

## **Lead Until Your Dreams Come True Parashat Pinchas, 5778**

My grandfather was a very interesting man. We all called him Gramps. He was lovable and gruff, and drank things like Postum or 7-UP and milk. He would enter a room and shout, "SAY HELLO!", and would always have pearls of wit like, "Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." He always had a smile for me, but also taught me, through first hand experience, that acting without thinking, like putting a penny in a wall outlet for example, led to people getting hurt. He was a very complicated man, and I loved him dearly.

Shortly before I was headed off to Boston for college, I was sitting with my Gramps, just talking. He was telling me all kinds of stories about his life in college and at work. The last piece of advice he wanted me to have before I went out into the real world was, "If you want to do well in the world, you don't dawdle; you get things done."

My Grammy, his wife, on the other hand, was a brilliant person who, as a young woman received academic awards and scholarships, but stayed home, went to a local college, and assumed a more supporting role in family dynamics. Both my grandparents were very traditional, socially and Jewishly, and one day when I was in middle school, I asked my grandmother once why she kept kosher.

She told me that her younger brother had been incredibly ill as a boy. During one particularly brutal infection, it looked like he might not make it through. So she cried and she prayed, and

she tried to think of something that she could do. As she asked God for help, suddenly and without warning an idea came to her. She told God that if God would heal her bother, she would do her best to always try to live her life in accordance with what she understood to be God's path. And as a girl of only 8 or 9 herself, she took that to mean knowing right from wrong, teaching others, and keeping kosher.

The next morning, when her brother, who lived into his 70s, came back from the hospital, she said she had made up her mind to learn everything she could about the kitchen, and make it a place full of love, care, and, of course kosher treats. She was the first person to show me how to follow a recipe. She taught me how to make peanut butter cookies, and would always make sure that I knew it was MY job to press the top of the dough balls with a fork to make their characteristic tic-tac-toe board shape.

She would tell me, "I want everyone to come into my home and feel comfortable and welcome, so I feed them. You should never take anyone for granted."

Parashat Pinchas this week introduces us to two different models of leadership. The titular character, Pinchas, shows his leadership by solving a problem. A grandson of Aaron, and therefore one of the Kohanim who lead the spiritual life of the Jewish people, he is urgently concerned with ensuring that B'nai Yisrael follow God's commands. He sees men of B'nai Yisrael turning to idol worship with the Moabites and knows that this will become a catastrophe. Sure

enough a plague rises up and kills 24,000 people (Bamidbar 25:9) and it is only checked when Pinchas kills the leaders of this idol-worshipping group at God's insistence.

On the one hand, some might say, Pinchas is a great hero. People are violating laws, Moses gets word from God that they should be put to death, and Pinchas carries out the sentence. He even receives a ברית שלום (*brit shalom*), "a covenant of peace/friendship," from God. Many of the classic commentators interpret this as a safeguard for Pinchas himself. S'forno (the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian commentator) and Chizkuni (13<sup>th</sup> century French sage) take this covenant with God to mean that he would not have to fear retaliation from the family of Zimri, the man he had killed, nor would he suffer the consequences of a murderer, one of which would be to lose his role as a priest.

But Pinchas not only remains a priest, he inherits the title of כהן גדול (*Kohen Gadol*, "High Priest"). Why is he rewarded for such a violent act? Several different commentators, including both S'forno and Rashi, follow this idea through with an interpretation of Bamidbar 25:11, where Pinchas is described as "being overcome with passion" for God, explaining that Pinchas is actually overcome by God, that he, in fact was swayed to display God's anger and disapproval according to commands he and Moses had received.

In this lens, Pinchas is a reluctant hero, and so his "reward" is not glory and privilege, but rather simply being allowed to maintain the privileges that he already was due to receive. As the son

of Elazar, who was Aaron's oldest surviving son, he was supposed to be the next Kohen Gadol. He was not chosen to lead, but was simply the next in line.

So, how should we act as leaders? What are the positive qualities that the Torah seeks in the leaders that are supposed to inspire us? It turns out, that Moses and God have that very conversation two chapters later, also in Parashat Pinchas (Bamidbar 27:15-18):

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ לֵאמֹר: יִפְקֹד יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי הָרוּחֹת לְכָל־בֶּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל־הָעֵדָה: אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא לִפְנֵיהֶם  
וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֹא לִפְנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדוּת יְיָ כִּצְאֵן אֲשֶׁר אִין־לָהֶם רֹעִה: וַיֹּאמֶר  
יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח־לְךָ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן־נֹון אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־רוּחַ בּוֹ וְסִמַּכְתָּ אֶת־יָדְךָ עָלָיו:

*Moses spoke to the Adonai, saying, (16) "Let Adonai, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community (17) **who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the God's community will not be like sheep that have no shepherd.**" (18) And the LORD answered Moses, "Single out Joshua son of Nun, an **inspired** man (אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־רוּחַ בּוֹ), and lay your hand upon him.*

Moses says to God: Here's what we need in a leader- someone who puts themselves on the front line, who makes sure everyone is safe, that they have their needs met, that they know the right way to go, and helps them get there. That's what a true leader is. This sort of leader focuses on self-sacrifice, not self-aggrandizement, on the needs of the people over the comforts of the moment.

To be a leader in this way is to be constantly looking to take in feedback, ideas, and concerns from outside of oneself. In fact when God names Joshua he calls him “an inspired man,” but both the Hebrew (אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נָדַח בְּוֶן) and the Latin root of “inspired” (*en spiritus*) mean more literally “a person who takes in breath/spirit/soul.” Joshua is a leader not because of the force of his own will or conviction, charisma, or even his particular set of skills, but primarily because he is open to things outside of him. He is able to listen to the word of God in one ear and the needs of his people in the other, and walk through the world carrying the burden of fulfilling both obligations.

Pinchas and Joshua show us two different worlds of leadership. I think back to my Grammy and Gramps, and I can’t help but look at how both of them, as well as these two Biblical leaders, worked to better their communities. One focuses on results, on taking action to make sure everything gets done. The other focuses on people, on taking pains to make sure everyone has a place. Neither is inherently wrong, but I believe, and I think the Torah argues, that one is ideal.

I am definitely a child of my Grammy. I want everyone to feel comfortable in this community. I don’t want to take anyone for granted. That is the way I think I can best make sure things get done. I want you to feel so comfortable here that it feels like home. But even at home, sometimes things need to get done. Over my last two years here, we have been doing incredible things, in large part not due to any one person’s talent or skill, but because people

rolled up their sleeves, planted a flag and said, "This is my home. These are my people. What can I do to get things done."

There is always more to do, more dreams and passions to make real, more families in need, more money to raise, more people to inspire. None of us can do it all alone. But to be an inspired person, a person open to the spirit of others and letting the very core of them become part of your life, is to join together and make sure the work gets done.

I hope that as we sit here in the summer heat, slowly crawling from Tammuz into Av and then Elul, you will reflect on how you lead here. Who or what have you been open to; when has your heart been closed off? Where have you taken care of others; where have you narrowed your concern? Have you made sure the work is done, and have you also remembered to act preemptively to insure that everyone IS actually welcomed here?

Now is the time to make those dreams real. Now is the time for leaders. It is not the time to be expedient at the expense of human dignity. It is not the time to only make sure things get done and forget about who we are and what we stand for. It is not the time to let past grievances, petty turf wars, differing ideologies, or fear of the future scatter us. We are a community, a flock, a family led by a common love of one another, and a devotion to bringing people together, sharing our holidays, joys, sorrows, and passion, and creating a sacred space within our world.

What our Torah seems to ask from you is no more or less that the faithful devotion to one another, an equal compassion for the people you meet and people halfway around the world who you may never meet. It calls on each of us to be active in maintaining justice in the world, and in building our sacred community here in St. Louis. I'm asking for you, each of you, to be present with your whole selves, and to be open and inspired to take action wherever you are needed, and to be the leaders that ensure our future now.

Shabbat Shalom.