

JULY 25, 2016

Parashat Pinchas

The Fragility of Peace

My covenant of peace (Numbers 25:12)

את בריתי שלום (במדבר כה:יב)

A kosher Torah must be written and maintained with great care. If even one letter is missing or so much as blemished to the point that the meaning of the word has changed, the Torah scroll is not considered kosher for use in a religious service. Yet, in a tiny number of instances, oral tradition conveys small but significant deviations in the writing of a Torah scroll. We find one example of this phenomenon at the beginning of this week's parashah. After his violent act of zealotry, Pinchas is lauded for turning away divine wrath and halting the plague that endangered the Jewish nation. For this he is given the reward of *brit shalom*—a divine “covenant of peace.” (verse 12) When one looks carefully at the word *shalom* in this verse, we find that the *vav* in the word *shalom* is severed in the middle. Tradition requires the scribe to write this word differently; the “peace” is cut off in some way. Rabbi Berel Wein explains that the blemished *vav* conveys the fragility of peace, and the need to make sacrifices to achieve true peace. He [writes](#), “The idea that I wish to advance regarding the split *vav* is very simple, but I feel it to be the essence of truth. Namely, that peace is very fragile, almost always difficult to maintain, and it requires great effort to keep it together. All of human history bears out this fact. True peace, whether in the home, the family, amongst neighbors, in the synagogue, in the community and certainly among nations, is very hard to achieve and even more difficult to maintain. The Torah wishes us to be aware of the difficulty in achieving and maintaining peace. Peace is not achieved with glib phrases, populist slogans or even with good wishes and sincere intents. It requires great sacrifices, sensitivity to others, patience and vision for the future and the possible consequences of current behavior, speech and decisions.”

While Israel has worked towards peace and have made significant sacrifices to create a framework for peace, the Palestinians diminished the possibility of peace by not only extolling and inciting violence, but by actively encouraging terrorism through their continued financial support for the perpetrators of terrorist acts.

Earlier this month, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a [hearing](#) to discuss the financial rewarding of terrorists and their families by the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA disperses up to \$140 million annually to Palestinians who committed acts of terrorism against Israelis and to the families of those terrorists. In addition to a one-time payment to each terrorist, the PA gives a higher monthly allowance to those serving longer sentences in Israeli jails, with some convicted terrorists receiving over \$3,000 per month. Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) condemned the practice asserting that “If a Palestinian state was established, it’s hard to see how this ‘pay to slay’ policy wouldn’t put them on the state sponsor of terrorism list.” “When the Palestinian leadership—whether it be the PLO or the Palestinian Authority—sends money to convicted terrorists and their families,” expressed Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY). “It’s no wonder that individuals...are incentivized to commit acts of violence. This culture of incitement must end.”

In a [Facebook video](#) released last week, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called on Prime Minister Abbas to take specific steps halt the incitement to violence encouraging Palestinian youths to kill innocent Israelis. He asked Abbas to fire his adviser Sultan Abu al Einein, who called to “slit the throat of every Israeli” three days before a Palestinian teen brutally murdered 13-year-old Hallel Yaffa Ariel as she slept. He also called on Abbas to “stop paying murderers and instead use this money to fund co-existence education, teach tolerance not terror.” He also called on Abbas to tell

his social media manager to stop extolling murderers on its Facebook page. “Impressionable children read these posts,” he said. “They should be taught harmony, not hate. Such words seriously harm the chances of peace.”

The severed *vav* in Parashat Pinchas reminds us just how fragile *shalom* can be, and how hard it is to achieve and maintain, especially in an atmosphere of hatred, incitement and murder. ■

Pioneering Women’s Rights

Then drew near the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1)

ותקרבה בנות צלפחד (במדבר כז:א)

Israeli-born “Wonder Woman” Gal Gadot recently lent her star power to a short video clip celebrating accomplished young Israeli women: an air force pilot, a marketing manager, a physician and a medal-winning surfer. According to the website Israel21c.org, Gadot, a former Miss Israel who has made it big in Hollywood for her role in feature films including “Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice,” readily agreed to take part in the feel-good film. The film was conceived by three female Israeli media students who told Ynet that they “wished to show the world and various audiences a different side of Israel, instead of focusing on its landscapes or the Tel Aviv nightlife.” The video highlights Israel’s hard work to create an environment where women can thrive and succeed.

Israel’s efforts to promote not only the rights of women, but also the importance of women’s contribution to larger society, began long before the creation of the modern Jewish state. Rather, these efforts began with a story in Parashat Pinchas. Before the Jewish nation entered the Promised Land, Moses divided the land between the families of the tribes of Israel. The five daughters of Zelophehad recognized that because their father had died in the desert and left no male heirs, their family would not receive a portion of the Land. They petitioned Moses to recognize their rights and, “Give to us a possession among the brethren of our father.” (Numbers 27:4) Their petition is granted, as Moses is told that, “The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: you shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father’s brethren...” (verse 7) As a commentary on the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, Israeli educator Rivka Lubitch penned a modern Midrash, imagining a conversation between Tenut, an angel who argues for the rights of women in the Heavenly court, and God about the story of Zelophehad’s daughters. She writes, (see “*Dirshuni: Midrashei Nashim*,” pp. 92-92) “Tenut asked the Lord: ‘If the daughters of Zelophehad spoke the truth, why did you not write them [beforehand] in your Torah, for you are truth and your Torah is truth and your words endure forever?’ The Lord answered: ‘...There is a truth that descends from the heavens, and a truth that grows from below. Fortunate is the generation in which the truth from above and below meet.’” According to Lubitch, in their successful claim to inherit the lands of their father, the daughters of Zelophehad advanced a larger divine truth by promoting the rights of women in society. Their effort to advance their agenda with Moses does not represent an attack on Jewish tradition, but rather the healthy process of advancement to a greater moral and ethical truth.

Today, Israel continues to follow in the footsteps of Zelophehad’s daughters by working hard to advance the rights of women in Israeli society. Unlike any other Middle Eastern nation, women are at the forefront of many aspects of Israeli society. Israel has always had [at least one woman on its Supreme Court](#), and Israel is the only country in the Middle East to elect a woman, Golda Meir, to the position of Prime Minister. Currently, many senior positions in the Israeli government are held by women. Women in Israel have long held important academic posts and leadership positions in government and served alongside their male counterparts in the defense of the state. Regardless of religion or ethnicity, all women in Israel enjoy equal rights, protections under the law and opportunities to succeed and contribute to society.

Since its founding, Israel has emerged as a leader in promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women—carefully balancing diverse religious sensitivities with strong support for universal rights—all of which is unprecedented in the Middle East. Like the daughters’ of Zelophehad in the desert, today Israeli women are propelling the nation forward as agents of change, peace and prosperity. ■

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