

JULY 14, 2008

Parashat Pinchas

Proactive Assistance

Brit kehunat olam... – “the covenant of an everlasting priesthood” (Numbers 25:13)

Pinchas' zealotry wreaks violence on the sinners and stops the spread of immorality in the Jewish camp, ending the plague that threatened the nation with destruction. At face value, Pinchas' action seems harsh, impetuous, and dangerous. The Midrash (Melechet Shlomo on Sanhedrin 89) even tells us that, “Said Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi: [the elders] wished to excommunicate [Pinchas], were it not for fact that the divine spirit infused Moses and informed him, “and it shall be unto him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood.” Why is it that God rewards Pinchas for taking the law into his own hands? Rabbi Avraham Orenstein in his work *Hadrush Vehane'um* (Bamidbar page 222) writes that among the lessons we learn from this episode we must remember that, “in a moment of imminent danger to the soul of the nation and its future, one may not be content with crying and groaning, but with great and heroic acts, because everything follows the greatness of the action.”

Rabbi Orenstein underscores the importance of being proactive when confronted with a looming threat. Today Israel is facing unprecedented threats and “imminent danger” but, thanks to the recently signed supplemental spending bill, she will have the resources to be proactive in protecting her citizens.

The dangers facing Israel are more dire than ever. Recently the Jerusalem Post reported that, “The Iranian Revolutionary Guard has begun a military exercise and issued a warning that Israel and U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf would be prime targets if Iran is attacked.” The web site of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard threatened that, “If they show such stupidity, Tel Aviv and the US naval fleet in the Persian Gulf will be the first targets which will be set on fire in Iran's crushing response.” This hostile language from the Iranians highlights the need for continued cooperation and military readiness on the part of both Israel and the United States. To that end, both houses of Congress passed, and President Bush recently signed into law, a supplemental spending bill, which provides \$170 million in additional security assistance for Israel. U.S. security assistance to Israel is the single most tangible expression of American support for Israel and is essential to help Israel face a potential nuclear-armed Iran, daily rocket attacks from Gaza and a rearmed Hizballah. This aid is the single most important manifestation of our special relationship with Israel and cannot be taken for granted.

Because of the United States' continued military support, Israel can continue to realize the message of Pinchas and be prepared to forestall any “imminent danger.” ■

Seeing the Big Picture

Tzror et Hamidyanim v'hikitem otam – “Harass the Midianites and smite them.” (Numbers 25:17)

The second paragraph of our *parashah* opens with God commanding Moses to attack the Midianites, while purposely ignoring the Moabites. The Talmud (Baba Kama 38a) notes that had God not explicitly instructed Moses to refrain from attacking Moab (see Deuteronomy 2:9) he would have independently decided to attack. After all, why attack Midian, which played only a minor role in the events of Shittim, and overlook Moab which instigated and coordinated

the effort? The Talmud explains, “But the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: The idea you have in your mind is not the idea I have in my mind. Two doves have I to bring forth from them: Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess.” (Baba Kama 38b) God prevents Moses from warring with Moab because from God’s divine perspective the tangible benefits that Moab will bring to the Jewish people many years into the future are visible.

This passage reminds us of the importance of dealing with adversaries from a long-term perspective, attempting to find possibilities of peace and mutual benefit even in the face of short-term violence and unrest. This concept is apparent today as Israel continues to search for peace in the face of continued rocket attacks from Gaza.

Israeli leaders see the big picture and want peace, and Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to resolving the conflict with both the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors. Yet, in direct violation of Hamas' commitment to Egypt to halt all terror activity from and around Gaza, more than 15 Qassam rockets have slammed into Sderot since the calm along the border began. Israeli officials have also said that weapons smuggling across the Gaza-Egypt border has not stopped. Despite these violations, Israel has increased the amount of food, medicine and other goods entering Gaza, and for the first time allowed cement to be shipped into the Strip, in line with Israeli commitments to Egypt. While Israel has shown extreme restraint in the face of these terrorist attacks, like every other sovereign nation, Israel has the right and responsibility to defend its citizens if these attacks continue and is fully aware that, as Hamas leaders have said in the past, a “tahadiya” often serves as a mere “tactic” in their war against Israel.

Like the message of the Talmud, Israel has its long-term future in mind. It repeatedly demonstrates its commitment to resolving the conflict in the hopes that one day Israel and her neighbors will achieve a durable peace. ■

The Power of our Position

Vayidaber Moshe v’Elazar Hakohen – “Moses and Elazar the priest spoke with them” (Numbers 26:3)

In *parashat* Pinchas we see Aaron’s son, Elazar, replace his father as the nation’s spokesman. This new position reminds us of how remarkable it is that Moses was such a strong leader despite not speaking directly to the people. How is it that Moses commanded such influence while never directly engaging the nation? We know that his influence does not come from great oratory skills. In fact, when God appears to Moses at the burning bush Moses objects, saying “For I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.” (Exodus 4:10) Moses’ success actually stems from the validity of the positions he presents. When one’s positions are justified - when they are righteous and instinctively appeal to others - the substance of the message triumphs over personal appeal. Moses’ utilization of a spokesman does not detract from his effectiveness because the righteousness of the speech is more important than the speaker.

The fact that Moses was an uninspiring speaker emphasizes the justice of his leadership. Had his positions not been righteous surely he would not have held such great influence. Today, as advocates of the U.S.-Israel relationship, our own virtuous message underscores the merit of a strong relationship between the two countries.

The fundamental strength of the US-Israel relationship rests not on the eloquence of Israel’s advocates, but the rectitude of our positions. It is the shared culture of tolerance, which is reinforced by common ideals, that binds the two countries not only as allies but as true friends. The values of democracy and freedom that Israel and the United States share resonate as truthful and correct. Each one of us can work to help make Israel more secure by ensuring that American support remains strong. Working to promote strategic cooperation between the two nations, to develop sound U.S. anti-terrorist policies, to share homeland security techniques and technologies, and to stop rogue nations such as Iran from acquiring weapons of mass destruction are efforts that we can all support because they are just. These undertakings are critical to Israel’s security and to American interests in the Middle East and around the world.

Moses’ leadership demonstrates that it will not be our oratory skills that convince others of Israel’s rights. Rather, the virtuosity of our position stands on its own merits in support of the special U.S.-Israel relationship. ■