraved on the walls of the new BBC Broadcasting House, states: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” This is closely related to a third phenomenon playing an ever larger part in the liberal democracies of the West, namely identity politics. There was a time, until recently, when politics aspired to be about what is best for the nation. One of the lasting unintended consequences of multiculturalism is that we no longer think of the nation as a whole. Instead the electorate has been fragmented into a series of subcultures, defined by ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. These can easily become competitive interest groups, less concerned with the common good than with what is good for those-like-me.

Each group can be encouraged, by the mood of our time, to see itself as a victim and to identify an oppressor who can be blamed for their current predicament. This gives rise to a divisive and rancorous politics that divides society, like the dualisms of old, into the children of light and the children of darkness. It also provides a justification for the use of social media to manipulate public opinion by fake news and “alternative facts”. When it comes to defending your group against oppressors, people think that the end justifies the means.

These are dangerous tendencies at both an individual and collective level. You can see this in the spate of best-selling self-help books about anxiety and depression on the one hand, and, on the other, a string of books with titles such as *How Democracies Die*, *The Suicide of the West* and *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*.

What connects the personal and the political was given a name more than a century ago by the great sociologist Emile Durkheim. He called it anomie: a state of instability, in societies and individuals, resulting from the breakdown of a shared set of moral beliefs and attitudes. This would lead, he thought, to a rise in suicides as well as a loss of social cohesion.

Since the Sixties, we have come to believe that you can outsource morality to the market and the state. The market is about wealth, the state about power. The market gives us choices and the state deals with the consequences of those choices. Within those parameters we can do whatever we like so long as it does not directly harm others.

We are learning that this only works in the short term. In the long term, when all that

matters is wealth and power, the wealthy and powerful gain and the poor and powerless suffer. That's what has happened for at least a generation. Hence the anger and loss of trust that today divide societies throughout the West. There is an alternative. Since civilisation began, morality has been humanity's internal satellite navigation system as we have journeyed toward the undiscovered country called the future. It has taken different forms, but it is always about caring for the good of others, not just ourselves; about decency, honesty, faithfulness and self-restraint, treating others as we would wish to be treated. It's the world of "we" not "I". While the market and the state are about competition, morality is about co-operation. It is born and sustained in families, communities, voluntary organisations and religious congregations. Altruism, Viktor Frankl taught us, is the best cure for depression. Virtue, as Aristotle noted, is the basis of strong societies. And we can each make a contribution. As Melinda Gates reminds us in the last programme of the series: change one life for the better and you've begun to change the world. Morality is the redemption of our solitude. With it we can face the future without fear, knowing we are not alone.

(This article was first published in The Daily Telegraph on 1st September 2018.)

Yahrtzeits

Peter Greene remembers his mother Marian Greene on Saturday July 11th (Tamuz 19)