

## How Will We Evolve? Davar Acher By: Rabbi Lee Bycel

[Parashat Pinchas](#) is one of the most provocative portions in the Torah. It is especially resonant to read in these times of uncertainty while living during this global pandemic and in a society that is grappling with how to address the racial and economic inequities that continue to plague us.

Rabbi Balin provides us with a powerful image of Serah bat Asher and the role of “memory keepers” like her in understanding an inclusive history. When we study Torah, we are “uncovering untold stories” and connecting the narratives we are anchored in as we try to understand the world we live in today.

I like to read the Torah portion as though I have never engaged with it before. It allows me to encounter it in an unencumbered way, using a lens of the social reality today to understand an ancient narrative. Sometimes the text uplifts me, sometimes it challenges me, sometimes it upsets me, sometimes it inspires me, sometimes it confuses me, and often, it helps me to make sense of life today.

For me, trying to ask the right questions is the first task before one can allow the text to come to life.

Last week’s portion ends dramatically, when Pinchas kills an Israelite man and a Midianite woman, which brings a devastating plague to an end. (Numb. 25:5) Does Pinchas commit this murder to defend God’s name or because he is a religious fanatic? What was the plague? It was an epidemic of moral depravity that infected many of the Israelite men by their consorting with the Moabite women and worshipping their Gods. This week continues that story and quickly goes to life after the plague: “When the plague was over...” (Numbers 27:1 )

Like us today, the Israelites are living in uncertain times as their journey in the desert will soon come to an end after 40 years of wandering. The men who had worshipped the Midianite gods reflect the angst of the Israelite people, who wonder what life will be like in the Promised Land. How will Joshua and Eliezer lead, as the successors to Moses and Aaron (Numbers 27:18-23)?

The Israelites then take another census, a counting of men able to bear arms (Numbers 26: 1-3), as they will soon be at war. However, a census is a much more than the counting of numbers or demographic information in today’s world. The Hebrew for take a census literally means “lift the head.”

The people were unsettled and unsure about life. It was a time of uncertainty and anxiety about entering the new reality of life in the Promised Land. My guess is that those ancient Israelites felt many of the emotions and had thought similar thoughts as we do today. When one listens to people and empowers them, everyone is included – and everyone counts.

Questions of inclusiveness and human dignity (uplifting all human beings) continue to challenge us today. Although we are still living in midst of COVID-19, many people are questioning what the “new normal” will look like once we have a vaccine. However, nothing will inoculate the economy to immediate recovery; it will take years.

The pain of the nearly 40 million unemployed Americans will not magically go away. The long-term effects of this recession will not recede. The economic inequality continues to be on the rise.

In *[The Dignity of Difference](#)* (p. 111), Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments on this disparity in a most insightful manner:

“A world in which the few prosper, and many starve, offends our deepest sense of fairness and human solidarity...Disparities of this magnitude – vast, concentrated wealth alongside widespread suffering- is intolerable.”

George Floyd’s murder ignited national protests and calls for racial equality, police reform, and social and economic equity. Will these flames of justice soon become history like the unrest after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or after the Rodney King beating? What keeps a movement alive? How do we keep marching toward a world where Black lives are really treated as though they matter?

Thus, the question to ask is: Does this Torah portion help in any way as we grapple with and emerge from our health and social pandemics? I believe it does.

The major theme after the census is how the people will relate to God in the Promised Land. (Numbers 28 – 30:1). In ancient times, they did it through animal sacrifice – but of course, that is not our way of shaping a spiritual life. During this time of transition, will our institutions ask the right, honest and difficult questions about how to evolve in a way that will attract those who are unaffiliated? Improved listening to those who are not connected to the Jewish community, and really hearing their stories of alienation, might allow us to reconstitute the Jewish community in ways that are even more meaningful and inclusive. People are yearning for meaning, spiritual connection, and community.

Our ancestors who were about to end their journey and enter the Promised Land had to change and evolve. It is abundantly clear that we have to do the same in order to enter a Promised Land of a just and equal society.

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