

JULY 2, 2018

Parashat Pinchas

When Two Is One

Eternal Covenant of Priesthood (Numbers 25:13)

ברית כהנת עולם (במדבר כה:יג)

After a long year of efforts to reform the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and remove member states that themselves commit abuse, the United States withdrew its membership on June 18th. “Our commitment does not allow us to remain a part of a hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights,” said U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki [Haley](#) said, further citing the council’s “chronic bias against Israel.” As U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo noted, while the council once had a “noble vision,” today it is simply “a poor defender of human rights.”

The opening of *Parashat Pinchas* references on Pinchas’s dramatic defense of the Jewish people and restoration of order to the camp. For his actions, God rewards Pinchas with a “covenant of peace.” The *parasha* then continues, “it shall be for him and for his descendants after him an eternal covenant of priesthood.” Thus, the question arises: Are these two separate gifts—peace and the priesthood—or one unified blessing?

The answer is that they are one and the same. “Peace” is virtually inseparable from “priesthood” in Judaism. The first high priest, Aaron, is a man of peace: He is satisfied with a secondary leadership role to his younger brother Moses; He makes peace with God after witnessing the death of his two beloved sons; And when plague breaks out in the camp, Aaron is first to save even those guilty of sin from the epidemic.

Despite his divergent path, Pinchas too pursues peace. For the sake of truth, he acts aggressively and boldly. Through his rapid reaction toward dangerous behavior that threatened the Israelites’ sacred principles, Pinchas sought atonement and wholeness for his people—much like the ancient priests who offered sacrifices to attain atonement. Pinchas averted the annihilation of the Jewish people, and in doing so, showed that he was truly Aaron’s descendant “loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them closer to Torah” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:12).

Reminded by this week’s *parasha* of the inseparability of “peace” and “priesthood,” we see the United States’ pull from the U.N. Human Rights Council as a similar example of bold, principled action in the name of decency and justice. The UNHRC’s unrelenting, unbalanced and unfounded attacks on Israel have destroyed its credibility. The council has passed more country-specific resolutions against Israel than the rest of the world’s nations combined. Thus, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the U.S. withdrawal, branding the council “a biased, hostile, anti-Israel organization that has betrayed its mission of protecting human rights.”

This latest move is not the first time that the U.S. has issued a call to end anti-Israel bias at the U.N. Last year, the U.S. Senate [unanimously urged](#) U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres to “to engage member states in comprehensive efforts to directly confront and root out this bias.” The Senators wrote, “Although, as Republicans and Democrats, we disagree on many issues, we are united in our desire to see the United Nations improve its treatment of Israel and eliminate anti-Semitism in all its forms. The recent United States withdrawal from the

U.N. Human Rights Council conveys a critical message to nations across the globe, establishing a foundation of truth from which the U.S. and her allies can legitimately pursue comprehensive peace, further weaving together “peace” and “priesthood” in the Middle East and throughout the world. ■

Overcoming Hidden Biases

My covenant of peace (Numbers 25:12)

בריתי שלום (במדבר כה:יב)

Parashat Pinchas features a particularly interesting reward from God. In recognition of his slaying of Zimri and Kazbi, Pinchas is granted a “covenant of peace.” The Netziv of Volozhin (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin 1816-1893) offers a memorable gloss on this otherwise seemingly obscure and unneeded blessing. The Torah stresses that Pinchas was provided with “a covenant of peace” (25:11) as a shield from the negative impact that even justified acts of violence have. The Netziv highlights that Pinchas acted “because he was zealous for his God.” The act that was purely *l’shem shamayim*, “for the sake of heaven.” Pinchas is granted the “covenant of peace” to help him put aside his personal biases and grudges and act with honest and just intentions. The text confirms that Pinchas acted in a manner that reflected a pure and unadulterated desire to re-establish peace and tranquility in the community.

In our day, when Israel searches for a path towards peace with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors, it is necessary that all sides follow in Pinchas’s footsteps by putting aside biases to authentically pursue a strategy with the sincere intent of bringing harmony and reconciliation. Even before Israel’s founding in 1948, the Jewish community in then British Mandatory Palestine sought peace with its Arab neighbors. Since then, Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to make serious concessions for peace such as withdrawing from land and forcibly removing citizens. Last year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#) reiterated his commitment to advance efforts with the Palestinians and with the broader Arab world to attain peace: “Israel’s hand and my hand is extended to all of our neighbors in peace.”

Just this past week, Jared Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump’s senior advisor, said Washington will soon announce its Middle East peace plan. Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, Assistant to the President and Special Representative for International Negotiations, have been meeting with world leaders, particularly in the Arab world in advance announcing their plan. In an [interview](#) in a Palestinian newspaper, Kushner appealed directly to the Palestinian people, portraying Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as entrenched in the past: “There have been countless mistakes and missed opportunities over the years, and you, the Palestinian people, have paid the price.” Since the decision of President Trump to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, Abbas has refused to see Trump’s team, accusing Washington of a pro-Israel bias. This sadly follows in a long tradition of Abbas walking away rather than negotiating in good faith.

Bringing peace to the Middle East is not easy. But any efforts must include direct bilateral negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In addition, the United States should continue to press the Arab States to normalize relations with Israel and support Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, with the goal of a two-state solution: a Jewish state living in peace with a demilitarized Palestinian state, with an end to all claims. Above all, we learn from God’s gift of the “covenant of peace” that these efforts must be genuine and that participants must be willing to put aside bias to achieve greater harmony. ■

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